



## From Gevgelija to Tabanovce - the Macedonian trains took out unclear stories and human lives

With an injured leg and weak heart, the young Iraqis from Baghdad, Walid and Sabrin arrived with their two children in Macedonia a week ago. Instead of going to Idomeni, they mistakenly took a bus to Dojran, where the police caught them and immediately took them to the Vinojug transit center.

After traveling through Turkey and Greece, they are now part of the small number of temporary residents in the improvised camp in Gevgelija.



"We endured everything, the cold and the road - all this for our two children. For hours we passed through the forests, only to get to a better place," recalled the 28-year-old Walid, who slowly moved with his crutch through the cabin. He hurt his leg by walking around Greece.

He and Sabrin started their long trip last year.

"We were facing certain death in Iraq, and slow death in Greece," Walid said, explaining why they decided to continue, although they knew that the Balkan route was closed.

"We have seen all the bad things one can imagine in the camp in Greece," he added.

"There is no food, no medical attention, we were left entirely on our own. If you had money, you could live. If you had no money, life was very difficult," he said, while his wife made us tea.

Their children have no friends, because they were the only one in the camp. They spent time watching cartoons and listening to children's songs on a mobile phone. The playgrounds and

the lanes across the camp were empty. The cold forced the other residents of the camp to stay indoors.



They learned about the route from their fellow citizens who had previously experienced it. The beautiful memories they had from their own country were now replaced with the threats and murders they were witnessing on a daily basis.

They said they did not use smugglers during the trip, because they had no money to pay them.

"The blood has returned to their faces," noted Nasir, who worked as translator in "Vinojug" for three years. He was a native of Iraq, but he lived in Macedonia longer than in his homeland. He married and started a family here.



"I am in Macedonia for 36 years and I have always longed to see Iraq again. I came here to study in 1981, when the first war with Iran began. I still long to return, but I also long for Yugoslavia as well," Nasir joked.

"I have not left Skopje for 36 years. I am here since the first day. This is my second homeland."

Like for many other refugees and migrants, the ultimate destination of this couple was Germany. In Iraq they have been under constant threat.

"Religious hatred began there long time ago between the two fractions, Sunnis and Shiites," Nasir explained.

"We are Sunnis in a city predominantly populated with Shiites. The Shiite population is currently in power and there were many threats to our lives and we decided to leave. We had no other option," Walid said.

But when they arrived in Greece and wanted to apply for asylum, the local authorities sent them to Macedonia.

"This is the extent to which the Greeks started to abuse them. They just did not like them," Nasir said.

They had nowhere to go, but they wanted to get a clearer picture of the situation before making a decision whether to apply for asylum here.

"We don't ask for anything, but a normal life and a calmer place," Walid said.



Their friends, Sa'ath and Sarah, are waiting for their first child. But the road was not easy for them either. Sa'ath suffered from alopecia, causing him to lose all his hair, including the facial one. Sarah, however, had a risky pregnancy. The medicines for them were expensive and they could not afford to buy them alone.

Although they were satisfied with the treatment in Macedonia, this was just a temporary stop for them.

Mol: Until the closure of the route, a total of 477,861 foreign nationals received a certificate of declared intent to submit a request for recognition of the right to asylum; of them 89,628 were issued certificates in the first three months of 2016, while the rest were issued in 2015. (This certificate was necessary for legal transit throughout Macedonia during the flood of refugees and migrants, before the closure of the Balkan route)

The political situation and the opinions of citizens were not of concern for these people. The only thing that interested them was whether the route would remain open.

"If Austria announces tomorrow that the border is open, believe it or not, there will be a river of people moving north," Nasir emphasized.

When asked if they wanted to return to Iraq one day, Walid immediately responded:

"I'm wounded in 3-4 places, I've been regularly bullied. I got a lot of pain from Iraq, what more could I get there? We did not see anything nice. Since I was born in Iraq, there have been only wars, troubles and problems. Our dearest and nearest have been killed in the wars".

The camp where they were located, primarily served as a reminder of the times when up to 5,000 refugees and migrants passed by every day.

The net and the wire placed on the border with Greece were partially gone, but the sign "Open the Borders" was still standing, as well as some of the clothes left behind by the refugees. The only ones that visited them from time to time were the local and foreign media.





## Each train carries its own story

On the platform number 2 in Skopje, "Gorbachev", one of the older trains of Macedonian Railways, transits daily. The composition, almost 70 meters long, leaves from Gevgelija and brings the passengers to the end point Tabanovce in Kumanovo.



"Each train carries a story," said one of the 20 drivers that traveled this route on a daily basis, recalling his experience from last year when he ran over a fugitive who walked along the track in Demir Kapija in a group with 14 other people.

"They were in the middle of the bridge, but that bridge is not intended for pedestrians. There are pillars and they were jumping over them. The train was getting too close, and he had nowhere to escape. I turned on the sirens because it was dark, and I thought "Oh my, I would kill all these people," the train driver began to tell his story, asking to remain anonymous.



"Somehow, all of them jumped, they grabbed the pillars, but one ended under the train. Then I stopped, I called the authorities. As we got off the train to see which part of the locomotive hit the man, if there was any blood, the rest of the group passed by, leaving as if nothing had happened. We wondered and stared. They passed us by, going one behind another as though nothing has happened," he described the accident.

There was a search for the body, and eventually they found it in the nearby river.

"The judge called me to go with them to the river to see the body. But I said I would never go there. Imprison me if necessary, but I'm not going," I told her.

Symptoms of stress began to appear several days later.

"At night I had reactions, I was awake and I was sweating. We react much later, after thinking about what happened," he explained. "We filled an entire wagon car with people," he recalled, referring to a total of 26 killed refugees on Macedonian railways.



This train driver has been operating a passenger train for more than a decade, and he alone has driven 70 trains with refugees and migrants during the flood of refugees. Or, approximately 70,000 passengers.

His profession is one of the few vocations that still attract a lot of young people in the country. He said the freedom he had while he was in his cabin was the one thing he fell in love with most. However, the job has its weight.

"Our work is such that when we drive we are aware that accidents can happen. We are psychologically ready for such an event," he said.



