

by Maria Koinova and Sjur Schuett



'Frontera serbocroata - September 2015' by Fotomovimiento (licenced under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/))

The current refugee crisis in the Mediterranean has been of unprecedented proportions since WWII. While political attitudes of policy makers have been in flux in Europe and beyond and ideas about inclusion and exclusion of refugees have been constantly reformulated, the crisis has brought to the fore how durable the difficulties experienced by refugees and conflict-generated diasporas have been at different times and in different places. On 26 November, 2015 the [ERC Starting Grant Project “Diasporas and Contested Sovereignty”](#) hosted a public event to shed light on the current refugee crisis in comparison to refugee movements and diaspora activism related to the conflicts of Kosovo, Bosnia, Iraq, Lebanon, Nagorno-Karabakh, Palestine, Sri Lanka, and Rwanda. In a room full of faculty, students and members of the community, speakers from the UK, US, and Sweden presented their views on the crisis. They connected their insights from academic and policy-relevant debates, as well as the academic workshop [“Diaspora Mobilization for Conflict and Post-conflict Reconstruction,”](#) that took place at Warwick University earlier that day.



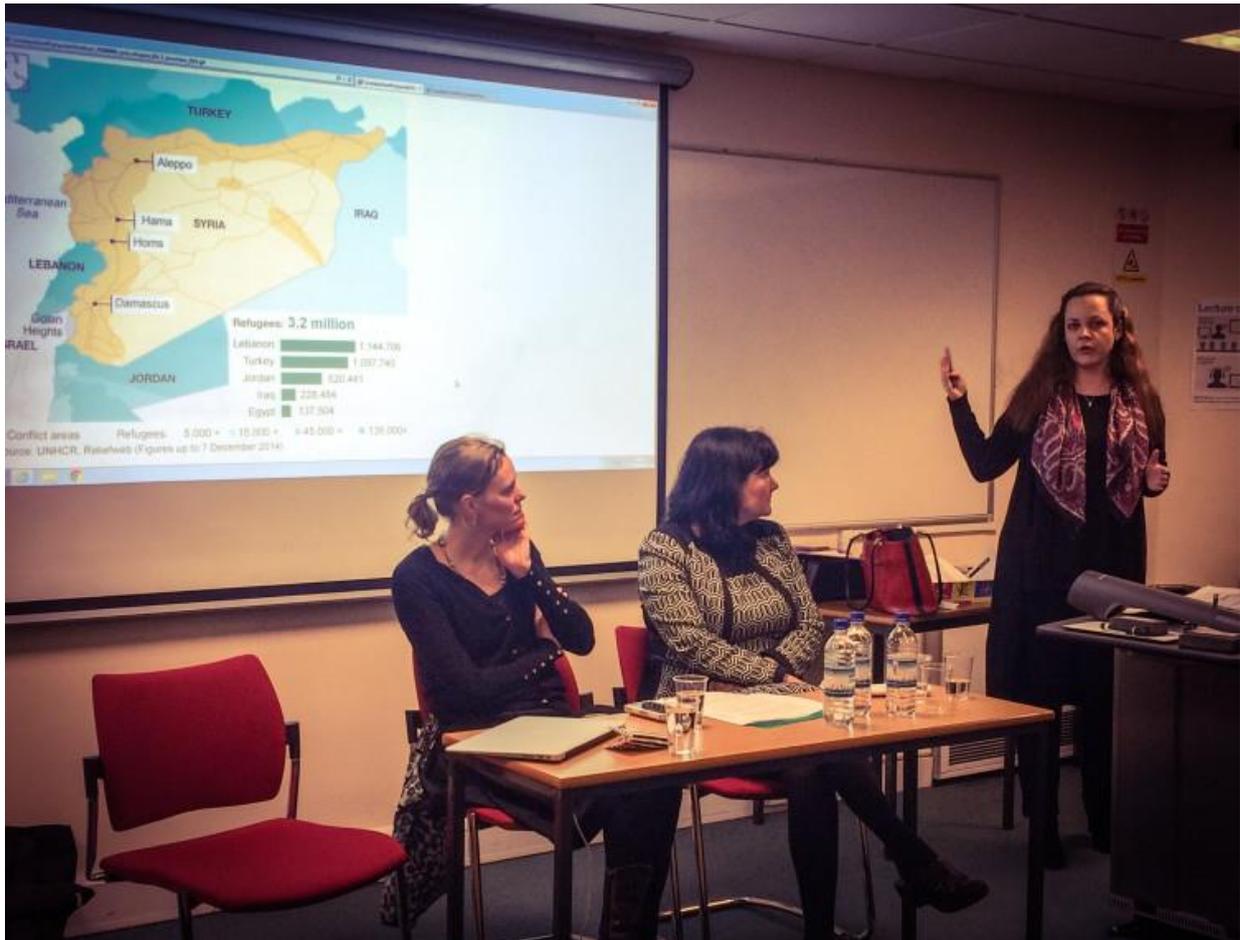
[Photo](#) by Freedom House, September 2015 (Licensed under [PDM 1.0](#))

