



The Impact of UUSC's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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BACKGROUND

Four years after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, which displaced half of the country's 22 million people and would eventually lead to the worst refugee crisis since World War II, a record 1.3 million refugees arrived in Europe seeking asylum.

From 2015 to 2016, almost a million migrants crossed into Europe along the so-called Western Balkan migration route, from Greece through Macedonia and on to Serbia, Hungary, or Croatia.

In 2015, the UUSC-UUA Syrian Refugee Crisis Fund **raised nearly three-quarters of a million dollars to respond to the crisis**. Between 2015 and 2019, UUSC would make 35 grants to 18 partners across 9 countries.¹ UUSC's initial strategy combined emergency aid in Greece, Croatia, and Serbia; legal access in Hungary, Jordan, and the U.S.; and advocacy in the U.S. and in Europe to combat xenophobia.

In late 2016, as the European Union closed the Western Balkans migration route, refugees were forced to find other, more dangerous ways into northern Europe or became trapped in oppressive and inhumane conditions in countries ill-equipped and disinclined to grant them asylum or integrate them into society. At the same time, major international donors pulled their support and few resources remained for refugees now caught in transit zones, camps, or other temporary shelters. UUSC responded to this change by shifting our focus to ensure access to protection and assist with refugee integration across Greece, Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, and Macedonia.

Now, in early 2020, nearly a million requests for asylum remain unprocessed across Europe. Tens of thousands live in dangerous and overcrowded camps in Greece and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and thousands more are subjected to violent and illegal pushbacks. The UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, estimates that more than 1,000 people drowned attempting to reach Europe by sea *in 2019 alone* and, as the civil war in Syria enters its ninth year, most refugees to Europe now come from another war-torn country in the region: Afghanistan.

In 2019, UUSC spent the last of the funds raised to advance our response, making our final grants in support of this work. **In late September 2019, I traveled to the Balkans for a convening of our seven current partners in the region.**² The purposes of the trip were to assess the impact of our response to the Syrian refugee crisis; offer our partners another chance to connect (we convened these same groups once before, in 2017), strategize, and learn from each other; and, at the request of our partners, provide a day-long fundraising training by UUSC's Chief Development Officer. Following the convening, I had the honor of spending time with our partners, Are You Syrious? and Centre for Peace Studies, in Zagreb, Croatia, and Greek Forum of Refugees in Athens, Greece.

1 Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Jordan, Lebanon, Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, and the U.S.

2 In late spring/early summer 2019, I also had calls with our former partners in order to incorporate their feedback into this assessment.



2011

Resistance to the Bashar Al-Assad regime leads to vicious crackdown by the state, sparking the Syrian Civil War

2014

A record 1.3 million refugees arrive in Europe seeking asylum

2015

The UUSC-UUA Syrian Refugee Crisis Fund raises nearly \$750,000 to respond

2016

The European Union closes the Western Balkans migration route

2016

UUSC responds by shifting our focus to ensure access to protection and assist with refugee integration across Greece, Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, and Macedonia

2017

UUSC convenes its Syrian Crisis response partners and other NGOs advancing refugee and migrant rights in the region

2019

Over the course of five years, UUSC makes 35 grants to 18 partners working on the crisis in 9 countries.

2019

UUSC staff travel to the Balkans to assess the work and provide fundraising training

KEY IMPACTS

In the face of this protracted humanitarian crisis and a hostile political environment across Europe – as well as a stubborn refusal by the European Union to offer systemic solutions – **UUSC's grassroots partners have worked tirelessly to make some deep and concrete impacts.**

Critically, while some of this work **immediately affected people's lives**, the long-term impacts **could reverberate for years to come**, as our partners have formed close collaborations with each other, helped build and strengthen a movement in support of refugees across Europe, raised awareness of often hidden issues facing refugees in the Balkans, and successfully advocated for long-term changes to refugee and asylum policies.