### **“The cost of the train tickets was not regulated by the Macedonian Railways”**

The train, he most frequently operated, was one of the trains that have earned huge profits in the past two years to the state-owned company, mainly from refugees and migrants who transited through the state on a daily basis, either illegally or legally. But the ticket, which usually cost 350 denars, then cost five times more.

"It was pure crime and it was allowed," he said.

"To be realistic, our state has robbed people. It is not acceptable for a state. The price of the ticket was not regulated by the Railway, as it has to have a blessing from the state to do it," he added.

"At that time, Macedonia did not take money from migrants, while in the region they were all taking, so they compensated with the train tickets. They saw it as a nice business and continued with that," he said, stressing that the state has earned millions of euros.

It is now strictly prohibited for a refugee or migrant to enter one of the trains, unless it is in the presence of the police, and only in the direction from Tabanovce to Gevgelija. However, it still happen to catch someone trying to cross the country, but the police react quickly," explained the train driver.

"We are a small country, we do not have many roads," he remarked.

MOI: In the first 9 months of this year, 10 attempts for smuggling of migrants have been prevented, and two more cases of smuggling since 2016 have been clarified.

Smuggling of migrants is usually performed in a way that illegal migrants cross the state border between Greece and Macedonia on foot. Then they are taken by smugglers at a pre-arranged place who transport them to the northern border in the Kumanovo region. Here the people are waiting for a convenient moment for illegal crossing of the Macedonian-Serbian border (also on foot), after which the same pattern of smuggling continues to the north.



The beginnings were hard for them too. There was a general chaos for him and his colleagues.

"No one has stopped them on the borders. As we carried them, they went north," he recalled.

After the accidents, the state introduced legal changes allowing refugees and migrants to stay up to 72 hours in the country and reinforced control over issuing certificates. However, according to the train operator, it was only a formality that further complicated the situation.

"While they were unable to issue more than 100 certificates, over 5,000 people entered every day," he stressed.

**"We do not have the capacity to cope with another wave of refugees"**

The flood of refugees and migrants has passed, and only domestic passengers were left in the trains now. But they were losing them as well, the train driver said. The bad smell, which could be felt from a distance, remained from the time when thousands of refugees and migrants were transported.

"We were just carrying people, the company took money, and no train was cleaned. They wanted to earn as much as possible, leaving everything as it was, so we lost our passengers," he complained.



To the question – what if there was another similar wave similar to that two years ago, he said:

"If 2,000 migrants came at our front line, I think we would fail again, because what they foresee with programs and some documents in reality is very different. They (politicians) have not seen 2,000 people, a horde without control. They failed to stop them with wires," he said.

"As Macedonian Railways, we do not have the capacity to deal with another wave like that. We do not have trains, the new ones are small, with capacity of up to 150 people. The previous trains could transport up to 500," he said.

What remained were the memories of the various moments spent with them.

"Once we had uniformed soldiers on the train who escaped the army. There were also brothers who were separated, as they were not allowed to travel together," he remembered.

"There were situations when they traveled from Syria, but there were also economic migrants, for example from Africa. We were also very sorry for them, barefoot walking in the snow. When they got on the train they did not have the money to pay, so the Syrians would pay for them sometimes so they would not be thrown out of the train," he continued.

"We talked to them, they sat with us in the cabin. There were students from Damascus who talked about what happened to them, that they were well paid, about how much they did not want to go to the West. I've seen everything."

From conversations with them, he realized that these people did not want to sit in a camp, but to make money to rebuild their home.

"Maybe 90 percent of all people I talked with wanted to return, they did not want to go to Germany either, let alone to stay in Macedonia," he remarked.

"They shouted at me: 'We will be looking for you when we return on the same route with the same train.' We also exchanged contacts," he added.

After driving, he saw us off with the words: "The ordinary man always suffers. He who is "up" will never come down, he will only use the whole situation to his advantage. What they have done is pure human trafficking."

### **Lence Zdravkin: I still hear the heavy steps of the refugees along the railway line**

For refugees, Macedonia was often just a stop. They saw nothing here, except open roads and forests. But there was a building that everyone knew - the house of Lence Zdravkin. The reflector on its terrace still shines in the night. It marks the road to her house, open to refugees since 2013.



"The hardest question to me is, 'What do you need the most in donations?', laughed the woman who first started helping refugees and migrants. Today, she is known in both Macedonia and Europe as a symbol of solidarity. She moved carefully through the narrow corridor and the pantry, full of boxes with food, water, footwear and clothing.

"If I tell you today that I need one thing, tomorrow I will need three other things. When people ask me what they can donate, I don't know what to say. Everything is needed, and if we have something today, it may be gone by tomorrow," Zdravkin explained.



She said that although the borders were closed for a year and a half, her reality is different - the Balkan route was not closed for a day.

"Refugees find ways to illegally pass through. They come here and they continue to go unnoticed. Those who are young and strong, just change their clothes, eat and leave. But the elderly need more rest."

She said that now was the worst part. The families of refugees ran over train were looking for their loved ones in her house.

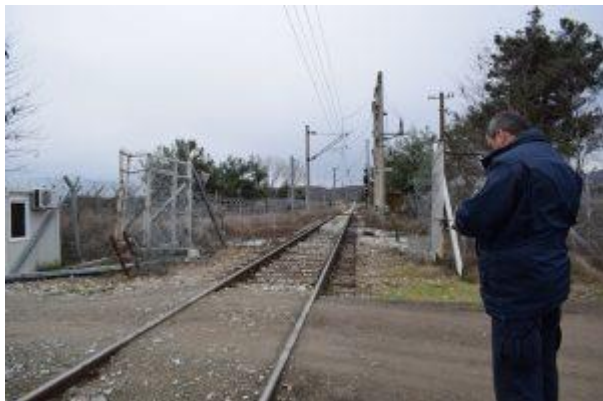
"It is very painful for a mother to look for her child. We buried them here, but we do not know who we buried. It was a massacre. DNA was taken from all bodies, so we'll see what happens next."