[Dr. Maria Koinova](#), Reader in International Relations and Principal Investigator of the ERC Project, opened the session and outlined how the current refugee crisis impacts both the lives of the millions of refugees fleeing from war, disaster, and oppression, as well as the elites and general public of states through which they have been passing. Having conducted [research on Eastern Europe for many years](#), she argued that the restrictive ways in which Hungary, most notably Prime Minister [Victor Orban](#), and some other Eastern European countries have been responding to the crisis is anchored in deep-seated legacies of communism. Such legacies have not been fully transformed despite [pressures from the European Union](#) to accommodate identity-based diversity for the past 20 years. Later during the discussion, she further challenged the widely spread notion that integration models have been working well in those countries, since societies have failed to adopt value-based liberal attitudes towards identity-based diversity. When put to the test of this refugee crisis, both elites and publics in many Eastern European countries have displayed remarkable resistance against diversity, and openly advocated anti-refugee sentiments. In the course of her presentation, Koinova further connected the current refugee crisis to the numerous refugee movements she and the ERC Project's team members have been studying for the past 3 years, namely those related to *de facto* states (Kosovo, Palestine, Nagorno-Karabakh), weak states (Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iraq), and a stateless diaspora (related to Kurdish areas in the Middle East).

[Dr. Camilla Orjuela](#), Senior Lecturer at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, shared lessons from her years researching the Tamil diaspora that fled from Sri

Lanka during the civil war of 1983-2009. She explained how it is often impossible to distinguish between “economic migrants” and refugees. She noted that for many Tamils who fled the civil war “the hardest thing was not the violence, but not being able to give food to their children.” Beyond interconnecting conflict and economic need, she further noted that links to the homeland and “being a diaspora” is rather a process than a fact. Of great importance are commemoration activities in the host community, which sustain diaspora identification with the home community and set the stage for diaspora initiatives for post-conflict development. The Tamil diaspora contributed not only to the war effort, but also by helping families to survive, and investing in housing, business and education. “When walking around in a village in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka, you will see new houses. The difference between rich and poor is no longer about caste necessarily, but about whether one has any relatives in the diaspora.” The Tamil diaspora involvement, however, varied greatly as different Sri Lankan governments took more welcoming or more aggressive stances towards the diaspora abroad. Orjuela considers the most important lesson of the Tamil experience to be the need to avoid making clear-cut distinctions between deserving and undeserving refugees. As virtually all refugees have been in very difficult situations, she stressed the need for understanding rather than judgemental approaches towards refugees.

[Dr. Nadejda Marinova](#), Assistant Professor at Wayne State University in the US, shared an account of the current scale of the refugee crisis in Syria’s neighbouring countries. Approximately 2 million refugees have been seeking shelter in Turkey, followed by at least over a million in Lebanon, and more than 600,000 in Jordan. The situation has reached a tipping point, with states that initially opened their doors to refugees now closing them. Turkey just closed its doors to refugees, with Lebanon and Jordan in the process of doing so. Often refugees have been fleeing from Bashar al-Assad’s bombs or ISIS. More recently refugees have been escaping areas controlled by the regime, as they do not want to be drafted into Assad’s military. Moreover, the situation that the refugees find in their host county in the Middle East varies greatly. In Lebanon, itself weak, corrupt, and sectarian-based state, authorities did not want to accept international funding to build camps to allow refugees to stay. The underlying motivation was a fear that this might entail a [permanent settlement of refugees](#), as has been the situation of Palestinians living in camps in Lebanon for generations. In Turkey, the refugees are more settled. A proportion is placed in camps close to the border, with the majority in cities, and an estimated over half a million in Istanbul. These refugees - mostly middle class professionals - seek to be smuggled across borders, if they can afford it. The full-scale proportions of the crisis are not fully visible without considering the 7.5 million internally displaced people (IDPs) within the borders of Syria, in addition to the 4 million refugees who have fled across international borders. As the civil war rages on and the neighbouring countries increasingly close their borders, the fate of the remaining Syrian population is getting more and more precarious.