Moreover, **UUSC's response stands in stark contrast** to the response of European governments and the European Union (insufficient and counter-productive), as well as the international humanitarian aid community (short-sighted and short-term). This assessment affirmed that our supporters can trust our crisis response work to **center the voices of affected communities, fill a gap** in the mainstream response, and help **address systemic injustice** on the way to an equitable recovery. At the same time, it also underscored how much value there would be in a **long-term response that lasted longer than four or five years.**

UUSC's support filled gaps for our partners so they could fill critical gaps in response to the crisis

At UUSC, one of the ways we deepen our impact is by **partnering with grassroots organizations with limited access to outside funding** or by supporting our partners in **ways that other funders will not**. This is especially true in the context of a humanitarian crisis. In most crisis situations, large international aid agencies arrive on the ground, initiate their own short-term responses without consulting those most impacted by the crisis, and deprive locally-led groups from critical resources. And then they leave.

Instead of asking our partners to jump through myriad hoops and fit the roundness of their work into our prescriptive square hole, we find partners we can radically trust, listen to their analysis of the problems they are seeing, and strategize with them on the best ways to address those problems.

In country after country involved in our response to the Syrian refugee crisis, we can see the impact of this approach. Often, the human rights work we supported was **not replicated by other groups**, leading many of our partners to be the **only organizations doing the vital work we have supported**. In this way, **our impact far exceeded the small size of our grants** or the relatively meager budgets of our partner organizations.



In **Turkey**, for example, *Syria Bright Future* (SBF) explained to us that, because there is typically no support in Turkey for trainings or capacity-building activities, UUSC's grant was vital. Supported by UUSC, SBF's trainings of community case workers, physicians, and mental health professionals working with refugees became the **only trainings of their kind available in Turkey**.



Likewise in **Jordan**, our partner *Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development* (ARDD) explained that there are rarely funds available for awareness raising activities in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. As a result, ARDD's partnership with UUSC to document and raise awareness of the risks of fraud and exploitation in resettlement and illegal migration led ARDD to publish the **only research on the subject in the country**.



When the refugee crisis hit **Greece** in 2015 and thousands were crossing the sea to get to the islands, there was a critical shortage of winterization kits, especially for babies. Around this time, UUSC reached out to *Praksis*, offered our support, and responded to their requests in "an open-minded way." Our willingness to support *Praksis*' work "without strings" – without the constraints of wanting to help "this population in this particular way" – was especially important, *Praksis* told us. *Praksis*' project became one of the **first distributions of winterization kits for babies in Greece**.



In **Hungary**, even though *Hungarian Helsinki Committee* (HHC) had been working with refugee families since 2016, it **was not until they received UUSC's grant that they could afford to actually reunify families**, paying for their flights, accommodation, legal costs, and more. Also in Hungary, *Cordelia Foundation* told us how "UUSC's funding saved our lives," in part because it was offered as **general operating support** and **allowed Cordelia to fill unmet needs and be creative in a time of crisis**. *Cordelia* expressed that **this kind of trusting, flexible support was "one of the noblest acts" one can do as a funder**, and urged us to "please preserve the freedom and trust in your grantmaking."



These impacts continue into the Balkans. In **North Macedonia**, *Legis* became the **only organization documenting and reporting** on human rights violations in the camps there. Their reports, available in both English and Arabic, have now **become part of the curriculum for students** studying this topic, giving the work a longer life.



And in **Croatia**, *Are You Syrious* and *Centre for Peace Studies* (CMS) are the **only groups currently documenting violent and illegal pushbacks** at the Croatia-Bosnia border, as well as how "**chain pushbacks**" are being coordinated by governments in the region.



Finally, in **Serbia**, [*Asylum Protection Center*](#) (APC) described to UUSC how crucial our early and ongoing investment was to their work:

“UUSC’s support was really important...when our organization was making crucial steps in order to...engage more in the field, and cover the territory of Serbia. UUSC was a donor that recognized our needs for technical assistance, for mobility, for flexibility, and that helps us even today to manage all these difficulties we are [faced] with.... Besides that, UUSC had understanding and supported our management and fundraising team, looking for sustainable results in the future. For our work to be independent, to be professional, to be devoted to the cause, we need to have financial and operational independence.”