She said that although the trains were very careful at that time, the refugees were so exhausted that they were moving, but did not hear anything.

"They were hallucinating. Once, my husband jumped to get a man from the railroad. He was moving, he saw the train, but did not perceive it. He was gone. Fatigue and hunger took their toll. They were moving only physically, they were not present in the moment," she said.

## **MOI: 19 dead migrants are still not identified**

According to the Interior Ministry's information, a total of 26 refugees and migrants have lost their lives on the tracks from the end of 2014 to the end of 2015.



The reason the authorities have cited for their death was the decision of these people to walk during the night.

"Once migrants have been allowed to legally transit through the Republic of Macedonia, there were no more railway accidents in which migrants were killed," the Interior Ministry informed.

The police said 19 of the dead were without identification documents, while the remaining migrants were identified and they were currently in process of identifying five people from Syria and two from Afghanistan.

## **Veles - the center of the European route**

Since the very beginning, Veles faced the refugee crisis. The fellow citizens, said Zdravkin, were humane and helpful.

"People from Veles were always willing to help, bring food, to go into their cars and drive along the road to Gradsko to give assistance, to give away what was necessary... Some who were unable to help, called me to tell me where help was needed. The neighbors were never angry about anything. They were always here for help," she recalled.

"Even those who knew to say: 'These are terrorists, they are bad people, they carry diseases ...' would soon realize that they were young and intelligent people and changed the perception about them."

The family has always been supportive.

"My husband, my children, even my mother-in-law, who is 85 years old, helped me. The whole family - my brother-in-law and my sister-in-law live on the first floor, and everyone knows how to mobilize and help when needed. In 2014-2015 there were up to 300-400 people in this yard. It's not easy to serve all those people, we need a lot of hands, speed, coordination, so we've all been involved."

Now that the biggest wave of refugees has passed, and the movement across Macedonia has drastically decreased, it is time for her to connect those whom she met with their families.



"Many of the families who have lived in Germany for years, had members of families who have started the journey. During the trip, their trail was lost - either their phones were lost, or stolen, or they sold them to survive, to eat, or to buy a ticket for somewhere. From Germany they were looking for their children, they would send me photos, so I enlarged them and I left them around here. When the groups passed, that photograph was in front of me all the time and I was trying to see whether that person would arrive. But it was very difficult to recognize a face. If the family sends you a photo of a normal, rested face, you need to recognize it in a weary, weak and bearded man with different hair. When the circumstances change, it is very difficult to recognize the person."

She was in touch with the refugees she helped for several hours each day. They call her aunt, mother, friend. She also talked with activists from other countries to facilitate coordination.

Most people who asked for help, she said, passed the country illegally. The official number appeared on the Serbian side, she added, because in Macedonia refugees often went unnoticed by the authorities. However, everyone knew where to find Lence.

"I do not know how it happened for them to recognize me. Probably those who have already passed here and were my guests, had relatives, friends, whom they told about. There are people who have been in Austria for the second year now, we often communicate, they call me and ask me for their sisters, brothers, and children. Or, they will tell me that their mother will come and they will ask me to help her. They send me pictures to check if I have seen their relatives, they need different help and we are still in contact."

She said they often stopped to take photo in front of her door, as if it was a significant monument or tourist attraction. She added that if their relatives and friends, would see such a photo on social media, they would know where they were.

Although she spoke English badly, she easily talked to them because she has learned some Arabic and English.

"In front of other people, I'm ashamed to speak English, because I just know some words," she joked.

Apart from Arabic words, she also learned something about their culture. Their cuisine, traditions, what they do when a child is born, and she already used some of their cooking tips.

"While we were in the camp in Gevgelija, there were women who stayed there longer and tried to show their skills, their handicrafts, they knew how to knit, to make various specialties for the holidays. It is very important, and some people cannot understand it, but they respected our

holidays as well as theirs."

She said she did not know where her humanity and sacrifice came from. But she knew that she could not ignore the other people's torments when she was constantly watching them.

"I live in such a place. I watched the refugees pass by from the living room. The sofa is turned towards the balcony and I could see them constantly. When I appeared on the balcony to wave my hand, they saw me, I was looking at them, they were looking at me. From the beginning, we set up a reflector to light the area - to see those tracks, but also to see them."

She can recognize their steps from a far.



"Our walk is not the same. Their legs are very heavy and tired. I can recognize that sound."

Those they do not know her, say they were afraid at first, but they only needed a few seconds to see that she was friendly.

"There were cases when they were robbed, attacked, exploited along the route, and it is normal if someone attacked them a few kilometers from here, to be scared of me. But this fear is short-lived," Zdravkin said.



## The refugee crisis - lesson not learned by the society

The last stop of the train from Gevgelija to Kumanovo ends before the entrance to the transit center Tabanovce. The only passengers who get down here are the camp staff.

At the entrance, we were met by Dragi, the man who knew everyone. Together we made a tour around the camp, while the outside whirlpools were already frozen, and the temperatures were below zero.

However, one could barely feel the December cold in the prefabricated booths. **Izedin** of Syria was in one of them.



Although the two of them did not know much English they greeted each other with “my friend“

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He arrived in Tabanovce with a desire to return to Greece, several weeks after his fervent attempts to continue his trip from Serbia to the north.

He traveled alone, sometimes with a car, but usually on foot. His agonizing adventure, he said, cost him approximately 8,000 euros. Part of his family has been displaced across Europe, but he has lost his energy and patience.



"I've heard stories from many people who have reached Germany, but it's not good there, either. There is no work, they are standing in one place for days, sleeping, and waiting for time to pass. It has been like this for months; they have nothing to do and to feel good about in life. If you do not do anything, you feel that life does not make sense," said Izedin, who was highly disappointed.

He left Syria about a year ago, and he has been traveling ever since. He spent most of the time in Turkey, about 5-6 months, and then stayed in Greece.

But this is not his first time to travel the world. The difference, he emphasized, is that earlier he used to travel to work and get to know other cultures, and now to save himself.

"... I moved out because the state was no good, I had no choice. It is another thing if you go somewhere to work and you are free," Izedin pointed out.

