

Interview with a Food not Bombs activist from Timișoara about refugees, solidarity and the current situation

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Bună: *Can you tell us a few words about the situation with the refugees in Timișoara?*

FnB Timișoara: I think that the refugees crossing the border started to be more and more numerous in November 2020. As the border with Croatia was closed, they tried to find another route, through Romania and then Hungary. The situation right now is quite bad. The centers are full and there are also refugees/asylum seekers on the streets. About 200 at the moment. Some of the people in the streets are those who received (or asked for) legal status in Romania, but are sent to centers in Giurgiu, Covasna and so on. They come to Timișoara, closer to the western border, in order to continue their journey westwards. As some of them said to us on occasions: „There is nothing to do there. If life is hard for you here, imagine how things are for us.”

Bună: *What do they tell you about what they have been through?*

FnB Timișoara: Personally, I haven't spoken that much with them, even though we had a lot of interaction. One of the reasons is the language barrier. That can make things a bit difficult. There were times when we couldn't find someone to speak English; or, in the best scenario, they only knew a few words. However, we were able to organize the food distribution together, in good order and with no conflicts. It was, of course, easier when we could find someone to speak English and willing to give us a hand. In general, those who spoke English were very kind and helpful, and translated what was being said for everyone. Honestly, the few stories they shared with us are heart-breaking. There is a lot of suffering and trauma, stories about the cold they have endured on the road and in the camps, about police beatings and hunger. Most of them seem, nevertheless, quite optimistic about the future. Maybe because they are young, the majority are under 25 years-old, they speak a lot about their hopes and wishes, about the life they dream of. They are open and very eager to learn new things, and ask us a lot of questions. So, we try to answer them as best we can, rather than dwell on the trauma and suffering they have endured so far. In the end, the anxiety and the overall fear in their eyes is a lasting and painful impression, from every encounter.

Bună: *As far as we know, the first one to respond to the situation and to get involved was the local community. Can you tell us more about that?*

FNB Timișoara: There isn't a single, undifferentiated „local community”, so the question is a bit vague, but I'll try to answer. Officially, there is an NGO, LOGS, that works with migrants and refugees, and offers them assistance. They work in partnership with other associations, churches, and with state authorities. Since the crisis in Timișoara began, they took the initiative and started to organize the assistance for the incoming people. However, this evolved into a sort of monopoly from their part. If you want to do something for the refugees/asylum seekers, you need to do it through them. For instance, gaining access to the asylum centers for food distribution. This is why we were a bit reluctant to get involved with them at first.

Back to the recent events. Because there was no room left in the state-run centers, people slept outside, in the winter cold. The first to respond to this situation was a Baptist church community that organized regular food distribution for refugees in the streets. At eight in the evening they distribute dinner for everybody, but they also provide other types of aid: showers, clean clothing, and basic medical services. At the end they all have a prayer together. I am skeptical about this part. Maybe it is totally voluntary and each is free to join in, or pray in their religion, as they say, but I don't see why, if you offer something, you always need to ask for something in return. Maybe there are people who need help, but who are not religious, or not in the mood to pray. Anyway... We realized the situation was getting serious, when we saw an article about a police intervention in an abandoned building, occupied by refugees. About the same time we learned about the aid provided by the Baptist community. I also started to notice groups of young people, many of them adolescents, around the place where I work. It was, I think, in December. They were barely clothed, with torn shoes, no socks, and the weather outside was very cold, so we started to bring them clothes, warm food and other things. Since January we also started to visit those who were sheltering in the abandoned buildings. We go there three-four times a week, depending on the donations we get (food, clothes, other things), and our budget. There are about thirty people in one of these buildings, sometimes even more. There are also many refugees around the train station. I think the situation is quite bleak at the moment – refugees/asylum seekers in the quarantine center get only a meal/day for instance, they cannot leave the center, and, generally, they have no sleeping bags, no clothes to keep them warm. At the same time, the police are constantly harassing those living in the streets. There are numerous reports of people being beaten, stripped of warm clothes and left in their t-shirts, with their cell-phones smashed and their money confiscated. This is why we strongly feel we need to do something. At this point, any help, any support, from individuals, collectives, anyone, really matters.