Dr. Nadejda Marinova of Wayne State University (Credit: Dzeneta Karabegovic, 2015)

Two ERC Project team members also briefly shared their views on the crisis. [Oula Kadhum](#), a Ph.D. Research Fellow, discussed how the refugee crisis is being securitized in light of the 13 November, 2015 attacks in Paris, and in particular how Muslim diasporas in the West are increasingly being treated with suspicion. She also questioned whether securitization of diasporas will impact their ability to contribute towards their homelands considering that Western countries are restricting citizenship rights, and so may limit diasporas' ability to contribute to development via circular migration. Kadhum voiced these points from the perspective of her research on the political engagement of the Iraqi diaspora in the aftermath of the 2003 intervention, and its fragmentation vis-à-vis ethno-sectarian politics in Iraq. [Dzeneta Karabegovic](#), a Ph.D. Research Fellow, argued that many individuals in diaspora and all over the Balkans feel [affinity and solidarity](#) with the refugees, some of who are passing through their very borders, such as in Serbia. She noted that studying diaspora mobilization could inform how the refugees of today might mobilize towards their homelands tomorrow. Her perspective was based on her research on Bosnian diaspora mobilization in Europe regarding issues of transitional justice.

These topics sparked a rich conversation, touching upon issues of geopolitics, popular opinion and specific methods for diaspora mobilization. There were comments regarding the situation in which the EU found itself concerning Turkey's aspired accession to the EU. As many migrants pass through Turkey, [the EU considers Turkey's role to be to stem migration flows](#). On its part, Turkey has been

interested in turning this role as leverage to revive negotiations towards EU accession. There were voices in the audience arguing that this relationship has unfortunately reduced the Syrian refugees to mere political bargaining chips. “Everyone wants to utilize the refugees, but nobody wants them,” argued [Dr. Latif Tas](#), a socio-legal scholar at SOAS, and workshop participant. This has been indeed disturbing, and not far from observations that certain regimes can utilize refugees and threaten to unleash [refugee crises in order to use them in negotiations](#).

In reaction, Karabegovic highlighted a more humane aspect in the European response. She explained how Bosnian ex-refugees have mobilized their contacts in states of refugees’ final destinations in Scandinavia and asked them to personally take care of those who share their former fate, particularly Syrian families who had been passing through the Balkans. This raised questions about whether “a sentimental shift” in Europe caused by an increasing exposure of refugees’ suffering, through the media and association with previous experiences of displacement, may change general attitudes towards refugees. The panel maintained that there is a definite value in developing empathy towards refugees in Europe, and that Scandinavian countries have shown more openness than countries in Eastern Europe or the Middle East.

The discussion concluded with a comment made by [Professor Franklyn Lisk](#) at Warwick University, who shared an impressive account of [best-practice diaspora mobilization for post-conflict reconstruction](#). He reported of a system of medical knowledge-sharing between Somali medical professionals and their Finnish-Somali diaspora counterparts. This diaspora has successfully mobilized to develop an extensive exchange programme in which Finnish-Somali doctors visit Somalia to share their knowledge, as well as invite their Somali colleagues to Finland for further training. This left the audience and the panel with an inspiring view on how diasporas can make a unique contribution to their home-country communities, despite current traumatic experiences.



[Dr. Maria Koinova](#) is a Reader in International Relations and a Principal Investigator of the European Research Council Starting Grant ‘[Diasporas and Contested Sovereignty](#)’. She is the author of “*Ethnonationalist Conflict in Postcommunist States*” (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013) and of articles on transnational diaspora mobilisation published in the *European Journal of International Relations*, *International Political Science Review*, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *International Political Sociology*, *Review of International Studies*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *Communist and Postcommunist Studies*



*Sjur Schuett is MA Student at the Politics and International Studies Department at Warwick University and Research Assistant to the ERC Project "Diasporas and Contested Sovereignty."*