

# solidarnost je naša snaga

## Solidary visit to war refugees

### REPORT FOR PARK VISIT

October 26<sup>th</sup> 2016

The Info Park booth in the park by the Belgrade bus station was closed yesterday by the City of Belgrade due to permit expiry. The Info Park booth served two hot meals each day to refugees and asylum seekers who have crossed the border into Serbia on their way into the European Union (EU). We two activists went to visit the parks and the area around the bus station, and saw that the entire structure of the booth had been taken down. We learned that it will re-open in an old café near where it used to be, but in 6 days' time. This means that for 6 days, people will have no access to warm meals. Those who have money will have to spend it on meals and groceries, and those who do not will have to be at the right place at the right time, when ad lib humanitarian aid is distributed. Today, there was juice and croissants being distributed, and those who did not hear about this impromptu distribution were out of luck.

We saw that the abandoned storage facility behind the bus station, where the Afghan refugees we used to visit took shelter under the awnings, had a line-up that had well over one hundred people queuing up. We learned that this was where little croissants were being distributed. It was before 11am, and before our arrival, there had been a fight between some of the people waiting for what little food they could get, so the Commissariate police had been called in by the aid workers to ensure no more fights broke out. We had purchased food (potatoes, carrots, onions, rice, oil, salt & pepper, juice, chocolate) and cigarettes to give to our Afghan friends who we met with in the past. We were unable to find them, and among the crowd of hundreds of starving people, felt that it was inappropriate to bring out the ingredients, so we walked behind the abandoned facilities to an abandoned house on the same property where over a dozen refugees were squatting. We gave them the bags of food and they distributed everything amongst their community. The house had fire pits, clothes hanging to dry, and many people coming in and out of it.

Following the food distribution, we walked into one of the abandoned storage facilities. Beforehand, we had only gone so far as the awning, as the weather was warmer, so the twenty or so people sleeping on that side of the building had not yet relocated indoors. Now that the autumn rain has begun, night time temperatures are around 8 degrees Celsius, and far too cold for being outdoors. The inside of the abandoned building was a very large open space. Old discarded furniture had been used to make walls and separate cubicles, where 3 to 6 or so people had mats and sleeping bags. Each of these make-shift rooms had people in it, and there were approximately 150 people in this one building alone. There are two other abandoned buildings on that property that have people squatting inside of them as well. We spoke to several of the refugees who were



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taking shelter in this building. There are only males [presumed gender] ranging from pre-teens to middle age. They are from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and very few from Iran. Many people asked us if we had brought food, and unfortunately, we had nothing to give except for a few packs of cigarettes. People huddled together, slept, or sat by their small fires. The inside was completely dilapidated, dark, mouldy, and smoky.

One of the refugees from Afghanistan spoke English and shared with us how terrible their experience has been. They mentioned that they left Afghanistan because their life was in danger, and they had many scars across their abdomen to show it. They also shared how they and their friends came back yesterday from attempting to cross the border into Hungary. They said that the police grabbed them and screamed at them extremely aggressively. The police in Hungary also released their dogs on them, who bit some of the refugees, and tore some of their bags. They were immediately sent back to the Serbian side of the border. Our new friend has been in Serbia for 16 days and has tried several times to cross into Hungary. Their friend has been in Serbia for 2 months, and both of them said that their treatment in Bulgaria was just as brutal as in Hungary. We spoke to this person for a while and asked questions, and appreciated the information they shared with us. We exchanged phone numbers so that we could continue to be in contact, and so that we could receive updates if something was happening or if they needed our help in some way. This was an important connection to make, especially because it shows mutual trust is being cultivated.

While in the abandoned building that is being squatted, there were no police present. On our way to the building, we saw one police officer walking by, though they seemed disinterested and were not focusing on the building or the people by it. While in the building, one person walked through and said hello to us, though we are uncertain of whether this person is with the Commissariate or what affiliation they have.

Overall, the refugee crisis in Serbia is not improving and has become very bad. There is no evidence that the funding that the government has received from the UN and various organizations is being used to provide resources for refugees or undocumented peoples. In fact, it seems that resources are often being shut down more often than they are being supported. Public spaces are being ripped apart and closed off under the guise of "park renovation", when in actuality, these spaces are only being fenced without any sign of renovations for over five months. Public space is less available for refugees who are stuck in passage between their countries of origin and the EU. The following 6 days will be important for observing how people are dealing with the absence of consistent meals. It is crucial that we stand in solidarity with refugees in Serbia during this volatile time, and in the future.



*Written by: Sofija*