This year, Macedonia has occupied the last place out of 138 countries in the world, according to the extent to which migrants were welcome in the country, showed the results of the Gallup poll.

Macedonian citizens received a total score of 1.47 - on a scale from 0 to 9, where 0 is the lowest, and 9 is the highest possible score. They answered the following questions: Do you consider it good or bad for immigrants to live in your country? Do you consider it good or bad immigrants to become your neighbors? Do you think it is good or bad for an immigrant to marry a close relative of yours?



Izedin has only good memories of Macedonia

"Macedonia is a poor country, so what they did for me means that they are good. Unlike wealthy states that do nothing for us. I think that the Macedonians are good people. Everyone treats us well. A simple example, yesterday I did not have cigarettes and Dragi gave me one. Everyone talks to me, they respect me. I feel good," he laughed.

Although he did not stay in Serbia for a long time, he said that the time spent there clearly showed him what was the system like there.

"The police took from us 3,000 dinars bribe for any kind of service," the Syrian said.

Izedin is one of the refugees and migrants who are slowly beginning to hit the road again. The reason for this, according to him, was the cold and closed route. However, Izedin still considered Syria to be his home.

"I hope that my country will no longer fight and that the whole world will improve and we will finally have peace. Of course, I would return to Syria if the war ended. My whole life is there, my memories, my family. I think that everyone sees their country as if it were their mother. You can change the state and find a better one for living, but you cannot ever forget where you are came from."



In one of the tents there was a sound of oriental music. Abdullah Sabuh waited for his replacement. He is Izedin's fellow citizen, who lived in Macedonia and worked as a doctor for more than 30 years.

Wearing his Red Cross uniform, Sabuh was ready to put an end to another working day. He is responsible for the health of the residents in the camp, and he has his small clinic of fifteen square meters serving that purpose.

Now he almost has no patients, but before he started working here, he was a doctor at the Immigrant Reception Center in Gazi Baba.

"The conditions were not that bad, as there was no room any longer. An overwhelming number of people was accommodated there; everyone that was caught was taken there. From completing the court procedure until leaving the country, the number of refugees was constantly increasing and there was an awkward situation," he said. That was why, he added, camps were opened in Vizbegovo, Vinojug and Tabanovce.



Abdulla Sabuh

"We started to work in a larger space, more comfortable. If this facility can take two or three patients, imagine how it will be if there were 20", he explained.

He recalled that when he started working on Tabanovce, there were only booths, trees and cramped land. He joked that he was once forced to kill snakes, as they populated the area.

"Now we have everything – air conditioning, insulation, nice kitchen, halal food, and kindergartens for children," assured the doctor.

His clinic has all the necessary medications. If they have a refugee or a migrant whose medical condition cannot be treated adequately, they are sent to a hospital in Kumanovo or Skopje, with a vehicle belonging to the center.



For pregnant women who used to stay in the camp, there were gynecologists who came twice a week.

"Now there are no women and families here, but if they come we call and doctors come here to examine them, or we take them to a doctor in Kumanovo. The ambulance comes regularly if there is a need. But, for long time there was no woman refugee, let alone pregnant one," Sabuh explained.

### **Experiences of refugees motivation for comic book**

Verce Karanfilovska and Kristijan Popovski are two students from Skopje. She is from the Faculty of Philology "Blaze Koneski", and he is from the Faculty of Fine Arts. Karanfilovska expresses herself through verses and sentences, and Popovski through drawings and colors. But what brings them together is the work on comic books, inspired by the experiences of refugees.

"Black and white lives" is their product, which they presented to the public last week. "The longing boy on canvas" is the story that Karanfilovska created, and then her partner Marko put it on paper.

"This was a wonderful event, first because we all participated in a project that we have never had the opportunity to witness, and second because we talked about a sensitive subject in a different, unusual way," the young writer noted.



Karanfilovska during the creation of the comic book

"Our lives are made of stories, and in my opinion the only way to change something in our consciousness is to change the stories that we tell. That's exactly what we tried to do, to present characters with which readers can connect, and hence change at least some of their worldviews," Karanfilovska said.

She and her colleagues had the opportunity to get acquainted with real stories, full of experiences that she tried to capture in her comics.



"What we noticed was that even we, who we thought we had broader views, during the exercises we did, discovered that our experiences were also tainted by stereotypes absorbed through different channels. By listening to the stories of all these people, we heard how our hearts get broken, and with them the stereotypes that we did not know we had," she said.

Karanfilovska is satisfied with the final product and the experience gained, which she said had changed her as a human being.



Kristijan Popovski

Her colleague Popovski had similar impressions. He was in charge of drawing of the comics. In the story of his team, he presented the leading characters, mother Haya, father Nazar and little Amar.

"For a long time I worked on the storyboard, the very important part of making the comic book where the text is visualized and translated into a drawing and a scene. Then, in agreement with my colleague, we continued with the sketching process. My task was after we finished the sketch, to focus more on the characters, while, my colleague on the background. My first completed drawing was on page 2-3 where cultural features of Syria were presented, and in the central part of the composition I drew radio. In fact, the radio coverage is what brings together the other pictures and gives us a sense of some kind of collage of history and culture," Popovski explained.

He was proud that he was holding the printed comic in his hands. He said that now when he was able to look at the finished product, he realized that it was not that far from what he expected.

"It was important to emphasize that humans were not only a number, but complex creatures with emotions, own stories and individual diversity. But it was also important to show how a team of young authors can create and influence future changes, break stereotypes and search for the truth through research," the student said.



"There are many people on earth, each different and in their own way special. We all move along the path of life, we pass through obstacles, we deal with bad and good, and it all forms us as a person and character," he explained.

"So, it often happens to make a judgment too soon and label someone in terms of appearance, speech, lifestyle, and so on. I think that exactly in this way refugees and migrants are represented in a bad light," he added.

According to him, people who are safe feel empathy, but those who fear for their own security, turn their focus on someone who is a refugee.

"First of all, I experience them as people, as human beings and full of understanding I try to understand the situation in which they are and the decisions they must make. These people leave their homeland, their comfort zone, which was significantly violated by an event and left to a place other than where they lived, a place where they have nothing, a place where they should start creating something from beginning, something that was left to them as legacy and should have been upgraded by next generations," believed Popovski.