Even as UUSC winds down this work, **we can see the lasting nature of our impact**. For example, as a result of a convening we organized in 2017, *Legis*, *CMS*, and *APC* formed an official network to coordinate advocacy for all forced exiles along the Balkan route. The group has had several meetings, has attracted outside funding, and is planning to expand to other peer organizations with whom they are already cooperating, including our partner in Greece, [*Greek Forum of Refugees*](#).



CASE STUDIES

With our support, our partners have challenged xenophobic narratives with compassion, provided refugees with safe spaces, and supported them to build new lives.

Throughout history, we have seen how the [tactic of dehumanization](#), in words or actions, has justified and facilitated cruelty and hate. With the return of fascism to the mainstream, this strategy has gained momentum and the dehumanization of refugees in Europe has been a primary aspect of their oppression. During the [convening](#) of our Syrian Refugee Response partners in Belgrade this

year, two of the most persistent themes were the sheer inhumanity of the treatment of refugees and the lack of resources to support their integration into European society. Our partners have fought these trends by dismantling xenophobic narratives, meeting refugees with compassion, providing them with safe spaces, and supporting them to build new lives.



A Free Shop and Integration Center in Croatia

One example is Are You Syrious' Free Shop and integration center in Zagreb, **Croatia**, established and run with UUSC's support since 2016. The space serves as **a safe haven for refugees to connect, obtain good quality items of clothing or household goods for free**, and begin the process of integration. Each day, between 30 and 50 refugees make use of the Free Shop's resources and community-building space.

One of AYS' part-time staffers, Antonia, told me she insists on connecting personally with each refugee she meets. *"The most important thing you can do is to hug a person; to take back that human connection that was taken from them,"* she told me. Being there in person, I could see clearly the impact of these small acts of humanity.

When I visited the Free Shop in October 2019, I met two refugees who are now volunteering with AYS and translating their [refugee news digest](#) – a critical resource for refugees and immigrant rights groups in the region – into Farsi and Arabic. I also met a Moroccan refugee, Khouya,* who finally made it safely to Croatia after seven attempts to cross the border, nearly two-months spent sleeping outside, and hundreds of miles covered on foot. Choking back tears, he told me of the beatings he had received at the hands of border police, and what it was like to leave his friends behind after they were caught. When I asked him how he managed not to give up, he said, *"You just keep going."* At the time a regular volunteer with AYS, Khouya told me that **meeting their staff and volunteers was the best thing that ever happened to him**. *"They were the first ones to treat me like a human being"* since leaving Morocco, he said.³

Family Reunification in Hungary

Through its family reunification program, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee has sought to

"preserve the right to family life" for refugee families in **Hungary**. Since UUSC began supporting this work in 2015, HHC has helped reunite 40 families consisting of 145 individuals. HHC **describes seeing families reunite as the "most meaningful part of their work"** and the first step on the way to integration in Hungarian society.

The importance HHC places on this work comes through in their dedication. At our convening in Belgrade, HHC told an emblematic story of one refugee family whom they had successfully reunited this year. The mother and children had to fly through Istanbul airport to reunite with the father, but none of them had ever flown on an airplane. None of them spoke Turkish or English, either. Istanbul airport being notoriously huge and confusing, HHC staff mapped out instructions and tips covering the entire journey. On the evening of their trip, however, HHC received a frantic call from the mother – despite their best efforts, the family had missed their connection in Istanbul and needed help. Late into the night, HHC stayed on the phone with the family to ensure that they navigated the airport and got on a replacement flight, which they did.



³ Khouya asked if he could tell his story in his own words, which we humbly present here in the Appendix.

