

Ombudswoman of Croatia – on site monitoring and recommendations for protection of refugees' human rights

As countries such as Macedonia and Serbia reported record arrivals of refugees in September, and Hungary was preparing harsher measures against all those trying to enter the country, the Croatian public, human rights institutions, institutions dealing with migration, the academic community, as well as international and local organizations, had no information on how Croatia would respond to the arrival of large numbers of refugees and migrants – and their arrival was only a matter of time.

Therefore, Ombudswoman Lora Vidović organized an expert meeting in the Croatian Parliament highlighting the importance of ensuring human rights, dignity and basic needs for the people in need of international protection. "This situation must be considered a humanitarian issue, not just a security issue," said Vidović on this occasion. An appeal to competent state authorities was made to engage all stakeholders, including civil society organizations in the coordination of the activities. This message proved to be key in dealing with the challenges the refugee crisis brought.



Ombudswoman Vidović at the temporary Refugee Camp in Zagrebacki Velesjeam

From 16 September 2015, when the first refugees started arriving, Ombudswoman and her teams continuously paid daily and nightly visits to the places where the refugees and migrants were located, especially transit centers, train stations, border crossings and temporary registration centers. During the visits, the Ombudswoman formulated a number of on-the-spot recommendations, most of which were immediately accepted. They referred to the improvement of the accommodation conditions and health

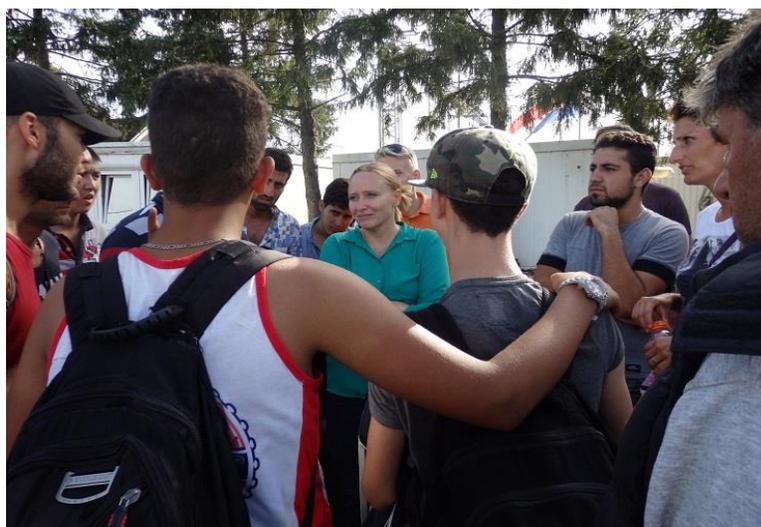
"This situation must be considered a humanitarian issue, not just a security issue" – Croatian Ombuds Vodovic

care for the refugees and migrants, protection of the rights of vulnerable groups, especially when boarding trains and buses, to the issue of reunifications of

separated families and to the better organization of the flow of information in the transit centers.

During the visits the Ombudswoman expressed her praise for the policemen working on the ground for their humane approach as well as the coordination and cooperation achieved between various ministries, international organizations, NGOs and volunteers – stakeholders who have all been daily engaged in the care for the refugees and migrants (<http://ombudsman.hr/index.php/en/top-stories-3/more-news/604-i-want-to-thank-each-police-officer-on-the-ground>).

As the reception and transit were stabilized and organized in a humane and solidary manner aligned with the security requirements, the Ombudswoman has continued to carry out control visits. Also, due to the attitude of some countries, including Croatia, as well as the international community as a whole, in reference to the influx of large numbers of refugees and migrants, she has publicly highlighted that a person's citizenship cannot present an obstacle to the access to the asylum system. (<http://ombudsman.hr/index.php/en/top-stories-3/more-news/623-citizenship-must-not-be-an-obstacle-for-access-to-the-asylum-system>).



Ombudswoman Vidović at the Tovarnik train station

On that occasion, she pointed out that the responsibility of finding a solution lies not on a single country, but on the entire international community: the international community must cooperate and act in the interest of protecting both security and human rights. Aiming to further strengthen the cooperation, particularly at the regional level, together with the Ombudsmen of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia the Ombudswoman visited the reception/transit camp in Slavonski Brod, Croatia and the border crossing Sid, Serbia.

(<http://ombudsman.hr/index.php/en/top-stories-3/international-cooperation/638-ombudswoman-vidovic-and-ombudsman-of-serbia-visit-refugee-centers-in-sid-and-slavonski-brod>).

An overview of a refugee crisis in Croatia, as well as the actions taken by the Ombudswoman, have been summarized in a short video, based on the photos taken by her teams during their visits (<http://ombudsman.hr/index.php/hr/top-stories/promocija-i-suradnja/639-video-izbjeglicka-kriza-u-hrvatskoj>).