The two students hoped they would succeed in transferring some of what has changed them into their stories, and that this would trigger change in other people as well.

### **From Berlin to Aleppo in the refugee's boots**

Hundreds of people, from a number of countries, marched thousand kilometers along the refugee route, but in the opposite direction, in order to send a message of peace. The march began in December last year, starting from Berlin, and finally ended before the borders of Syria in August.



Civil March for Aleppo at the border between Lebanon and Syria

Among the people who left their personal lives and set off to march for Aleppo was Jan Horzela, a social worker from Poland. He saw a Facebook post calling on all citizens who want to do something about the refugee crisis to join the mission, so he started marching from the very first day.



Jan Horzela

This experience, he says, has taught him many things. With the march, he first visited some of the countries, and by staying in them he had the opportunity to feel the daily life and character of the people. This, he believed, has taught him how to look at the world differently.

Horzela said some people were emotionally touched by what they were doing, so they invited them to sleep in their homes, offering them food and refreshment. But they did not get the same treatment everywhere.

"We spent 11 nights in Macedonia. In most places, local citizens with whom we were in contact did not show much stress because of the refugee crisis. Generally, the reactions were positive, I did not feel any reservations on the topic, as I may have felt in the Czech Republic. There were people who were really engaged and helped, who recognized that emotional tone in their own country. That they should not be afraid of people coming from different religions and states. But there were also people who believed in propaganda. We had some surprising situations in the Czech Republic when people thought we were refugees. In some places they even called the police. But I do not recall that I noticed such behavior here. If people did not know what we were doing, they were simply curious, but I did not see any tension," he said.



March passed through Macedonia in April

"I think now I know much more about the Balkans than before and I got a picture about the region. Now I know more about the links between different ethnic groups, their history and sensitivity. For example, I did not have any idea how popular was the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece. Even if you hear about such things in Poland, it's hard to imagine the intensity, how sensitive it is," he joked.

People saw their idea as something that opposed the war. But in every country, people had their own memories by which they associated with it.

"For example, when you are in the Czech Republic, people have many memories of Poland, and this is related to the Second World War, which is quite different for Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia, because if you mention a war in Serbia, they will say 'Yes, my brother was killed by a bomb 18 years ago'. The same topic will trigger really different contexts and will guide you into different conversations in different countries. It can enrich you because people can share their feelings. It's not just about exchanging knowledge, but also acknowledging things," he noted.

The following link includes the video we recorded while the march passed through Macedonia (Otherwise, the march was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize):  
<https://youtu.be/DSVlvXm9XcY>

And Horzela agreed that people were often afraid of things that were unknown to them, which leads to their demonization.

"The same thing happens in Poland, which is a rather homogeneous country, so talking about Islam or refugees will spur at least doubt in many. In recent years populist policies have fueled fear, negative emotions, but these are not experience-based, because we do not have many guests. The same thing I have heard from friends in Germany, in places where there are refugee centers, there is not much fear, as opposed to East Germany. Communities that did not have much contact with them are easier to manipulate," he stressed.

As a social worker, the march for him is a tool for connecting with like-minded people, creating a kind of family.

"For me, the march was an attempt to connect various people from all over the world and we constantly managed to do that. We managed this even before the march began, because with the announcement we constantly received feedback. For example, a woman from Italy could not march with us, but her granddaughter wrote that her grandmother told her about us, and she was inspired and wanted to join us. It was at the beginning of September and for us it was a success. We made efforts to get to know active people from Slovenia and Croatia who have been dealing with the same topic for years, but they never met though they are close," Horzela said.

According to him, anyone who has been part of the march for at least a short time, wanted to stay active and continue to do things related to the refugee crisis.





"I believe that there is very high potential and I believe that similar initiatives will be born. I try and hope to be part of them."



## **They missed the last train for Europe, now they live the Macedonian 'low life'**

Syrians Safuat and Rama and their 17-year-old brother are among the thousands of refugees and migrants who remained stuck on Macedonian borders after the closure of the Balkan route. They were on their last train to Europe when they told them they could not continue the journey.

After daily bombing raids, surrounded by trauma and lack of resources to meet the dire needs for a normal life, their parents have invested everything they had to save their children, sending them to Turkey in search of a safe ground. But their desire to reach the West from Aleppo, died in Tabanovce, after more than 2,000 kilometers on foot, by water and by land.



Rama

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"We thought it would be good for us to start over here, and here we are," said Rama, 23, as we talked before her class at the Balkan University in Skopje, where she enrolled this year.

Previously, in Aleppo, she studied translation and interpretation for two years, from Arabic to English and French. She was only 20 years old, the best years for having fun and being careless, but she had to be mature and responsible, both for herself and for her younger brother.

After their parents sold everything they had for little money, Rama and her younger brother left for Turkey, where their older brother, Safuat, waited for them.

He is now studying with Rama, English and literature. At home he studied for a lawyer, but the letter to join the army forced him to leave Syria.

"For me nothing that is happening in Syria has any sense and I did not see why I should be part of it. I decided to flee," Safuat recounted.



Rama and Safuat, a year ago when they arrived in Macedonia

"I was in Turkey for a short while and Rama told me that the war was getting worse and could no longer stay in Aleppo. So, they joined me in Turkey. There I was in a very bad situation, I did not know what to do. In fact, we tried to collect as much money as we could, we sold everything at a very low price so that we could have some money and get here. We found a smuggler in Izmir. We embarked on a boat, it was a very traumatic experience, 75 people. We were in the water for seven to eight hours. Fortunately, we survived that day," he recalled.



Safuat

Both of them have told this story many times, but now they hoped that life would finally get better for them. They also worked in the Red Cross, in a mobile team that monitored the border with Serbia in Lipkovo.

"I know Macedonian, but not very well," joked Safuat, trying to pronounce the words correctly. Apart from the language, he said that every day he also learned about the Macedonian way of life.

