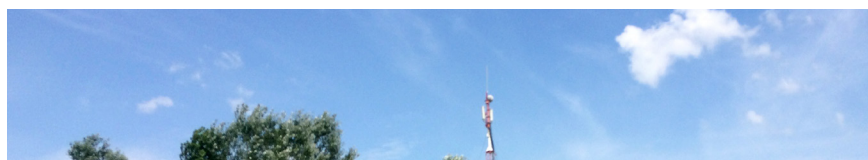




Opportunities Along the Balkan Route:
Policy Proposals for Modernizing the Response to Forced Migration

A Joint Research and Policy Project of the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies
and the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development



Row one, from left to right:

Hungary's closed border with Serbia at Kelebija: to prevent inter-ethnic tensions, Syrian and other Arab refugees have been segregated to this border checkpoint, approximately 30km west of the Horgos checkpoint where mostly Afghan and Pakistani refugees have established a temporary camp.

Event participants after day one's discussions on refugee policy recommendations. As one participant stated: "there is no refugee crisis in Europe, there is only a policy crisis."

The mountainous border crossing at Dimitrovgrad has been a waypoint for smuggling networks connecting Bulgaria to Serbia. Those who can afford it are driven through checkpoints by a smuggler; for a lesser fee, smugglers will walk groups of refugees for days from Sofia into Serbia.

Belgrade's "Afghan Park" (although nationalities from Morocco to Syria to Sierra Leone are routinely present) has become an ad hoc aid distribution and camp site for some 600 refugees attempting to pass on to the EU. Here, everything from meals to information on smugglers can be acquired by refugees.



Row two, from left to right:

BCARS works to cultivate the next generation of scholars and policymakers who will handle future mass migration challenges from tomorrow's protracted conflicts.

For refugees, information is as critical as food, water, and shelter. Aid workers pass on the latest news about border procedures, but despite information dissemination efforts, confusion about borders abounds among refugee populations.

With an uncertain future about when—or if—they will be allowed through Serbia's borders, refugee boys pass the time by playing football on an improvised pitch at the Hungarian border.

Letter from the Director



Dear Friends and Colleagues,

The Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies was founded in 2013 amidst a chaotic period for the region. The “Arab Spring” (or “Arab Uprising”) in Syria had transitioned into a civil war, leading to a massive refugee crisis that stretched across Syria’s borders to Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, and now continues through the Balkans and much of Europe. The Syrian refugee challenge emerged as the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time, and its solution required the input of a strong scholarly community collaborating with experts deeply rooted in the Arab region, the Arab diaspora, and the international policymaking and aid communities.

BCARS exists for just that purpose, enabling scholars of the region to investigate problems and propose policy solutions. As a result, BCARS’ initial 18 months of work examining regional dynamics of the “Arab Spring” was re-focused toward research and policy work on the Syrian humanitarian challenge, pursuing these and related questions: what do regional and international policymakers and practitioners need to know in order to help refugees and host communities? What lessons and best practices can be identified, adapted, and shared across the region and beyond?

Over 2015 and 2016, through a series of workshops and field research, BCARS scholars have worked to provide essential evidence and new knowledge to help guide policymakers’ actions. Our Consortium members are renowned academic institutions in eight countries, and the Consortium continues to grow to meet the scale of the continuing refugee crisis.

The BCARS community is much broader than our official members: our scholars build on personal relationships with refugees, government representatives, UN and EU officials, security personnel, advisors, aid practitioners, academics, and community leaders in Belgium, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, Germany, Greece, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Serbia, Syria, Turkey, the U.K., the U.S., and beyond. This work has produced numerous publications and briefings, including this policy paper series, that aims at providing contextualized local, national, and regional policy recommendations to researchers and concerned actors.

For this particular workshop and policy report, I am especially grateful for the partnership we have with Vuk Jeremić, President of the Center for International Relations & Sustainable Development (CIRSD). Our work—in Belgrade, the Balkans, and Europe as a whole—is far from over, just as the refugee and migrant challenge continues unabated for now. We welcome all feedback and suggestions for further action.

Denis J. Sullivan

DENIS J. SULLIVAN
DIRECTOR, BOSTON CONSORTIUM FOR
ARAB REGION STUDIES
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There is no refugee crisis in Europe; there is only a policy crisis.

The political effects of refugee flows from the Middle East present the Balkan region and the European Union with enormous challenges, but also with opportunities. The overwhelming majority of refugees moving into Western Europe have used the Balkan route, placing immense pressure on the countries along that route, especially Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia, and country responses have seen varying degrees of success.

Balkan states and the EU need to work together, or they risk the negative effects of unmanaged refugee inflows. The prolonged nature of the crisis calls for discussion to learn from the accumulated experiences of the countries hosting refugees, both in transit and in settlements.

To promote this sort of learning, in July 2016 the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies (BCARS) and the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD) convened a workshop on the Syrian refugee crisis in the Balkans.

Meeting in Belgrade, participants highlighted and analyzed the main characteristics of refugee flows and identified policy recommendations at local, national, and regional levels.

This report and its policy recommendations aim to fairly represent the comments made by workshop participants, and therefore do not necessarily represent the opinions of BCARS or CIRSD.



Migrant Route through Europe
Over 2015, more than 1 million refugees attempted to cross into Europe from Turkey via the Balkans route. Robust smuggling networks that existed prior to the “migrant crisis” provide mass transit by boat or land into Greece or Bulgaria, north through Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, and Hungary, and finally arriving at destination countries within the EU. Despite border closures, the route continues to be a viable corridor into Europe for those refugees who can afford transportation and smugglers.

