Supported by the Allianz Cultural Foundation and the School of Public Policy at Central European University, the Unifying Refugee Aid project took place in Budapest, Hungary, on February 12-13, 2016. Through workshops, seminars, public lectures, and documentary screenings, participants shared ideas, offered advice, and charted future ways to collaborate on refugee aid. The project brought together more than 80 active participants, and over 100 total guests, representing over a dozen NGOs assisting refugees in Central and Eastern Europe.
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84 REGISTERED ATTENDEES
100+ PUBLIC ATTENDEES
54 NGOS & ORGANIZATIONS
4.7/5 GUEST SATISFACTION
“THE REALITY IN OUR COUNTRIES IS NOT MONOCHROME, BUT MADE OF MANY COLORS”
Four civil society participants from different countries gave an overview of their organization and national refugee context. The countries covered were Serbia, the FYROM (Macedonia), Hungary, Austria, and Germany. This session emphasized the national specifics faced by participants, particularly the differences between transit countries and receiving countries. Equally importantly, participants emphasized how national contexts change with rapidly evolving political climates. It is important to note that, given the unstable political and practical situation on the ground, much has changed in these countries even in the month since the workshop.

The session began with comments from Jasmina Golubovska of the Open Society Foundations Macedonia (FYROM). She underscored that institutional deadlock and a lack of cooperation between government and opposition has resulted in an uncertain and sometimes chaotic working climate for activists and humanitarian aid workers. She also noted that a state of emergency has been in effect since 2015, and was recently extended until June 2016. This includes the issuing of a 72-hour transit passport which allows migrants to legally pass through the country. Golubovska further showed that asylum camps are well run and facilities have improved, but some issues – for example heating – remain. These improvements have not prevented human rights violations from taking place. Smuggling remains an issue, and migrants are also targeted by gangs. (As of April 2016, the situation in Macedonia has changed significantly and the status of transiting refugees remains uncertain).

The second presentation was from Nikolina Milić of the Belgrade Human Rights Center (Serbia). She also iterated that institutional uncertainty exists in Serbia, illustrated by different ministries fighting over responsibility for the migration and asylum process, resulting in a constantly changing number of actors and policy contexts. There is also a general lack of information and expertise across the national institutions on asylum law. According to her, although the asylum process is legislated for, there are problems with implementation. For example, delayed first-instance decisions can take longer than the legal limit of 2 months, and there are instances of deportation before the completion of the asylum process. Milić also noted that Serbia does not issue temporary travel documents, and therefore migrants must pass through the country illegally, often on foot, without the use of public transport.

Márton Bisztrai then presented the Hungarian case from the Menedék Hungarian Organization for Migrants. He highlighted the transition from a ‘crisis’ to a ‘post-crisis’ situation in Hungary since the government stopped the entry of migrants into the country – thus shifting civil society’s responsibilities. The current focus in Hungary is providing effective legal aid, social work and human rights monitoring in camps and assisting in integration for the asylum seekers who are still coming in, such as returnees under the Dublin III Regulation. According to Bisztrai, most asylum seekers are now held in prison-like closed camps. Approximately 40-100 people are caught at the Serbian and Croatian borders every day. Those who are caught are imprisoned, charged, fined and deported. (Like in the FYROM, the situation in Hungary remains in flux and the status of transiting refugees remains uncertain).

Julia Bachler, from the Innovation Planning Agency (IPA), presented the final session on the situation in Austria and Germany. She works under Killian Kleinschmidt, a disaster management and refugee expert, at the IPA to solve humanitarian problems via innovative, open source solutions. Bachler noted that violence prevails against refugee housing when the houses are empty – showing the violence is against the policy, not the people. She also noted that, in Germany, Syrians are given subsidiary protection for one year and that family reunification is only allowed after two years. This reduces integration investment.
The session took place with two experts in the psychological aspects of humanitarian work and trauma:

- **Gina Donoso**, a specialist and international consultant in comprehensive approaches on psychosocial processes after trauma events, currently a PhD Researcher at Ghent University (Belgium).
- **Ljilijana Todorovic**, a clinical counsellor with experience working with witnesses, refugees, and other victims of trauma. Currently employed in the Staff Welfare and Medical Office in the United Nations Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Gina Donoso began the first portion of the session by noting that psychosocial support is often considered a luxury, as basic needs like food, shelter and safety are more important in crisis situations. Donoso believes that psychosocial support must be integrated into the provision of these basic needs. Psychosocial support should always be given in a dignified way and according to some basic guidelines. These include establishing trust, watching out for specific behaviors, providing safe spaces for children, providing information in an accessible way, and avoiding the use of family members as interpreters during psychosocial sessions.

Donoso commented that often what affects people more than the actual traumatic event is the lack of support and stability. This is particularly important for children. In her words, one must understand that you may only see this person one time – and should not spend that time gathering background information as you would in a clinical situation. Critically, one should not force someone to talk about something traumatic – it may not be what is needed, particularly if you are not able to establish a long-lasting relationship.

Ljilijana Todorovic then presented on the art of resilience: secondary trauma and self-care. She began by discussing Secondary Trauma Stress (STS), or ‘compassion fatigue.’ Compassion fatigue is a natural consequence of behaviors and emotions resulting from helping, or wanting to help, traumatized, suffering people. Todorovic defined resilience as the ability to bounce back from negative events by using positive emotions to cope. At the core of resilience are coping strategies that protect against the stressful events and promote well-being. These are based on the ability to find a balance between how much you give to others, and how much you give to yourself – people, particularly in these professions, tend to overgive to others. She then illustrated two risk factors for burn-out:

1) **Personal** – alienation from friends and family; and
2) **Professional** – the danger of bringing frustrations into your work and acting out towards your colleagues.

Todorovic then provided tips on how aid workers and supporters can better take care of themselves. She prescribed an ABC strategy that is “easy to explain, but very difficult to implement fully.”

- **Awareness**: know your needs, limits, emotions and resources;
- **Balance**: keep a balance in your life, especially between work, free time and rest;
- **Connection**: be in connection with yourself, others and your environment.

She suggested to put one hour per day in your agenda for yourself – for rest, a walk, etc. If you don’t, she said, you’re neglecting yourself. Todorovic then suggested how one can build resilience: Learn to say no, identify your personal and professional boundaries, create a support system, learn to relax and find time for yourself and develop an active external life from your work. Lastly, she recommended to be wary of a professional culture where there is competition and comparison over how much each person is giving. Promote, instead, a culture of being positively selfish – it’s called self-respect.
The first day concluded with a roundtable discussion of engaged academics in Hungary. A five-person panel convened, moderated by organizer Sara Sudetic. The session began with the question of how academics can engage with and research the current refugee situation. A video of the session is available here.

- Prof. Melegh Attila (Corvinus University)
- Prof. Robert Templer (SPP, Central European University)
- Prof. Prem Kumar Rajaram (Dept. of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Central European University)
- Prof. Daniel Monterescu (Dept of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Central European University)
- Ms. Annastiina Kallius (SPP, Central European University)

The roundtable began with a short presentation of an ethnographic research paper published by Monterescu, Rajaram, and Kallius. Kallius noted the political nature of engaged activism and the usefulness of ties between Migszol, a Hungarian activist group, and academics. The project began with interviews conducted in Keleti rail station during the period of refugee entrapment in summer 2015. The sociological and ethnographic approach was outlined by Professor Monterescu as an effort to describe the dynamics of mobility and immobility of the migrants/refugees stuck in Budapest. An immediate reaction to the Keleti situation, they worked to categorize aid organizations working on different logics. Two forms of reactions, broadly speaking, were visible in civil society & state agencies: horizontal politics, drawing on solidarity principles, and vertical politics, drawing on the concept of charity. Professor Rajaram continued the discussion, describing the project as an analysis of the attempt to depoliticize the political issue of migration through two means: Firstly, through a narrative of crisis which separates the political problem from a norm that could be addressed. Secondly, through a process of demobilization, namely the denial of movement. The narrative of depoliticization results in two types of interventions: humanitarian and government, as mentioned by Monterescu. The risk of objectifying migrants and refugees is present in both types.