"In Macedonia, it is most interesting that people do not and cannot make plans for the future. You need to survive day by day. And I started to be like that, I adopted that philosophy. I only think how to survive this day and the day after that. Now I am the same as you Macedonians - today I was fine, I was at work, I survived, I will survive tomorrow," he remarked.

Although they said that the culture they come from was not much different from the Macedonian one, they still missed their native Syria.

"We have similar food, folk music, spices, Turkish coffee. But at some point you feel that this is not your home," Rama added.

They have the status of asylum seekers in Macedonia, and Rama and her younger brother live under subsidiary protection here. Safuat's case, however, is still under consideration.

A person under subsidiary protection is a foreigner who does not qualify as a recognized refugee, to which the Republic of Macedonia will recognize the right to asylum and will allow to remain within its territory, because there are strong reasons to believe that if the person returns to the country of one's citizenship, or if one is a stateless person, one will face a real risk of suffering serious injuries in the country of previous residence.

The greatest help in their journey came from the Red Cross. Sandra Tomovska is the coordinator of the mobile team in Lipkovo, which provided medical care and other assistance to illegal migrants that moved on the territory of Macedonia. She was also among the first people whom Rama and Safuat met when they arrived in Macedonia.



Sandra Tomovska

"Somewhere in the beginning of 2017, we, as the Red Cross, decided to meet Rama and Safuat's need, as they were asylum seekers. We offered them to volunteer within the Red Cross and because of their linguistic abilities to become field interpreters," Tomovska said.

She has so far had the opportunity to meet more than 700,000 refugees and migrants who transited through Macedonia.

"It is concerning that from a mass of people, very few decide to stay in Macedonia. Simply when they left their countries and Turkey, they decided to continue their journey, they decided to go to some of the countries of the European Union. Macedonia is not one of the countries where they want to continue their lives," she said.

According to her, it would be necessary for the state to enable integration of the few people who remained here.

"What happens after these people stay here? How they would become part of the education system, the labor market, how their housing issue would be resolved while staying here and waiting to get refugee status or subsidiary protection?" Tomovska asked.

However, Rama, Safuat and their brother were lucky to receive some kind of replacement for their education so far. With the help of the Red Cross, as well as donations and goodwill of private faculties and schools, all three continued their education.

### **Asylum seekers trapped in the Macedonian legal labyrinth**

In the last 10 months, 131 requests for asylum have been submitted to the Ministry of the Interior. Of these, only four requests were approved, all with subsidiary protection. Most of them were for unaccompanied minors.

The fact that only 38 people have received the refugee status since the independence of Macedonia speaks a lot about the complexity of the process of obtaining this status in the country.

Anyone who has a justified fear of persecution, due to one's own faith, race, nationality, membership of a social group, or political conviction, may seek international protection in another country.

In our country, the asylum procedure is under the jurisdiction of two ministries - the Ministry of Interior through the Asylum Sector that decides whether the conditions are met and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, responsible for their integration.



Zoran Drangovski Photo: Akademik

According to **Zoran Drangovski**, president of the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association, Macedonia has quite good law. Being the first in the region, the country has passed the Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection in 2003. Although the law has undergone several changes in recent years, it is based on the Convention for the Protection of Refugee Rights, the only document ratified by the state. At the moment, a new law is being developed.

"With the latest amendments from 2015, there was a new provision, Article 10a, which referred to a 'safe third country', which was quite problematic for us and we reacted together with the Ombudsman. That specifically meant that Macedonia declared the countries that are members of the EU and NATO to be safe countries, and once that provision was adopted, it was automatically possible for anyone who came to Macedonia, from Turkey, for example, or from Albania, Greece or Bulgaria, to reject the asylum request because one came from a safe third country," Drangovski commented.

The position of the Macedonian Young Lawyers Association, he pointed out, was that every request should have been considered individually.

"You cannot generalize. For me, Greece is a safe country, but for someone else it might not be," he said.

Nazif Avdi, one of the lawyers from the association, emphasized that there was also a problem in limiting the right to unite with the family.



Nazif Avdi

"With the changes to the law so far, family reunification could have been granted to a recognized refugee and a person under subsidiary protection three years after obtaining the status, while before the changes, there were no such restrictions."

"We aim to change this policy because we feel that the family is the core. If you divide the family, this is not a procedure in the spirit of the European Convention on Human Rights and other international regulations."

Macedonian laws stipulate that two types of status can be given in the country: a recognized refugee and a person under subsidiary protection. The recognized refugee is the highest status and is given in accordance with the Convention for the Protection of Refugees.

Persons under subsidiary protection are, however, those who do not meet the criteria to be recognized as a refugee, but there are still circumstances that can put their lives under certain risk in the home country.

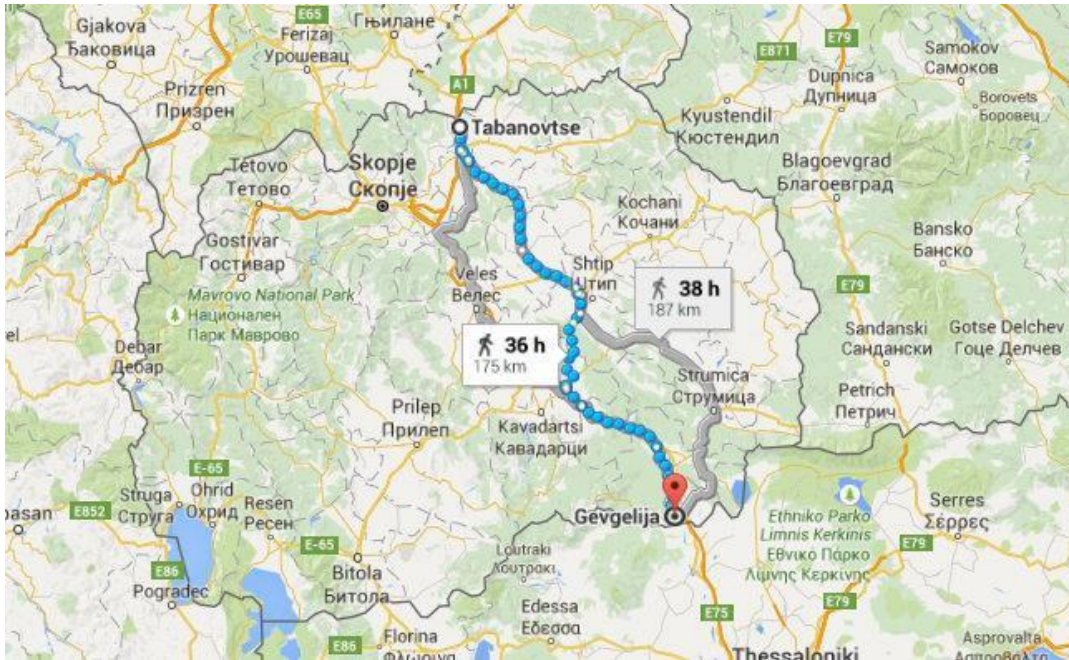
"These persons have the status for a limited period, i.e. for a year, after which every year the Ministry of Internal Affairs examines whether there are still factors that would grant them such status. Throughout this procedure, these individuals have the right to free legal assistance, which MYLA together with UNHCR have been providing from the moment of submitting the application to the competent institution, until its final decision," Avdi explained.