Strengthening Economic Opportunities and Dismantling Xenophobic Narratives in Greece

According [to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs](#), “the racism and ignorance experienced [by refugees] at both the personal and institutional levels” is the primary impediment to refugee integration. On the other hand, successful “[e]mployment is the most important factor in securing the integration of migrants into society.”

Our partners’ efforts to dismantle false narratives and counter the anti-integration policies of European governments, which appear designed to undermine refugee integration in an effort to convince them to leave, are therefore critical. In **Greece**, the *Greek Forum of Refugees (GFR)* has done this by **helping refugee communities self-organize, supporting them with job and language training, and advocating for them on the national level**.

GFR’s model is to help establish, partner with, and support the work of small associations of refugees, organized by country of origin. When I was in Athens in October 2019, I met with several representatives from the Afghan Community of Refugees and Migrants in Greece (ACRMG), [one of GFR’s local partners](#). The story of Mina, the Vice President of the ACRMG Board, stood out as a powerful example of how little truth the anti-migrant narrative holds.

Mina and her family are refugees from Afghanistan, and they have lived at Camp Eleonas,⁴ a refugee camp on the outskirts of Athens, since March 2016. In addition to the organizing work she does for ACRMG, Mina and her husband, Hussein, run a small food delivery business from their home. Each day, they cook in their tiny kitchen for dozens of organizations and nonprofits in Athens, including Doctors Without Borders and Caritas, as well as Afghan-owned businesses and restaurants. Hussein delivers the food himself, riding his bike the more than 20 kilometers it takes him to reach his daily customers. To get their eight-year-old daughter to school, Mina takes two buses and an Uber, which uses all of their money and most of Mina’s time – a problem, because she is the primary chef for the business. Yet, Mina has little choice as the government has cut-off school bus service to and from the refugee camps.

Mina’s family initially fled Afghanistan for Iran, where they faced discrimination common against the Afghan community there. After Iran, they applied for asylum in Greece, but their case remains in limbo. Unlike many refugees, Mina and her family want a life in Greece. They want to start a restaurant. Mina, a teacher in Afghanistan, wants to get her Master’s degree. “*This isn’t the life we would have chosen, but we are trying to make the best of it,*” Mina told me. Both she and Hussein are hopeful for what their future might bring, but **they remain grounded in community, hoping to employ other refugees when their business takes off**. Sharing an Afghan saying, Hussein explained, “*Your table cloth should be spread wide.*”

Organizations like GFR and ACRMG offer people like Mina and Hussein the opportunity to share their story and connect with others facing similar challenges, helping build collective power and hope.

4 Eleonas is known as the most humane of Greece’s 50-plus refugee camps. Most of Eleonas’ residents sleep in converted storage containers, some of which have been covered in bright murals painted by the residents. Yet, as Moria and other “hotspots” become overwhelmed – Moria, for example, now houses 14,000 refugees, with a capacity of ~2,500 – Eleonas is becoming overcrowded as well. When I visited, a number of families were camping in roadside tents and many residents with whom I spoke complained about disease, the lack of access to education and employment, and concern for their safety.

DOCUMENTATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

UUSC supported documentation of human rights abuses against refugees that has played a key role in informing advocacy at the state and European levels, strengthening alternative narratives, and sharing reliable information with civil society and other movement actors.



As our partners conveyed to us during our 2019 convening, it is critical to “document everything” during and in the wake of a crisis. One of the most impactful results of UUSC’s work in the Balkans has been to support critical human rights documentation. Our partners in Croatia, [Are You Serious?](#) (AYS) and [Centre for Peace Studies](#) (CMS), are perhaps the best examples of this. For one, they are the **only groups currently documenting pushbacks at the Croatia-Bosnia border**, and how “chain pushbacks” are being coordinated by governments in the region (e.g., *pushbacks from Italy to Slovenia to Croatia to Serbia / Bosnia to Montenegro*). In fact, both organizations were key contributors to Amnesty International’s 2019 [report on the subject of pushbacks](#) from Croatia, which also dedicated an entire section to the criminalization of AYS and CMS.

