

Activists from Italy, Spain, Greece and Croatia traverse migration pathways to create a route of solidarity

‘The Route of Solidarity,’ most recently in the Balkans, seeks to create a network of organisations bound by common strategy, in order to face the rejection of migrants and asylum seekers resulting from policies of deportation and border closure.

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Migrants receive food from the NGO No Name Kitchen in Šid, Serbia. MARÍA IGLESIAS

Lawyers, social workers, and public policy graduates, alongside philologists, logistics experts, nutritionists, photographers, journalists, and filmmakers, some representing NGOs, others as individuals, all participated the week of April 15th, 2018 in a conference that took place in the Balkan route between Serbia and Croatia, as part of [The Route of Solidarity](#) (TROS). The initiative is promoted by the [Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de Andalucía](#), the Italian NGO [Un Ponte Per](#), Greek NGO [Antigone](#), and [Udraga PANK](#) of Croatia, with funding from the EU program Europe for Citizens. This was the same week that the [US, with the support of France and the UK, bombed Syria](#), a country in its eighth year of devastating war. If this diverse group of activists share anything in common, including all those who met in previous conferences in Rome (January 24-30th) and Seville-Ceuta (March 12-18th), it's the **turning point in each of their lives which led them, after the “refugee crisis” of 2015**, to confront the pain of those fleeing war, DAESH, and terror. “Once we looked into these people’s eyes, migrants, asylum seekers, and embraced them, we knew we had to get involved,” lawyer Riccardo Bucci of [Altrego Fabbrica dei Diritti](#) remembers.

“That September of 2015, when [three-year-old Syrian boy] Aylan Kurdi drowned, I was still unaware,” recalls Navarre-born Leire Itoiz, on the drive to the agency headquarters located in the Serbian town of Šid, accompanied by five of the 20 participants in the Zagreb-Belgrade meeting of TROS. Šid is a town of 15,000 inhabitants that lies close to the border with Croatia, where Asturias native Bruno Álvarez founded [No Name Kitchen](#) in February of 2017. The NGO provides **two daily meals, basic hygienic/sanitary assistance, portable showers, and clothing** to between 50 and 150 migrants who attempt to cross the flawed border with Croatia before they’re sent back, to try again. They live hidden in the undergrowth alongside an abandoned factory building, which in the local jargon is known by the Anglicism ‘squat.’ They’re young and alone, the majority of them Afghans or Pakistanis, though there are also Algerians and Moroccans.

“I want to get to Cartagena,” one explains. “I’ve flown from Morocco to Istanbul without needing a visa. I crossed the Aegean, from Greece, to FYROM, to Serbia. And I will keep going because I worked in Cartagena and it’s my second home.” **The young people now in Šid fled alongside Syrians and Iraqis** during that initial wave of 2016, when the September 2015 suspension ordered by Chancellor Angela Merkel from the Dublin convention was still active, which obligated refugees to seek asylum in the first country they crossed into. **But in March of 2016 they remained blocked by border closures** and the announcement of the pact to deport to Turkey. It’s been two years now. Two years of brutal, snowy winters. The journey has been a long one for them.

“The European citizens are not the ones at fault,” an Afghan man says with a shake of his head, having just been sent back from Slovenia, in his umpteenth attempt to move forward. “They help us. Look at Leire, she’s lived here since November, she’s our sister,” he says of the Pamplona-born woman with a Masters degree in Agro-business who, after years of volunteering with disabled people, went to Greece in February of 2017. **“I wanted to know what was happening in Lesbos and there I realised that I wanted to do something long-term.”** “I haven’t had any fears about coming here,” she states, resolute. “Not of the Serbian police, because I’m European, nor of the kids. No matter how frustrated they may be, although some might drink and, because of the tension, get into fights, I can say they appreciate and protect me.” The van arrives bearing food, and from its loudspeakers comes the music of Las Amigas de Yoli, a modern protest version of the anti-Franco song *Que Volent aquesta gent* by María del Mar Bonet. Young people begin to appear, until they form a crowd of 50. And as they line up to receive bread, hardboiled egg, apples, they hum along with *Al Alba de Aute* (see [video](#).)