If the decision is negative, the association continues to represent them before the competent courts, by engaging lawyers who represent the interests of these persons.

If the person is granted a status, then one has access to other rights, which are granted to the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, but with one important difference - the persons with recognized refugee status do not have the right to vote or to be elected. Persons under subsidiary protection have limited rights, but their fundamental rights are guaranteed by the Constitution.

### **Although closed, the Balkan route still exists**

The movement along the Balkan route is illegal, but refugees and migrants can be still observed. According to data available to the UNHCR, from July 1, 2015, about 800,000 people transited through Macedonia. 96 percent of them mostly came from three countries: Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, and one percent from other countries involved in a military conflict, such as Eritrea and South Sudan.



Some of the transit routes in Macedonia

"There is still a movement and we are trying to help them, to get in touch with them. Now it is more complicated and harder because they are afraid, they hide," Ljubinka Brashnarska from UNHCR Macedonia said.

Their teams worked along the border areas in order to have insight into the real situation about how many people were transiting the country and what their needs were.



Ljubinka Brashnarska

For her it was very important to review the procedures during the state of emergency and to learn lessons.

"Whenever any state is in a state of emergency, it is very difficult to work on creating or improving the system. Then the country literally seeks ways to help all those who need help, in the most appropriate way. But that is why this period is very important after the end of the state of emergency, and we use this period precisely for that - to make one step forward in improving the system," she said.

According to Brashnarska, it is necessary to simplify the process of obtaining asylum. In order to avoid the several months waiting for a single procedure, it would be useful, she said, to have a database of all refugees who were in the country. Therefore, the UNHCR made efforts to register them in a more thorough way.



"We are trying to help the institutions accelerate that process and improve it as much as possible, for the rights of refugees to be respected. Particular attention should be paid to the needs of groups that are vulnerable and have special needs, such as women, unaccompanied minors, elderly people, persons with disabilities. They are the most vulnerable in every situation, so we are working to jointly improve the system so it can be fair, regardless of the outcome of asylum applications," she said.

However, there has been and still there is insecurity in the media, Brashnarska believed.

"Perhaps a part of that uncertainty is based on ignorance about what a refugee is and what a migrant is. Often these two groups merge as if they were part of the same group or if one is a subgroup to the other, but this is not true. Refugees flee from war, from persecution based on real fear for their life, just because they belong to a group."

### **Fear of the unknown fueled xenophobia**



Jasmin Rexhepi

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Refugees should not be used for political issues, suggested Jasmin Rexhepi from the non-governmental organization Legis, which helped refugees and migrants from the very beginning of the crisis.

"Macedonia should remain a country that is almost neutral on that issue, it will only need to provide the refugees with what they are entitled to. If they are in transit to provide humanitarian aid, but no more than that. We cannot act as protectors of Europe!"

In July, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy presented a draft Strategy for the Integration of Refugees and Foreigners, which sparked controversy in the public. The opposition blamed that "100,000 refugees would move to Macedonia, and the Strategy suggested that this might happen."

According to Rexhepi, the problem is not in the document itself, but in the way it was presented to the public.

"First, none of them wanted to stay in Macedonia. Second, Europe has never officially requested such thing from us. Third, if those people want to integrate in our country, we should have a good law for that, but there will always be individual examples of people with family or friends here," Rexhepi explained.

According to him, it is meaningless to say that these people will change the demography and will aggravate the economic situation in Macedonia.

"If you were in power for 11 years, and you were not able to create jobs for all, but you have put them in state administration, it is your personal problem. Not that someone will come and take the jobs of our citizens. On the contrary, the problem with jobs is an

economic and political problem that has been 26 years old and is not something that is jeopardized from the outside," he criticized.

In fact, Rexhepi added, the Strategy was based on a budget that was 90 per cent composed of foreign donations, not from tax payers' money.

"The whole campaign was created on the basis of a lie. On one hand, the goal was to mobilize the citizens, to sow fear in them, to go to the (local) elections and to vote for the political party that pushed these lies into the public. To that end, it was planned that referendums would be held simultaneously - those who did not want refugees or migrants, would vote for that political party."



Утре со почеток во 11.00 часот пред трговскиот центар „Бисер“ ќе се собираат потписи за граѓанската иницијатива против населување на мигранти и создавање мигрантски кампови во општина Аеродром. Потписите ќе се собираат од 11.00 часот до 19.00 часот.

Ти одлучуваш дали во Аеродром ќе има мигрантски кампови!

Излези и ти!  
За Аеродром!

One of the calls in the social media

Fear was a very powerful tool, added Brashnarska.

"Here we should be all involved in an internal dialogue and ask ourselves who is afraid more and try to put ourselves in the fugitive's skin. Who is more afraid, the one that escapes from war, from smugglers, human traffickers, organ traffickers who can meet him, his children and his family along the way. Or more afraid is the one living in freedom, in a state that protects him, which has a functioning defense system, functional army and police?" she asked.