Perhaps the best evidence of their impact has been the **response by the Croatian authorities to criminalize their work**. Both AYS and CMS have come under direct attack from Croatia’s Ministry of the Interior, which claims that the organizations are encouraging illegal migration and undermining attempts by Croatia to join the European Union’s [Shengen Area](#), which it hopes to do in 2020. Here is how AYS [described](#) the Ministry’s response to their work: “Faced with the criminal charges [brought]... with the help of AYS and Center for Peace Studies, the Ministry of Interior responded brutally. Instead of providing answers, they decided to attack NGOs that were raising questions about the criminal treatment of refugees at our borders.”

The Ministry of Interior also pressed charges against one of AYS’ volunteers, Dragan Umičević, whom it [accused](#) of “smuggling” refugees (here, the family of 6 year-old Madina Hussiny, who was killed in an illegal pushback by Croatian Border Police) – a case with striking parallels to the U.S. government’s case against staff and volunteers from UUSC’s partner in Arizona, *No More Deaths*. The Ministry also imposed a significant fine and asked for a ban on AYS’ work. At trial, Dragan Umičević was found guilty of “unconscious negligence;” however, AYS has appealed the decision and refuses to pay the fine.

On numerous occasions, AYS had its office [vandalized](#) and threats have been made against its volunteers and CMS’ employees. As AYS put it:

“Public defamation of [AYS] has led to several anonymous attacks to our premises in Zagreb, Croatia. Our van was smashed with concrete blocks, windows of our integration center were shattered, insulting graffiti was sprayed all over our building and the van. All of the mention[ed] incidents were reported to the police, but no one was ever found guilty for the attacks... AYS employees were advised by the police to buy pepper spray and to always carry it with them. One of them was also advised to always follow her child to and from the school...”

AYS and CMS have also used their documentation to support advocacy efforts that have put the issue of refugee rights and the violence of border police on the political agenda. For instance, the President of Croatia is now [being asked in international media](#) about pushbacks. **And, in large part as a result of our partners’ efforts, the issue is now on the agenda of the European Parliament.**

For example, twenty-two Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) recently requested a parliamentary investigation into migrants’ living conditions in Croatia. The MEPs asked the European Commission to present plans for monitoring these conditions and to articulate specific measures it will take to ensure that refugees’ fundamental rights are respected. Ahead of the plenary session, AYS presented a comprehensive report about the criminalization of NGOs in Croatia to the MEPs. AYS was then invited to present updates to the Council of

Europe's Secretary General Special Representative on Migration and Refugees.

In February 2019, AYS met with European Commission representatives on a fact-finding mission to Zagreb, following AYS' reports on pushbacks; and, in March 2019, AYS hosted a Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly fact-finding mission to the AYS offices in Zagreb, where it shared findings about pushbacks, the lack of support for unaccompanied minors, and other human rights violations of refugees and migrants in Croatia that AYS has documented. In April 2019, AYS' founder, Milena Zajovic, was invited to testify about human rights violations of refugees and human rights defenders before European Parliament, where she made a speech and answered parliamentary questions.

AYS' "[Daily Digest](#)," which provides information critical to refugee rights protection across the region, is now being translated into Farsi and Arabic and reaches more than 30,000 people. The digest ensures that accurate information is available; indeed, it is **relied upon and contributed to by virtually all of UUSC's partners in the region.**

Finally, AYS and CMS have continued their tireless support of the family of Madina, **the six-year old Afghan girl who died on the train tracks on the Serbia-Croatia border as the result of an illegal pushback by the Croatian border police.**

During 2018, they were in continuous contact with Madina's family, supporting them and their lawyer in filing a criminal complaint against unknown perpetrators in the police. Together with the family's lawyer, they have accompanied Madina's family to court hearings and supported the preparation and submission of their application to the European Court for Human Rights.