Lesbos was the beginning. Not only for Leire Itoiz, but also for Italian photographer Francesca Maceroni of [Baobab experience](#), Thanasis Vulgarakis of Greece or Carmen Dupont, Belgian, of the NGO [Lesvos Solidarity](#) based in the Aegean island. **Other activists have lived the stark, shameful reality of the border between Greece and FYROM** (in the village of Idomeni), like Iliaria Zambelli of [Un Ponte Per](#), or the dividing line between Hungary and Serbia, like Iva Brajkovic of Udruga PANK, or many years ago now, the Ceuta border with Morocco, like photojournalist Antonio Sempere. But Lesbos was the cradle where the Route of Solidarity was born. That’s how its first initiator explains it, Caterina Amiccuci of Italy, based in Seville since 2013. That summer of 2015 when everything seemed to begin (although the exodus was documented by European investigators starting in 2011, when Bashar Al Assad first suppressed

the Syrian uprising) Amicucci was in Greece in protests against the gold mine in the peninsula of Chalkidiki, close to Thessaloniki. “Some activists came from Lesbos and told me about what was happening, which the media was still barely reporting.”

At the start of that September the image of Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi sent shockwaves through the media and turned the tide of public opinion to the point of forcing a long-delayed pact among nations of the EU to **accommodate 160,000 refugees within two years** (17,680 in Spain.) It would have been 0.2 percent of the 500 million inhabitants of the EU (compared to Jordan o Lebanon which have 10 and 20 million, respectively.) But **not even this was accomplished** in the given time frame of two years, which expired in September of 2017. “In the fall of 2015 I went to Lesbos and although I helped as much as I could, my main goal was to learn from the extraordinary experience of the humanitarian effort for the 5,000 people who arrive every day, made up almost entirely of aid workers and activists alone.”

“Opposing the official, exclusionary Europe,” Amicucci continued, “there is a Europe of nonracist, inclusive, and compassionate citizens, and we wanted to see that the initial impulse of 2015-2016 wouldn’t be lost, but rather refined.” That is the idea that beats at the heart of TROS. The idea which has prompted five more international meetings to be arranged: Lesbos (May 23-29,) Sicily (September 17-23,) Thessaloniki (October 3-9,) Pula (November) and Seville (February 2019.) And the same idea that allows all participants to come together not merely as members of the four organising NGOs, but as threads in a vast social tapestry. But isn’t it contradictory that the same EU which closes borders should be funding initiatives like this one? “Working in activism for 20 years, I’m used to it,” Amicucci responds. “Perhaps they’re cleaning their conscience. But we fund their budget to begin with, by paying taxes, it’s only fair that the money goes to construct the inclusive Europe which we citizens want and need.”

“Here in Croatia,” testifies Iva Bravjcovic, hostess of the meeting in PANK, Zagreb, “**between September 16-18th of 2015, we saw 2,000 people pass on their way toward Austria or Germany.** And everyone from ordinary citizens to the Police turned out to help: taking water, food and clothing to the border, organising bus transportation. It was exciting but the media didn’t show that part. They made it seem like a disaster.”

The TROS meeting began with visits to the reception centre of Porin (the biggest in Croatia with 300 residents) and Kutina, the oldest (now with only 10 families, 50 people total) before crossing through to Serbia, to [Info Park](#), the NGO situated between the re-named Afghan Park and Kurdish Park of Belgrade. And Šid, the unofficial accommodations where residents requested a restricted visit, in order to keep a low profile. Even though the patrol car with two agents parked in the path nearby suggested that the Police are already aware of their presence.