Nazif Avdi had a similar position, for whom the initiatives for referendum were unjustified. According to him, the main reason for this was ignorance about the essence of the Strategy.

"The strategy is a simple document adopted by the MoLSP, after which it is obliged to act accordingly, because in 2003 the Parliament adopted a migration document. But the essence was not brought to light, as the most common debates were focused on whether 100 apartments would be built in a certain municipality, or not, or whether Macedonia would give citizenship to 100,000 refugees, or not."

He added that the fears were completely unjustified that a larger number of refugees and migrants would settle in the Republic of Macedonia.

### **The desire to reunite the family makes them go forward**

Rama and Safuat are in regular contact with their parents, but also with their oldest brother, who has been in Norway for five years. They said that the situation in Aleppo was still worrying.

"It's not easy to lose all four children at once and not to have them close to you. They just want to see us and hope they would come one day. We have not been together for more than two years," Rama said, recalling the last moments she spent with her family.

"Breakfast at home with parents, being with my mom and dad ... Sometimes, when I'm in a warm place and there is noise from a TV in the background, I close my eyes and I think I'm at home.

Everything that reminds me of my home is a good memory," she described it emotionally.

Safuat, however, joked that he missed even the bad things.

"I even miss my fights with my brother. It's a homey atmosphere. You can understand, right?".

Now they only have to adapt to life here. Despite what they read and watch in the media, they said they did not feel like strangers.

"Macedonians are very kind. I do not feel like a refugee here. Maybe elsewhere I would feel, but here, when I am among people, I am part of them, I have no feeling that they see me as a stranger. They treat me like they know me. People in other cities are even finer. The people from the villages through which we passed, are more open," said Rama.

They wanted to be of benefit, and for this reason they volunteered in the Red Cross.

"You wake up and every morning you receive a different information, some sort of rumor. But the reality is that nothing changes, you're just wasting your time. We want to be helpful, we want to be useful. Before I started volunteering in the Red Cross, I already had friends there, and the crisis was still going on. Sometimes I went to the warehouse, I helped them with physical work. I volunteered even before I became part of the Central Committee. I have a good opportunity to help. I told my friend Filip from Kumanovo: 'One day I will be part of the Red Cross'. He told me, 'Well, why not?' And they did it for us," he said.

"It's pretty amazing. In two months, I will be a Red Cross volunteer for a year now. Safuat is with them for eight months. Time really flies," added his sister.

Their main goal now is to graduate and to create more friendships. They say they know a lot of people, but they do not have close friends.

Although they are young, they play the role of parents for their younger brother.

"He needs someone to guide him and give him direction. Now he is at a very sensitive age. After this period, after what you did in those few years, you will probably be that person all your life. Therefore, it is important to guide him and show him what is right and what is not," said Safuat.

"I think the best thing that has happened is that the three of us are together, we have a part of our home with us. If I was alone, it would have been much more difficult," he concluded.

## Civil march for Aleppo in Macedonia

Yes it's a day number 119 I think today. A lot of road is behind us, a lot in front of us. We shouldn't forget what we are doing and why we are here, not only because we like each other. There is some bigger thing behind it. Let's for a moment of silence think about it.

Aleppo! Let's go

Are you ready to go ?

Yeah

My name is Ismahan, I'm from France and I heard about the March before it starts, so in November and immediately I said to myself I will do it. It was impossible when I was in Austria to imagine that I will come back in France and stay at home and, I don't know, looking at on TV and so on and news and so on about Syria and stay at home like that. It was obvious that I have to this March, I have to...

I don't believe that we will have the peace in Syria just thanks to this march, I am not naïve. But at least we try I and we do something and we will show our support to the Syrian refugees.

Have your walkie talkie with yourself? Yes

So what is your assignment today?

I am security on the back today, because we divided some rules during the march for our security so there is a march master who leads the march and there are two securities, one on the front and one on the back. On the back I have to announce who is coming, I have to wait for people if they stay on the back, to regroup the group and so on.

I try to guess, which places are safe maybe easy or even beautiful. It matters. **Many ways on the roads which are safe but really noisy. This is stressful for the group and its take....** It's easy to keep the motivation and spirit high when the days are hard and even one day after a few days like that in beautiful peaceful place like through forest or some hills can really help people.

For hour's we walk usually is like 15 to 35km so it gives us 4 to 8 hours of walking.

Let's say.. During the walk there are small breaks and one bigger like the thing you see around it's like a lunch break . we bring food with a car, the group arrives. Has Half an hour to 40 minutes of time to drink something hot little bit and then we will continue walking and once we arrive at the place where we finish the road for today we usually the same way as in the morning we make a small meeting and welcome the place where we walk to. Than in the evening at the place where we sleep already preparing food and having some meetings and sometimes it's a longer discussion on topics, either strictly or loosely connected whit idea of the march and every day we have organizational meeting where we divided the roles for the next day.

It's a really changing experience, and it might sound selfish, because it's only about my experience, but it is not true.

I believe that those experiences can be translated into social change and raise awareness or make people more active in their local communities, to educate, to, I don't know change things around

Not necessarily connected to the war in Syria, of course we focus on that but the same quality, it takes to stand up for somebody else in that part of the globe. It's the same qualities you need to stand up for your neighbor or for yourself in your own community

My name is Edgar I am a lawyer, human rights lawyer from Brazil.

I come here to help these people to reach Aleppo

It's not easy. I left everything behind. And of course I didn't have too much support, because just leaving your comfortable life to go to the war it's not something that people can understand, but as I usually say if you believe in a project if you believe in a concept, you just you know have to do it.

We are not politicians, we are not people who are in charge of the politic or of some government. But maybe the march will not change anything but the point is, we are not worried about the outcome, we are not expecting any result, because we believe in a process

We are fighting for the process, it's a long term process, that maybe the next generation, or three generations after our generation, will see the change. Physically we are tired, but even though we are tired we keep marching every day 30km, doesn't matter, the weather, if it's snowing, raining or sunny, we have this strength because mentally we are very strong, so we look tired but mentally we are strong, and this is how we are going to reach Aleppo.