

ERASMUS REPORT

My Internship in the Social Apartments of ARSIS in Thessaloniki for 5 Months

Two weeks ago my internship in Greece has ended and I have returned to Germany. I've spent a great deal of time reflecting on that entire period, experiences it has brought to me, and how they have affected me both as a social worker and as a person. In this short text I will do my best to describe that period, my starting expectations, motivations, and the realities I have discovered.

My initial desire to visit Greece was not connected to this internship. I was always attracted by Balkan countries, their culture and their way of life. The idea to travel to Greece has already been brewing in my mind. I was curious to meet the locals and learn about their life. One could easily stay informed about the economic crisis and political turmoil which shook the country – some of them easily relatable to the problems we also have in Germany. I was however hoping to see it first hand and to better understand what it is like to live in Greece and face such issues on daily basis. Not only as a Greek citizen but maybe even more so as a refugee. What made it very interesting to me personally is that, for most migrants, it was the entry point into EU. Once more, one can stay informed well enough simply following the media. But while we clearly see how the arrival of those in need of aid has shaped European politics and what kind of image of a refugee has taken hold among the people of Europe, few bother to ask what kind of image do we reflect back to those who place their hopes in Europe. Within the ERASMUS PLUS Program, I wanted to get the opportunity to ask such a question. I also wished to discover people's stories and motivations, to see what kind of opportunities are truly offered to them, what kind of future they have to hope for, and which are the largest obstacles placed in their way.

My internship took place in Thessaloniki a beautiful town in Northern Greece, at an organization called ARSIS, Association for the Social Support of Youth. Since there are many different departments inside of ARSIS I ended up in the Social Apartments. The Social Apartments host young asylum seeker adults in the age of 18-25 years, that have to leave the shelters for minors or get transferred to ARSIS through other organizations. During a period of 6 months the goal is to be able to reach the highest Autonomy. Which means the beneficiaries will be accompanied with their search for work and apartments get support during their asylum process as well as an inclusion in the educational and recreational possibilities, the city offers. I was a part of a team of seven people. Two of us were interns, two care takers, one psychologist, one Urdu translator and one coordinator.

Our work was focused around roughly twenty young adults. Their nationalities, backgrounds, and stories were quite varied but they all shared need for support and guidance in a foreign unfamiliar country. They were situated in three social apartments provided to them by our organization, located in different areas of the city.

To begin with, we were not given any sort of special training or work schedule to understand, what is expected of us, the interns, it was not very clear to us how our time at ARSIS will look like. From day one we simply started to meet the young adults. To get to know them. Learn about their story, if they were interested to share. To discover their interest and needs. This was a bit chaotic. Arsis had barely any internal structure, with only a handful of people filling in clearly defined positions, while others had to adapt to whatever circumstances and needs arose. Such was our work as well. During my entire internship I had no set job or place. I was there to answer the needs of our beneficiaries in the best manner possible. Our duties were numerous. We were tasked with visiting these young men in their apartments and making sure that they live in good conditions and that they get along well with each other in their living space. This required of us to approach them and gain their trust, to show them we are willing to listen to their issues and to do what we can to mediate any disputes or dissatisfactions. In some cases there were language barriers making this duty quite challenging for us, but the need for good communication was obvious for all sides so we always tried to find a solution. Luckily most of them spoke English. Offering them our skills and support, soon I discovered, was the key aspect of our work. They were in need of many things but regardless of their situations or aspirations they all required to be heard and understood. It was the only way for them to cope with stress and fear that were inflicted on them and to be better prepared to face the uncertainty of their future. We did our best to treat them all with equal care and spare enough time to talk to everyone, which was not always easy. Even harder at times was to remember that we are there for them, after all, as a part of our service, and to keep a strict professional relationship. Or rather to find proper balance between closeness and distance. Necessary to be able to observe and evaluate each of their cases and to figure out the best course of action. We had to always remind ourselves that working with people, especially in such difficult times of their lives, requires of us to keep an open mind and listen to their needs carefully. There was no such thing as one rule, or method, or approach which we could use universally. Instead we had to be aware of each separate case and to work with what we are given. Communication was, as I mentioned earlier, of utmost importance. The more we were familiar with circumstances and desires of each client the better we were equipped to act. In this matter however we had no choice but to trust they will be honest with us regarding the conditions of their arrival, legal details, and future ambitions. I believe that they completely understood however that honesty represented the

basis of our relationship and was not only making our job easier but was also in their own best interest. This was one of the reasons why many of the beneficiaries were taking language courses in attempts to bridge the language barrier. Some of them have also been assigned to our team. Not all of them wanted to learn Greek and stay in that country. Many had family scattered around Europe and planned to join them as soon as they are able to do so legally. One such case is of a young man whose brothers awaited for him in Austria, and who was for this reason assigned to me as my German language student. This side of my work I found fairly easy since my student already spoke good English, and I too had some previous experience teaching German. In cases in which we were unable to provide language lessons inside the organization, we were looking for external opportunities for our beneficiaries, constantly keeping in touch with organizations which offer not only language courses but also various programs our clients could take part in. We were tasked with helping them find work or volunteering opportunities, organizing trainings about "How to write a CV?", constantly tracking any offers that might be interesting to them, and accompanying them to various meetings when necessary.

We have discovered that in Thessaloniki there are many organizations offering interesting inclusion programs for refugees, ranging from educational ones such as the above mentioned language lessons, to free time activities. To get an overview of offers and possibilities we arranged numerous meetings with organizations in Thessaloniki, to find out about their programs, to be able to transfer the information to the beneficiaries. Since many people arrive sooner or later to Thessaloniki a lot of especially foreign NGOs got implemented, most of them financed by UNHCR. In retrospective it was very useful to connect and stay in touch to make the most for our beneficiaries.

In the end I can say, that I had an amazing time, getting to know this field of work in another European country. Many enriching experience and memories will accompany me back to Germany. I wouldn't like to miss this time with all ups and downs, new impressions and different perspective. I would totally recommend to make an ERASMUS experience in Thessaloniki.