Professor Melegh Attila then sought to address the underlying question of how academics can grapple with the current situation. He explained that sociologists analyse structural conditions and discourses at the same time, and how they come together. In his reading, the discourse in Central & Eastern Europe is getting very ugly. Unfortunately, that discursive trend is nothing new. Melegh noted that we must deal with “mental maps,” as this is not a European refugee crisis: it is a global refugee crisis. These invented mental maps obscure a balanced view of the situation. He suggested that, while we should think about why regional collapses happen and lead to migration—we are losing ground with such arguments, especially in the Hungarian media. Melegh concluded by emphasizing the necessity of taking a broad view to understand refugees and the current situation.

School of Public Policy Professor of Practice, Robert Templer, then gave an overview of his work with engaged refugees as part of the Aleppo Project. He commented that much of the project aims to change the perception of refugees by having them lead research and interviews as part of the reconstruction planning process. Templer then noted that the crisis rhetoric is massively over-played: refugees and migrants account for less than .2% of the EU population. The end of the EU, he projected, is highly unlikely to come about from the refugee situation. In his words: “We need more open, participatory engagement of refugees for informed policy making. Reaching out and listening to their stories is crucial. We must recognize fundamental similarities of the humanity of refugees.”
Further, Templer suggested that universities should:

- **Push back against anti-refugee narratives.** Universities can facilitate this through including more Syrian voices through ideas such as a European university-led imprint of Syrian thinkers in Arabic. To change narratives, “one must have books and ideas out there.”

- **Help to provide education in the regions pushing refugees, such as Afghanistan and Syria.** People want to go home, as Templer’s work has found. Refugee camps should include educational possibilities to make local futures more viable. Institutions in the region could partner with European universities to develop open courses accessible both online and in-person.

- **Encourage the global aid paradigm to provide higher education, not only primary education.** CEU’s initiative of providing courses to refugees should be continued, as well as encouraging students to continue their laudable activism.

The conversation on education continued, with Ms. Kallius noting that refugees in Hungary, even once granted status, are not entitled to education. She commented that, while “those in Europe enjoy free movement in the EU,” legal refugees do not have the ability to seek higher education across Europe like EU citizens. She concluded that both academics and institutions must do more, and that academics must not center on ‘the other.’ For her, the responsibility of the university is to encourage academics to engage more.

Professor Rajaram then provided an outline of the OLIVE initiative at CEU, which offers four benefits to refugees: English courses, practical courses such as career skills, an academic component to support university applications, and regular academic courses. He emphasized that the program seeks to redefine what it is to be a university in times of ostensive crisis or emergency; how to think about the society universities serve; and how to redefine barriers to education. Universities, for Rajaram, are institutions which guarantee political life: programs like OLIVE hope to reinvigorate the public and rethink how to be critically engaged.
The second day of the URA event began with a series of workshops on various topics. The humanitarian aid workshop included presentations by Robert Kozma of Grupa 484 (Serbia) and Kastriot Rexhepi of NuN Kultura (FY-ROM).

Kosma emphasized that the basic principles of humanitarian aid are common sense, but difficult to practice, particularly in extraordinary circumstances. The key principle is to respect and protect the dignity of the person in need of assistance. Kozma discussed many practical ways to do this, and highlighted particularly the good practice of including the person in choosing what they need. Aid should also include the person in choosing what they need. Aid groups should provide information sensitively to target groups, not generally (e.g. for unaccompanied minors). He continued by listing questions that must be asked in extraordinary circumstances, and what Grupa 484 has learned:

- Who is the target when there are limited resources? How do you communicate what you have and allow the person to choose what they need? If you choose a specific group (children and the elderly), what happens to those not targeted (e.g. young men)?
  - One possible solution is the better coordination of actors & translators.
- What are we distributing and when?
  - One can adjust distribution to the movement of people, be flexible and non-judgmental to what people take and what people leave. Groups should provide information when people are relaxed and not in a transit situation.
- In which local context are we distributing?
  - Be in solidarity with all those in need, particularly towards impoverished local people. To every possible extent, provide aid broadly to all that ask for it, not just to target populations.