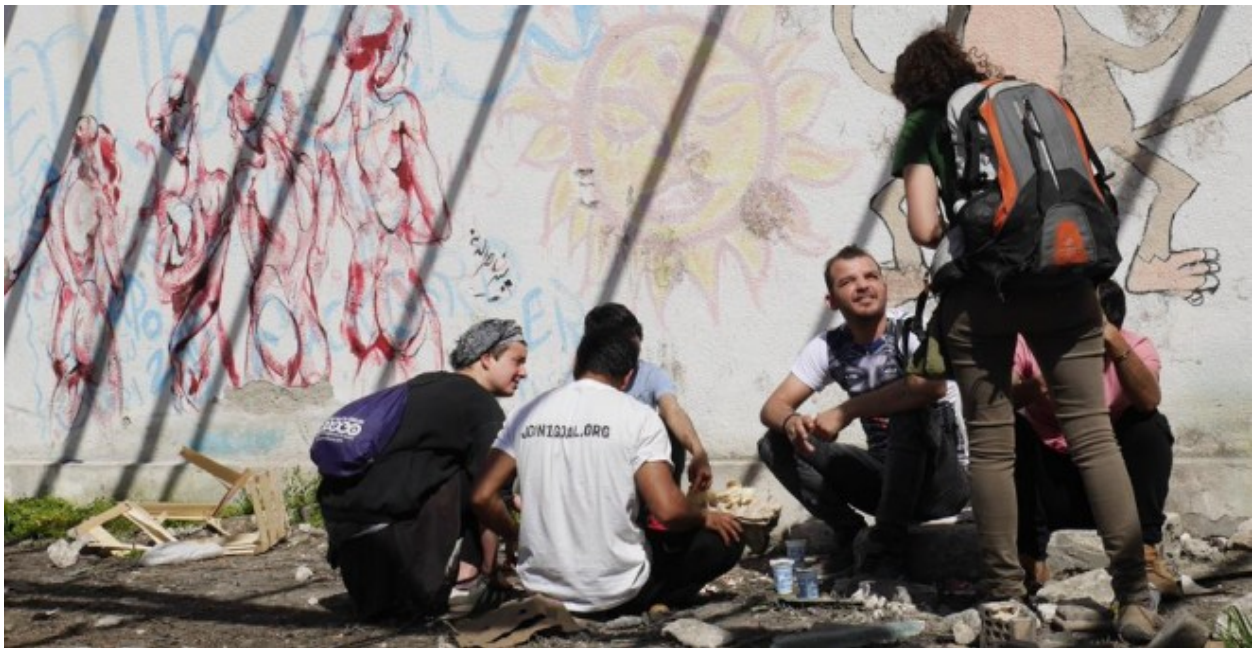
European activists of TROS Zagreb support incarcerated migrants in Greece. MARÍA IGLESIAS

“Everything’s going to get worse,” declared one Pakistani refugee who, like all the rest, wished to remain anonymous. “So many have come, activists and journalists. We appreciate their goodwill. But **nothing gets better, the public doesn’t force the governments to react,**” the Pakistani went on. “It’s the other way around, the more they hear about us, the more they fear us and increase the barriers.”

Frustration is a common experience not only in Šid, but also for all those who wander through Belgrade, or wind up trapped in **centres like the one in Adasevci, where into the nearby forest a group of activists ventured: Catalonians Oriol Andrés and Oriol López of [Chapter2](#), an entrepreneurship initiative to help refugees already in Spain with starting their own businesses, along with Nikos Goutas of the NGO Antigone and Ero Koulakidou of [OMNES](#), both from Greece.** Some 15 men in the forest welcomed the group, “No problem, come,” they said. “Inside, they won’t let us cook our own food,” the men explained, alongside the embers of open fires, pointing to the centre where their wives and small children remained. “Tell us, as we tell you our story, will you help us cross over?” And they graciously accepted the answer, in the negative, which they’d known even before they asked. The answer everyone knows well. In spite of that, away from the forest, in the doorway of the centre, a young Afghan woman with her husband asked, “Would it be very dangerous for you all to help us cross into Croatia by car?” Dangerous and impossible, because on the return trip, the car was registered at the border. “We’ll stay here then,” she said, “but we won’t have children. There’s no medicine or food, it’s not the right place,” she explained, surrounded by the children of others.

