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## Eight years by the side of unaccompanied minor refugees

Since 2011, METAdrasi has safely escorted 11,000 unaccompanied children to appropriate accommodation facilities

For decades, unaccompanied minor refugees who arrived in Greece remained for a long time in detention facilities, under precarious and inappropriate conditions, exposed in dangers and exploitation networks. METAdrasi, since its founding in 2011, and following the “no child in detention” principle, sought to resolve this long-standing problem, by initiating the activity **“Escorting Missions for Unaccompanied Children”**. Within three months, the news of the creation of an entity responsible for escorting children had spread across Greece. METAdrasi was overwhelmed by escorting requests, mainly from police stations looking for ways to transport children refugees who were in their holding cells towards appropriate accommodation facilities. Thus, METAdrasi’s trained network of escorts was created, which consists of social scientists and interpreters, is active throughout Greece and operating ad hoc every time a need for escorting comes up.

The difficulties in the implementation of the activity have been numerous. In the first years, escorting teams repeatedly faced emergency incidents, when smugglers followed them and tried to detach the children from the team. In the period 2014-2015, the serious lack of resources, with the simultaneous skyrocketing number of children arriving in Greece, lead METAdrasi to appeal to the private sector. Aegean Airlines, Hellenic Seaways and Blue Star Ferries responded immediately; they supported and continue supporting the activity by offering tickets for the transport of children. Additionally, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), recognising the emergency of the situation and the need to reinforce the activity, started since 2016 supporting in a stable basis the escorting missions for unaccompanied minors, with funding by the European Commission.

The stories from the escorting missions are plenty and each one is unique: 14-year-old Azal from Afghanistan lost her family in the Aegean Sea, making it impossible for her to face the sea. She was escorted from Lesbos island towards an appropriate accommodation facility in Athens by airplane, thanks to the courtesy of Aegean Airlines. METAdrasi’s escorting team stood by her side, until Azal felt safe, as from the very start of the flight, the girl wouldn’t stop crying, while she wouldn’t dare to turn her look towards the airplane’s window.

“Each mission is a life changing experience. Seeing the anguish of these children and the conditions from which we take them, I feel I am contributing to their lives’ improvement” mentions Christina, METAdrasi’s escort.

In another mission, ten children travelled by boat from Chios to Piraeus. “When we went to pick up the children, they had their eyes lowered by fear. It was not until we entered the boat that they started smiling, as they felt sure that they were finally leaving behind the island and the conditions they had to go through”, recounts Anna, member of the escorting team. “When an escort meets a child about to be escorted, he appears in his eyes as a savior. In fact, many times, children feel such a relief, that they confide in their escort their highly traumatic experiences, for the first, and maybe the last time in their lives. We always give priority to the children under the hardest conditions”, adds METAdrasi’s president Lora Pappa.

Within eight years of “Escorting Missions for Unaccompanied Minors” **11,000 children** have been escorted in total, during **4,000 escorting missions**. According to the latest data, 40% of the missions concern escorting from the islands to the mainland. 41% of the



escorted children come from detention centers, 36% from hotspots in the islands and 8% from homelessness.

Observing, through this activity, the imperative needs of this vulnerable group, METAdrasi was led to the creation of a protective network for the unaccompanied children, which consists of innovative activities: Escorting Missions, Guardianship Network, Foster Care, Transit Accommodation Facilities, Supported Independent Living for unaccompanied minors aged 16-18.

Currently, more than **3,700 unaccompanied refugee children** are found in our country, and although a solution to the issue of their escorting has been found, 6 out of 10 children still live under precarious and inappropriate, for their age, conditions, due to the lack of proper accommodation facilities.