Bună: *Was there any reaction from the authorities (local and national)? Are there any support measures in place?*

FNB Timișoara: To be honest, I didn't follow very closely the „authorities” reaction. They are either lying about the whole situation in the media, or just denying any responsibility at all. They are well versed in their discourse about „the refugee problem”, as the public opinion in Timișoara seems rather fearful towards the asylum seekers/refugees passing through the city. At the same time, the authorities are trying to cover up the allegations of police abuse; they also resort to pressure sometimes in order to gain the NGOs on their side. This way, eventual problems are less likely to transpire to the public. Things are also bad from an organizing and resource allocation point of view, at both local and national level. A boy who was caught by the border police and taken into a quarantine center – it is a requirement because of covid-19 to spend two weeks in such a center before being sent to another location for asylum seekers – told us the building was full, there were no places, so they had to sleep in the yard, with no sleeping bags, no mattresses

and no blankets. I think the authorities are overwhelmed by the situation. However, they don't seem to be doing very much to remedy these issues. Instead they seem very eager to cover up as much as they can, to make the refugees' life as hard as possible and to keep everything out of sight.

Bună: *What is your involvement? What kinds of actions do you organize in solidarity with the refugees?*

FnB Timișoara: We are five or six people who got involved. We do it depending on the resources available and the time we have. Our actions are generally guided by „Food not Bombs” principles. I think this kind of direct action is still relevant and necessary today, and especially with the current situation. The format might be ”old” in a sense, but it has been tested through time. And it works best for us as well. Generally we prepare food, but we also try to provide clothes, shoes, hygiene products (like soap, wipes, masks etc.). We also bring games, like chess, or books, things that we think might make them happy, or amuse them, at least for some time. They sometimes ask us for things. In any case, their needs are quite simple, basic things, as one can expect: food, warm clothes, socks. Generally everyone is getting along in harmony. There are not many arguments over food or stuff like that.

Bună: *What is the situation now and what are the perspectives moving forward? Especially that a new lock-down is now in place in Timișoara.*

FnB Timișoara: Right now, the situation is not so good. Our previous location, where we could prepare food, organize benefits, gather donations etc., is closed. We could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble and solved many more problems, had we had a space of our own. The prospects are not very optimistic on the long run either. People are more and more alienated; they need more than on-line communication. The pandemic, all the policing and medical restrictions make organizing very difficult. I am speaking of long-term perspectives because I have the feeling that this situation is going to continue and the general context is not very favorable, with the lock-downs and a ”medical and military dictatorship” already in place. The lock-down in Timișoara is very hard on everyone, but the most vulnerable are particularly affected: people with no job, suffering from depression, those living on the streets, asylum seekers. And now, on top of an already corrupt and unjust system, we have a pandemic that has brought fascist and authoritarian tendencies to the surface. It is quite demoralizing. It is difficult to work with people and bring them some hope, if you struggle yourself to keep afloat.

Bună: *The solidarity is mostly local or do you also have support from other collectives or individuals (nationally and/or internationally)?*

FnB Timișoara: There are few collectives and individuals in Timișoara involved, other than LOGS and the various religious associations and churches I have already mentioned. People here seem quite reluctant to do that in general. They rather see the refugees as a ”problem”. We have been questioned at times as to why are we helping them? Of course, there are also people who still want to give a hand. The tricky part is that the only way for them to get involved, or, at least the most visible and easy way, are the NGOs and the churches. Or, eventually, they can join us, the punks.

As far as international solidarity is concerned, we haven't seen much support. On the other hand, other collectives from Romania, from Cluj (@casă) and Bucharest (Filaret 16), have been collecting food, hygiene products, and clothes on several occasions lately. I hope they will continue to do that, as the need is constant. Back to the local collectives, the support of *Dreptul la Oraș* (The Right to the City) collective has been of great help, as they cover two thirds of the

weekly budget needed for our actions. This way we can provide products that we don't always get from other donations.

Bună: *Thank you for this interview.*

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