The contingent of refugees in the route of the Balkans is small compared to Italy, Greece or Spain. Serbia and Croatia are transit countries in which the migrants don’t intend to stay. They prefer to go to Germany, France, or the United Kingdom, where Croatians and Serbians, Spaniards and Greeks themselves have emigrated since 2008. “In Serbia, because the border is closed, they talk of zero arrivals,” explained Stevan Taialovic of Info Park. The organization

estimates the true number at 15,000 people who crossed into the country in 2017 alone. “In the last 10 years we’ve had 16,000 asylum seekers, of which 98 succeeded,” he points out after explaining the fight against solitary confinement in detention centres, or lapses in the care and custody of minors due to the guardians’ fear that they’ll lose their state-paid salaries if they criticise the way the Police treat the wards. The numbers from Croatia are hardly impossible, either. **In 2017, of the 1,887 people who sought asylum, only 211 were granted their request.** Via the Mediterranean, in contrast, data from the [International Organisation for Migration](#) states that the arrivals in 2017 were 119,369 for Italy, 35,052 for Greece and 22,419 for Spain. In Spain the demand for asylum has doubled from what it was in 2016: 30,445 petitions, of which 13,345 were granted, mainly to Venezuelans. Very far from the number of applications received by Germany, Italy, France or Greece, which range from to 50,000 to 200,000.



Two volunteers of the NGO No Name Kitchen with migrants in Šid, Serbia. MARÍA IGLESIAS

“In Croatia, 80 percent leave for another country, even though their fingerprints may be already taken and the procedure started here, as required by the Dublin Regulation. Of the 20 percent who say they wish to stay, 90 percent will be rejected and only 10 percent will receive asylum,” explained the leader of the Croatian centres, Filip Stipic. “The paradox,” finished Drazen Klaric, of the [Jesuit Refugee Service](#) in the Porin centre, “is that **the need for workers in Croatia is so great that, in 2017, the government took out 30,000 work permits for foreigners.** Only some 5,000 of those were requested, by Bosnians and Serbians. The other 25,000 were used to seek workers through a bilateral agreement with Ukraine. “We don’t want to stay here,” whispers a refugee resident of Kutina. “They have us playing football, without work, waiting, day after day. They give us classes in Croatian but I want to learn English in order to move on to a place where we can work,” he says, in front of his two-year-old daughter, through a mouthful of damaged teeth.

17-year-old Rashed Gholami of Afghanistan exemplifies the opposite case. He’s been in Croatia for two years and four months, having achieved asylum through subsidiary protection, and is

happy to build his life in the Croatian city of Pula, within a family-like network of PANK volunteers. “I want to be a computer specialist. My primary reason for fleeing Afghanistan was for fear of the Taliban. But education was another key motive. I was orphaned at 3 years old. My brother, now in Germany, and I were raised by my aunt and uncle on a farm. I never went to school, which is very common there. It’s been here, in Kutina, where I’ve learned not only Croatian, but also how to write in my own language, Farsi!”

23-year-old Sweta Pudasaini from Nepal and 27-year-old Sadou Diagne of Senegal have also found their way, thanks to the catering cooperative [Taste of Home](#). “Making a life here was very hard at first,” Pudasaini remembers. “Everything is so different, from the food to the way of interacting with others. But I’ve been involved in this project for a year and a half, I have residency and work permits, colleagues and friends. I’m moving forward.” Does she see herself staying in Croatia? “For the time being,” she qualifies, a bit nostalgic. “In spite of everything, my country, friends and family are my paradise. For every migrant, our roots are irreplaceable. At least with the Internet I can see my mother every day.” Here Diagne joins in, “To help migrants and refugees, the best is to contribute concrete things, focusing on how to make a life here.” Afghan Rashed Gholami adds, “But also making sure they get documents quickly.”

This pragmatism manifests, at the end of the meeting, in condemnations of the criminalization of migrants and those who try to help them. This means supporting the [Moria 35, a group of refugees arrested and detained in Lesbos](#) who, after protests against their living conditions in July, were gassed and beaten by the Police. Hours later, they were imprisoned with thousands of other inmates accused of violent crimes. They were then moved to the island of Chios where a trial was to be held on April 20th. Pragmatism also means backing the solidarity campaign [#SavingLivesIsNotACrime](#) in support of the three Spanish firefighters from [Proem-Aid](#) accused, along with two Danish activists from [Team Humanity](#), of attempting to bring unauthorized migrants into Greece. An accusation for which [they face sentences of more than ten years](#), in a pre-trial hearing in Mytilene, the capital of Lesbos, which was to be held on May 7th.