Kastriot Rexhepi continued with a discussion of NuN Kultura’s practices. The organization provides aid throughout the country wherever it is needed: often in undefined areas on roadsides or in train stations. To do this, he said, you have to be adaptable, but also have the ability to organize and prioritize your work. Some tips from NuN Kultura’s experience include:

- To ensure distribution points have proper crowd control.
- To distribute food that is culturally familiar, otherwise it may not be eaten. He commented that one should do what is necessary to make people happy. To do this, you must be flexible and cooperate with authorities and other organizations. Key challenges for Kultura include uncertainty, a lack of information, a lack of funding and ever stricter rules. The flow of people is not stopping, and the political environment (or ‘political genius’ as Rexhepi calls it) makes it difficult to provide assistance. Specific recommendations from Rexhepi are as follows:
  - Facilitate better information sharing from the government both to the organizations and to refugees.
  - Allow movement of refugees and improve infrastructure for movement across FYROM.
  - To not prevent movement and improve infrastructure for movement across FYROM.
  - Ensure that governments and political actors do not make decisions without consulting actors who are working in the area.

The morning continued with a simultaneous workshop on the subject of community engagement led by Annastiina Kallius representing the Migszol migrant solidarity group from Hungary and Are You Syrious from Croatia. The workshop fostered a productive, private discussion of activism tactics by participants and offered several conclusions, namely that the roots of various problems faced by the participants are often the same – this provides fertile ground for a coordinated response. Such a response, according to the conversation, can be achieved by focusing attention on single issues and create coordinated movements on each. Areas that could benefit from internationally coordinated efforts include:

- The lack of implementation of legislation across many states;
- Abuses by foreign police officers along the borders of countries;
- Advocating for a common case in front of the European Court of Human Rights.
The asylum procedure itself is difficult, as all official documents are in Hungarian; Under Hungarian law, minors shouldn’t be detained, but some minors are processed as adults and kept in detention; More people are applying for asylum from detention than from open camps.

Radostina Pavlova of the Center for Legal Aid – Voice in Bulgaria stated that in 2014-2015 approximately 70% of asylum applications were terminated because the applicant failed to appear for the process. Now anyone who assists an illegal transit – including hostel owners – can be penalized. People who are found to have illegally crossed the border into Serbia can serve up to one year in jail. The organization is changing its focus from providing legal assistance to researching and advocating necessary legislative change.

There are a high volume of cases where asylum seekers are unaware they have gone through a criminal trial because the procedure was held in Bulgarian without appropriate translation.

The afternoon of the second day provided space for another set of simultaneous workshops. The legal assistance portion was led by Gordana Grujičić of Grupa 484 (Serbia), Gruša Matevžič of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, and Radostina Pavlova from Center for Legal Aid (Bulgaria).

Gordana Grujičić from Grupa 484 began with an overview of the Serbian constitution, which provides the state with the obligation to ensure that everyone has access to legal assistance. This includes free legal aid, but there is no legislation providing free legal aid at the state level. She held that this legislation should be created, and in the interim the government should allocate funds to the NGOs that provide free legal aid to asylum seekers in Serbia. Further, she recalled, according to the Serbian Asylum Act, those seeking asylum in Serbia are entitled to be informed of their rights and obligations. Grujičić recommended that the act be altered to ensure that this information is provided in a timely manner. The primary challenges currently faced by Grupa 484 include:

- A lack of translators or officials with the required language skills make the provision of effective legal assistance very difficult;
- Challenges in providing necessary information to those applying for asylum;
- Accessing local legal procedures, made even more challenging by the recent influx;
- And ensuring the quality of legal assistance.

