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As Europe's focus shifts to integration, the humanitarian refugee crisis is still not over

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Hellinikon Olympic Park looks like yet another derelict and forgotten space – sad but unsurprising, given how often Olympic venues fall into disrepair and abandonment. But this baseball stadium on the outskirts of Athens is the site of a very different story.

In 2015, the abandoned park – which had been built on the site of an old airport – was repurposed to house refugees entering Athens along with a number of other sites in the Greek capital. When a team of reporters from the podcast *This American Life* visited in June 2015, 1,000 people lived in 150 tents within the outfield, unprotected from the summer heat, waiting for the next stage of their journey.

By the time we visited two years later in July 2017, the site had been abandoned – and cleaned up – once more. The only sign of the people that had lived there until recently was the graffiti we found throughout the adjacent Ellinkiko neighbourhood, and the vast and abandoned Olympic Park.

These abandoned spaces can suggest that the humanitarian crisis of two years ago is over, or that refugees no longer require emergency accommodation in hastily repurposed sites.

We spent time doing research along the Balkan route that many refugees and migrants took into Europe, visiting Belgrade, Thessaloniki and Athens. We spoke to a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in both Serbia and Greece who told us that, from a humanitarian perspective, “the crisis is over”.

Funders, including the EU and the UNHCR have suggested to these NGOs that the focus now needs to be on “integration” rather than emergency aid. And recent changes to how EU funding in Greece is to be distributed is likely to shift the focus towards more state-led solutions and services rather than being driven by on-the-ground needs.

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Graffiti in the Ellinkiko neighbourhood near Athens. Gemma Bird, Author provided (No reuse)

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As such, many of these NGOs recently began putting their time and efforts into activities focused on integrating refugees into the community. These include language lessons, help with CVs and job applications, and help with housing for those awaiting relocation decisions.

Still living at crisis point

While each of these projects is important and valuable, our research along the Balkan route showed us that, contrary to the image invoked by the abandoned camp and the change in focus implied by

donors, the humanitarian crisis is by no means over. While the number of people arriving in Europe has fallen since 2015, those stuck in transit states like Greece and Serbia often feel that they are living in crisis-like conditions.

We spoke to one NGO in Thessaloniki that provided showers for refugees who were living outside of formal camps or accommodation within the city. They told us that, during the 2016-17 winter period, there was a waiting list of ten days for shower usage, let alone the waiting list for other basic provisions such as laundry. In Thessaloniki we also visited a refugee support centre that had recently hosted a wedding reception. The couple had originally been married in Syria but were subsequently separated as the husband took refuge in Germany and the wife in Greece. The reception was a multicultural gathering of friends, sharing the experience of being refugees, and support workers from the centre. Close family members skyped into the reception. People are finding ways to have normal lives but these are not real alternatives to being surrounded by their families.

In the Serbian border town of Sid, an activist group called No Name Kitchen, cooks 150 meals twice a day for refugees living in the local park with no shelter or facilities. In Belgrade, according to a local NGO, refugees are taking more risks than a year ago. Families with small children now try to cross the border with smugglers, and if their attempts are unsuccessful, they often sleep in local parks and try again the next day. The crisis has shifted: some refugees still have no accommodation or basic sanitation, while for others the inability to leave Serbia or Greece is creating situations of hopelessness and frustration.

Stuck in limbo

In Athens, we visited squats which housed local homeless people, anarchists and refugees. Volunteers helping there were often locals who had lost jobs during the financial crisis. The squats are often seen as an alternative to refugee camps where refugees and activists make decisions in assemblies and run the buildings themselves. But the crisis is still evident in the constant threats faced by the residents, from far-right attacks or evictions.

Read more: Named and shamed: EU countries are failing to share responsibility for refugees

While the humanitarian crisis affecting Europe's new arrivals is less visible than it was in 2015, it still exists. It has shifted from an emergency situation to a crisis where people are feeling increasingly hopeless about their ability to move on from transit countries.

Only 24,449 refugees out of an initial 160,000 have been relocated from Italy and Greece. Those that remain often live in precarious conditions, facing violence, uncertainty about their status or unable to reunify with their family. For many of these people, the crisis is far from over.

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