LESSONS MOVING FORWARD

Deepening Our Understanding of Effective Crisis Response and Equitable Recovery

Assessing the impact of our Syrian Refugee Response work also offered UUSC the opportunity to hear, directly from local organizations with four-plus years of experience working on the frontlines of the crisis facing European refugees, what kinds of support are most impactful during and after a humanitarian emergency. **What stood out most was how many parallels there are between what our Syrian Refugee Response partners shared and what we learned from assessing our responses to the [2015 Nepal earthquake](#) and the [2013 typhoon in the Philippines](#).**

Here were a few of the most important lessons from our Syrian Refugee Response partners:

- From the outset, invest in framing the narrative and countering problematic narratives.
- Citizens and civil society are often the first to respond – people know how to organize themselves during a short-term crisis!
- Tremendous competition of international NGOs (INGOs) is devastating to local responses. Therefore, it is crucial to support local civil society organizations (CSOs). These groups already have experience and expertise that is critical to an effective response. Work to ensure local groups' efforts are sustainable.⁵
- Long-term commitments from funders are critical. Most donors and aid agencies commit to short-term, band-aid fixes. This means that underlying causes are not addressed and there is little support for when the crisis inevitably shifts or takes a new form, which can be many years down the line.
- Flexibility of support is vital, especially at the beginning. Trust your local partners and let funding be spent on whatever they deem most necessary.
- Cross-border cooperation and movement-building support are necessary to create humane and successful responses to international crises.
- Human rights documentation is critical during and after a crisis. Such documentation is vital to inform advocacy and counter false narratives.

⁵ INGOs pursue short term goals (without long-term strategy) and vacuum up local resources before withdrawing completely, such that "the previous situation cannot be restored," as our partner Asylum Protection Center put it. Local CSOs often respond by adopting short-term goals themselves. When INGOs take over public services, the government can then deny responsibility for the service. INGOs tend to establish another (less effective) layer on top of local civil society.

Appendix

The Barbarian Route

By Khouya

Ed. note: This is the first-person account of Khouya, a Moroccan refugee and volunteer with our Croatian partner, Are You Syrious, detailing one of his unsuccessful attempts to travel from Bosnia-Herzegovina to Italy. He provided this story to UUSC out of a desire to tell his own story in his own words. It was translated into English by Are You Syrious and edited for clarity.*

The whole trip, or as we call it the GAME and some call it the barbarian route, is the hardest way. There must be at least 4 people or more, and there was 9 of us. After the incident of a fire inside the camp in Bosnia-Herzegovina where we were staying, we decided to go to the GAME and try to go to Italy. The best place to cross the border into Croatia was the village of Šturlić which is about 16km walking from Velika Kladuša, where our camp was located.

On the border there is a valley that has to be crossed. It's not too big, but we pray to God that there won't be rain—because then it is impossible to pass.

When entering into Croatia, we walked for 3 days through the forest, until we felt safe and away from danger (of course, we were never “away” from danger – the whole road is dangerous – but we had to continue). The road was mud and dirt all the way,

until we reached the first highway. We cut through the mountain and between the first and the second highway we had to walk for another 4 days. When we reached this road, we did not realize that there was a camera that caught us. Because of that, the police were waiting for our arrival.

As we walked in the dark, we heard shooting and the famous sentence, “Stop, police!” At that moment, I felt like I had two options. I am in the mountains, so either I stand and surrender after 10 days of hunger and fatigue and thirst, or throw myself from the mountain.

I started running with my eyes closed. I cannot describe to you what the feeling was—it was not surrendering, it was bravely escaping. Yes, the police caught 3 of my friends, but 6 of us managed to escape. We could hear the police laughing and mocking our friends. They were forced to sit on the road while police forced them to call us to surrender (in our own language), or they will beat them. We kept going.

After two days on the road, we were close to the Slovenian border. Again, when the border police discovered us, it was like a scene from the movies. They treated us as if we were terrorists. Again, we had no choice but to try to escape. I did not stop trying to escape until I could not continue running. And then, I was caught. They took all our belongings, beat us like animals, and then sent us back to Bosnia.