Gruša Matevžič from the Hungarian Helsinki Committee attested to participants that “there is a general sense of hopelessness in the country.” Although Hungary is becoming a destination country, not just a transit country, the treatment of asylum seekers is extremely problematic. Namely, legal procedures are lacking, and police are not educated on the rights of asylum seekers. She continued that, in the ‘transit zone,’ asylum seekers are issued decisions in less than an hour, and if the decision is negative they are immediately pushed back. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee has not been allowed into the transit zone, is not able to consult with clients before legal proceedings, and must use Skype for argumentation. Other challenges outlined by Matevžič include that:
A workshop held at the same time as the legal aid session focused on integration and community organization. The workshop began with Corina Popa from the Romanian-Arab Cultural Centre, who discussed how integration takes time and must be done through the exchange of culture. She also outlined recent positive change in the Romanian policy context, with the establishment of the National Coalition on Refugee Assistance after a coordinated action by civil society in the country.

The workshop continued with four simultaneous discussions on different areas of integration. Integration is a difficult topic, and the discussion resulted in many unanswered questions.

Firstly, a discussion of cultural integration revolved around participatory integration (i.e. integration from both society and migrant population) and cultural differences. It concluded with raising questions of “how do we react and deal with cultural differences that are against our definition of human rights? And is the right to culture unlimited?”

Secondly, with regards access to education, the group surmised that access to education is a right, but isn’t implemented. This axiom applies to primary, high school and university level education. Several points followed for possible action:

- Notably, discrimination is often built into school systems. Refugees are experiencing a continuation of the educational discrimination experienced by Roma.
- A lack of inter-institutional coordination is impeding integration. A key aspect of this is the lack of diploma recognition or skills assessments for refugees.
- The established migrant community could be a resource for teaching (e.g. language teaching).
- Parents should be fully involved in educational programs.

Thirdly, the group moved to discuss labor market integration, which is particularly difficult when there are high unemployment levels within the domestic population. The language barrier is also a key issue, and there is rarely a national integration plan to deal with such obstacles. The participants also noted that civil society is not, and should not, be responsible for integration procedures – it should be the remit of the government. However, there is an opportunity for civil society to assist in integration in the period between requesting asylum and being granted asylum for assisting in language and skill assessments.

Lastly, the conversation turned to intercultural integration. Participants suggested that an indirect approach can be useful: organizing common activities between welcoming society and refugees. Notably, being a refugee is not a culture – instead of asking refugees to talk to groups about their refugee experience, invite them to talk to groups about their home culture. The group concluded that culture is knowledge, and we can provide some of that knowledge to refugees. Small things can be important, and exchanging information about cultural differences is powerful.
DEBRIEF AND NETWORKING EVENT

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

For this event, participants who took part in the workshops discussed what they learned. Following a 10-15 minute discussion time, feedback was provided to the group about the sessions summarized above. The second part of this event grouped people together to come up with ways to continue collaboration following the two-day URA event. Suggestions included:

- Developing an interactive website for organizations and refugees that would provide live information on the situation across the region;
- Participants responded that Solidarity Beyond Borders, Balkan Route, and #stateofsolidarity are existing pan-European networks. Information about the groups was subsequently circulated to all participants.
- Establishing working groups among a minimum number of NGOs to act as an advocacy strategy group;
- A publication with stories about best and/or bad practices created as a resource for learning from this period of influx;
- Continuing the URA workshop project annually or bi-annually.

The URA gathering concluded with a series of documentary screenings and a short Q&A session with the directors. A packed audience of more than 100 partook in the screening. The films are accessible at the following links.

- **Into the Fire: A film about refugees & migrants in Athens, Greece**
  Kate Mara (Independent Filmmaker)

- **My Escape From Syria: Europe or Die**
  Aws Al-Jezairy (Vice News)

- **4Stelle Hotel Interactive Documentary Project**
  Paolo Palermo & Valerio Muscella (Independent Filmmaker & Photographer)
WHAT IS MISSING??

- No funding
- Quality of services
- mango power
- financial support
- psychological support
- integration

Housing

Politics will?

Legal aid

Language

- lack of integration programs
- psychological support
- lack of support
- lack of social harmony
- integration

- Welcome society

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