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# Idomeni: Resisting and hoping at the borders of 'Fortress Europe'



**Report:**

**March over the Fortress to Idomeni**

**(25<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> March 2016)**

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While visiting the refugee camp of Idomeni in Greece, I found this sign hanging in front of a fence protected by the police force at the Greek-Macedonian border. The message is short but clear, the refugees living in Idomeni – around 11,000 women, children and men – despite the precarious living conditions in the camp - are staying there hoping that Europe will embrace them, and finally the borders will be open again.

However, what does it mean to live in Idomeni? What would make someone live in those terrible conditions where sanitation, proper housing, access to food, medical services and medication are extremely limited?

Of course fleeing of war and persecution is not a matter of a free a choice, but some people consider that the decision of coming to Europe it is. Some people might ask, If refugees are fleeing war and looking for safety, why they cross several countries and come here? Why to make those dangerous trips if protection could be granted somewhere else closer to their homes? - questioning the 'true intentions' of the refugees.

The truth is that most refugees stay indeed close to their national borders, in the case of Syria, for instance, countries like Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan host the largest numbers of Syrian refugees within their territories. The majority of them are not coming to Europe. Nevertheless, the refugee movements into Europe has been catalogued as 'a crisis' that needs to be solved. Unfortunately, to close the borders and to engage a controversial pact with Turkey seems to be the answer of the European Union to this matter.

There is indeed a European Refugee crisis, but it seems to be more a political, and a humanitarian one, and Idomeni if one of several examples of the consequences of the 'fortification of Europe'.

My trip to Idomeni was part of a solidarity march called "**March over the Fortress**" organized by several Italian organizations. The march took place from 25<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2016. Around 300 people responded to the call and joined the march. From Venice to Palermo and from Munich to Trieste, people were mobilized and several goods like clothes, shoes and medicines were collected in order to distribute them in the camp.

The main goal of the march was to protest against the European Migration policy, to reject the EU-Turkey deal, but especially, to show and bring solidarity to the people blocked at the borders of Europe. Solidarity that meant a physical presence of 300 people, willing to listen and interact with the refugees and other activists, but also by accomplishing other task that could improve their living conditions in the camp: Distribution of materials, installing a free Wi-Fi-spot and a power generator, give legal advice about international protection and asylum procedures. To achieve these tasks, five working groups were organized among the volunteers: Communication, Legal-counselling, Distribution, Children care, and Construction.



A march was also organized on Monday the 28<sup>th</sup> in front of the regional government offices to show our disagreement with the current European solution to the refugee matter especially to the EU-Turkey agreement.

During the last weeks the Greek government have tried to shut down the camp, there have been some initiatives to bring people to other camps, nevertheless the vast majority of refugees decided to stay there. There has been a lot of information in the media about the living conditions in the camp, about the confrontations between policy and refugees, about the attempts to cross the borders that have failed. However, little have been told about why despite all the disadvantages and deprivations that the refugees suffer here, they still persevere to stay in Idomeni.

To try to give an answer to this question, I have to recall that first sign in the cover of this report and the imaginary of Europe that it evokes: **Patience + Hope = Europe.**

Europe resounds in the imagination of those people as a place of peace, freedom and prosperity. Despite crisis, austerity and the deal with Turkey that confirm the humanitarian step-back of the European policies, Europe remains a rich continent with all the means to face this challenge.

The idea of Europe as a sort of 'safe and democratic place' endures for those people fleeing war, dictatorial governments, political persecution or structural violence, as a place where they can have a new start away from all those problems.

However, the European governments are sending a different message: Refugees and Migrants, you are not welcome! The signed agreement between the EU and Turkey, the creation of hotspots of in Italy and Greece to detain all new arrivals, and the new asylum procedures that are not compelling to the right of asylum, show how the EU is unwilling to face its international responsibilities towards refugees. If the governments lack the will to support refugees, then civil society initiatives are thus important and relevant, and much of the work to support them has been done by volunteers and NGOs.

Today the borders between Greece and Macedonia are still closed, and Austria's plan to build a fence border at Brenner disclose Europe's unwillingness to open the Borders to those seeking asylum in Europe. However, to those 11,000 women, children and men living in Idomeni, the thousands of people crossing the Aegean or the Mediterranean Sea by boat, those risking and losing their lives at the European borders, there is not a step back. For them it might be not a home or a place to go back. In those conditions, the idea of Europe, as Europe also claimed to be, as democratic, plural, tolerant, and welcoming becomes stronger.



There is not a step back for them, despite the fences, the police and military presence, the cold and the rain; and despite the lack of services and support that represent a huge violation to their rights and dignity.

The Refugees are staying in Idomeni, looking over the fences hoping that Europe will remember that once Europeans also fled from war and poverty. Hoping that European politicians will come into their sense and realize that the current European policy is not only an incredible violation of international conventions but also to the fundamental values that the EU claim to be based on. Therefore, they are staying there at the borders of Fortress Europe, hoping that the border will be open again and that maybe they will get the right to call Europe their home.

### **Overview of the march over the fortress:**

**Friday 25<sup>th</sup> of March:** Meeting point at Ancona's port. After the press release and a few statements from several organizations, more than 200 volunteers from all Italy embark the Ferry to Igoumenitsa (Greece) with all the goods collected in several Italian cities. Other groups were also departing by ship from Puglia and by car from Trieste and Munich.

**Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> of March:** Arrival to Igoumenitsa, meeting with the second Italian delegation coming from Puglia. Bus travel to Policastro (close to Idomeni), where we meet the whole delegation. There we organized the distribution of goods in several trucks and assigned the tasks before coming to Idomeni. Around 16:00 we arrived to Idomeni, we talked with organizations working on site; we talked to refugees and distributed some goods especially for women and children asking tent by tent.

**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> of March:** Sunday morning travel back to Idomeni to finish with the distribution of goods and to build the Wi-Fi-point. In our way to the refugee camp, the Police block our arrival without reason. We explain the reason of our travel to Idomeni but they refused to let us in. They not only blocked us, but also any other person or organization trying to reach the camp – excepting refugees-. (Apparently, someone spread the voice that the reason of our presence in Idomeni was to help the refugees to cross the border, fact that was fake). After some hours of discussion and demonstrations in front of the police barricade, we were allowed to enter the camp and continue our work there.

**Monday 28<sup>th</sup> of March:** Three different working activities: The legal-counselling group visited another refugee camp close to Thessaloniki managed by the Greek government to know the legal situation of the refugees there. The construction team went back to Idomeni to finish its work with the internet and the electricity plant,



and the rest of us went to Thessaloniki to march with other Greek organizations against the European Refugee policies. That night we embark the ferry back to Italy.

**Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> of March:** During our travel back to Italy all volunteers and organizers gather to reflect about our experiences and to consolidate strategies to continue with the work started in Idomeni.

Currently, #Overthefortress became more than a march, and today it has a permanent representation in Idomeni composed by activist and volunteers. It aims at monitoring and continuing with the solidarity work with all refugees living in the camp.



Ancona harbour



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Igoumenitsa Greece



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Police block close to Idomeni



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Idomeni refugee camp



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Idomeni refugee camp



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Thessaloniki, Greece

