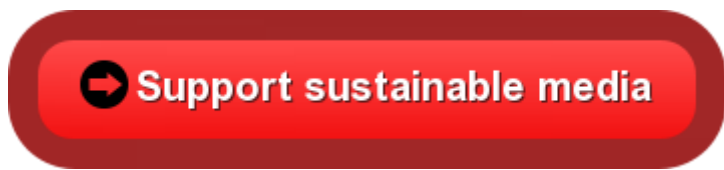




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Hunger strike on the steps of the UNHCR office in Athens

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Raluca Bejan (</category/bios/raluca-bejan>) July 6, 2017

POLITICAL ACTION (</ISSUES/POLITICAL-ACTION>)

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Weather reached 45 degrees Celsius degrees in Athens over the last weekend. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office -- located in-between a supermarket and a bank on Michalakopoulou street, in a large, imposing building, with massive glass doors, marble-like white and grey floor tiles and four elevators to the upstairs floors, carefully guarded by security officers who assertively inform strangers that a scheduled meeting is needed for entering the UNHCR -- gives little respite from the heat.

There are very few signs of an UNHCR office on Michalakopoulou. No inscriptions are visible neither outside nor inside the building. The only indications are a white van parked at the corner of Michalakopoulou and Leof. Vasileos Alexandrou, where some people are sleeping on the back seats, a couple of dark-skinned women holding their babies in their arms, and the formally-dressed, somehow fashionable UNHCR workers continually walking in and out of the building.

"They are hiding from the people. They are hiding from the refugees," Anwar Nillufary said when I first met him.

Michalakopoulou is more or less a noisy and claustrophobic street. Dozens of cabs, motorcycles, and cars are continually passing on both sides of the road. The sidewalk is small, merely permitting only for one person to pass by, although it gets larger near the big glass building. Motorcycles are parked everywhere and garbage is massively piled in hundreds of blue and white bags. The municipal workers' strike has affected garbage collection in Athens for several days.



contains a black-inked inscription addressed to UNHCR: "Referral, resettlement or a Safe Passage. Do not hinder. An effective remedy and durable solution is urgently needed."

Anwar is sitting down on a newspaper on the marble-like steps, his back leaning on the glass doors. He holds a bottle of water, his phone and a red agenda with many names and phone numbers written inside it. Philip Leclerc, Chief President; Giovanni Lepri, Vice President. "None of them talk to me," he says. "I have been here for 3 months."

Anwar is the one sleeping in the tent. He is a Kurdish civil engineer, born in Iran, 31 years old. He entered Greece as a refugee in September 2014, from Turkey. "I was on a boat for ten hours" he says. "Life and death decisions. I am still surprised that I survived." Anwar paid the smugglers 2000 euros to board a "good" boat. "From Istanbul they put us in a van with many people and took us to Izmir. There is a jungle near the sea in Izmir, a shore where they are preparing the boats."

The "good" boat was made out of plastic and carried over 35 people on board. One of the refugees was trained "for 5 minutes" to navigate it. The person who usually drives the boat does not have to pay any fees to the smugglers.

They swirled in circles for hours in the Aegean Sea. Water came inside the boat. After 10 hours they somehow arrived safely on the shores of Samos. People had to swim for about 200 meters before reaching land. Within 10 to 15 minutes upon arrival, police showed up and detained mostly everybody from the boat. Anwar went to a nearby mountain-hill to dry his clothes. He stayed on the mountain for two days and managed afterwards to board a commercial ferry to Athens.

Anwar waited 10 months in Greece for his asylum claim. In June 2015 he left for Sweden. By September, he was deported back to Greece on asylum considerations pertaining to the Dublin agreement. The **Dublin** (https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/examination-of-applicants_en) accord stipulates that asylum claims are to be prepared in the entry European Union (EU) Member State; once a person gets the right to asylum, he is legally bound to residency in that country. Yet following the austerity measures imposed on Greece and the massive influx of refugees that hit the country in 2015, Greece's asylum system turned penniless. Due to countless organizational and technical **problems** (<http://localhost/http://www.asylumineurope.org;reports:country:greece>) (i.e. backlogs) Greece no longer abides by the Dublin system of asylum rules and regulations. While claims are still filled in the country, these are merely matters of formality.



"I am looted in this country. I am looted on this continent," Anwar states. "UNHCR in Greece, in Athens, this office...ruined my life. I am here for three months," he explains. "Two months hunger strike, one month just protesting. I am only eating biscuits for one month. All I need is a referral letter for resettlement. Or to connect me with other institutions that could offer me safe passage. I am staying here, 24 hours a day, in all weather conditions."

He has been in touch with Canadian and U.S. embassies, yet he cannot apply for resettlement on his own since the formality is that a resettlement letter needs to be provided on his behalf by UNHCR. He contacted 13 sponsorship agreement holders in Canada; he wrote to some senators in Vancouver, Larry Campbell and Mobina Jaffer; he spoke with representatives from the Canadian embassy in Italy, the Canadian High Commission in U.K., and even the Canadian Prime Minister. "Yes, I wrote to him." He also contacted the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva and the United Nations (UN) Secretary General. UNHCR suggested he contacts the Greek authorities. From all others he got no replies.

Police is called over at the Michalakopoulou street almost everyday. The security guards oftentimes push Anwar around, they insult him and threaten him with being beaten to death. He was held several times at the police station for hours and hours.

Hypothetically, Anwar could apply for work in Greece. However there are no jobs in Greece at the moment. Greece has the highest unemployment rate in the EU, at about **22.5** ([http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Unemployment_rates,_seasonally_adjusted,_May_2017_\(%25\)_F2.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Unemployment_rates,_seasonally_adjusted,_May_2017_(%25)_F2.png)) per cent. Youth unemployment sits at about **45.2** (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/266228/youth-unemployment-rate-in-eu-countries/>) per cent. "This country is sold out," says Anwar. "It is bankrupt. It owes a lot of money to the creditors. There is no possible way for Greece to recover. And Europe closed its borders."

On Friday, July 7, 2017, Anwar starts his 108th day of protest: 64 days of hunger strike plus 44 days of regular protest. Yet on this very same day Anwar also needs to appear in court. He was summoned by the owner of the big-glassed building for protesting at the entrance. Charges seem to be a fine of 1000 euros and three months detention.

Anwar contacted, among many, the Red Cross, the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Amnesty International, the Hellenic League and the Hellenic National Commission for Human Rights, as he needs



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