Executive Summary of Policy Recommendations

LOCAL INTERVENTIONS

1. Improve information flows: Refugees and local/host populations alike need “real-time” information, especially about changes in border policies and smuggling operations.
2. Optimize the use of technology, especially to help with local coordination, translation, and psychological support.
3. Debunk prejudice: Misinformation about economic impact, cultural and security issues, and attitudes among host populations are creating unnecessary social tensions that are best addressed at the local/host community level.

NATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

1. Add flexibility to labor laws: Allowing work in the formal sector is a net benefit to the local/host community and to refugees, who otherwise must rely on social welfare programs. This is relevant to Balkan transit countries and EU destination countries, just as it is in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.
2. **Improve coordination between and among NGOs and state agencies:** Time invested in coordination meetings, networking, and sharing of data, information, resources, and skills will pay dividends in the long term.
3. **Create a distinct legal status between “refugee” and “migrant”:** The protracted nature of modern conflicts has outgrown the 1951 Convention’s conceptualization of what it means to be displaced.

REGIONAL INTERVENTIONS

1. Improve coordination between and among national governments and international NGOs: As at the national level, time invested in coordination, networking, and resource sharing will pay long-term dividends.
2. Increase personnel dedicated to the refugee/migrant challenge: Current migration is manageable if proportional human resources are dedicated to meet the scale of the situation.
3. Evaluate policy and develop institutional memory: Given the diversity of stressors, from civil war to climate change, mass influxes into Europe will continue for the foreseeable future. Policies need to be empirically tested and adapted, and institutions, not individuals, must develop long-term capacities to manage mass migration.

This paper summarizes the discussions from the July 2016 BCARS-CIRSD workshop in Belgrade and then expands on these recommendations, describing specific, actionable solutions for policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers.

Overview of the BCARS-CIRSD Workshop

The two-day workshop brought together a group of regional experts to share experiences, concerns, best practices, and policy proposals for the continuing refugee movements through the Balkans.

The organizers chose Belgrade as the site for the workshop, given the long-standing relationship between BCARS and CIRSD, which is based there, and the fact that Serbia has been a hub for Balkan refugee inflows and outflows for decades.

The first day was organized around four panels, each covering a different aspect of the refugee situation: infrastructure (the ways and means of migration), security, governmental and NGO responses, and alternative approaches, perceived risks, and opportunities.

The final panel set the stage for day two, which was dedicated to the articulation of policy proposals.

THE BALKAN ROUTE AND SERBIA’S ROLE
The importance of the Balkan route is evident from the fact that about 80 percent of individuals who end up in Germany pass through that region on their way from the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. The countries along the route are already plagued by chronic poverty, bad governance, ethnic and religious frictions, and external interference.

The sudden injection of a large number of traumatized, impoverished, and culturally and religiously diverse people is

thus a cause of great concern in a region already known for instability.

Independent of refugee flows, the Syrian civil war has had a boomerang effect on the Balkans, as a large number have left the region to join the self-proclaimed “Islamic State.” The prospects of radicalization in some Muslim communities in the Balkans have stoked fears of a spillover effect that could trigger wider ethnic instability in the region and justify authoritarian tendencies.

This is especially the case in the western Balkans. On the other hand, migrant-route countries could transform crisis into opportunity by capitalizing on the refugee situation to catalyze constructive political dialogue, economic benefits from integration and migration, and improved national and regional coordination.

Serbia has a long history of managing refugees. Preceding the influx of Syrians was a mass migration from Serbia’s disputed province, Kosovo,* which opened the floodgates to forced migration from the Middle East. The first instance of mass entry by asylum seekers to EU territory (exceeding 10,000 per week) was in early 2014, as Kosovo Albanians crossed central Serbia on their way to Hungary.

Their network of smugglers, their (successful) strategies for crossing the border at Horgoš and Kelebija, and their base in the border town of Preševo were all defining precedents for the subsequent

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

influx of Middle Eastern refugees. It was precisely these “trailblazers” in Serbia who determined the timing and the path of the early stages of the refugee wave in 2014.

It is a little-known fact, in other words, that the current refugee wave began *within* Europe, at the heart of the Balkans.

THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF REFUGEE MOVEMENT

The workshop’s discussion of the ways and means of refugee transport highlighted the often-neglected aspect of “digital infrastructure.” Traditionally, migration has involved a mix of legal and illegal (or extralegal) border crossings that make use of multiple physical infrastructure options, including legal transport companies, free transport organized by state authorities, and illegal smuggling operations.

Digital technologies have enabled refugees to coordinate with friends and relatives, communicate about their experiences, and adjust strategies, tactics, and timing. Refugees also use technology to learn about support networks from local activists. However, the digital infrastructure of refugee movement raises questions about monitoring of communications and use of technology by smugglers and anti-refugee groups.

Data from social media allow for better policymaking and monitoring, but those same government actors can also abuse the information in over-securitizing refugees, migrants, and smugglers. Further complicating migration, Balkan governments have aimed either to prevent refugees from entering or to move them as quickly and inconspicuously as possible to the next country along the

route. Moving refugees quickly sometimes involves tolerating smugglers, perhaps to the point of active collusion with smuggling operations.

Although the land route in the Balkans was supposed to have been closed in March 2016, the borders remain porous and the flow continues, albeit in smaller numbers. Indeed, such policies have simply moved migrant flows back to the sea route, heightening the demand for smuggling operations.

SECURING REFUGEE MOVEMENT

Security aspects of the refugee flow revolve around regional and international cooperation, treatment of refugees, domestic instability, and radicalization. Participants in the Belgrade workshop noted, for example, that cooperation between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia has been boosted by a shared concern over managing refugee flows.

On the other hand, new frictions have emerged between Hungary and Serbia over fence construction, and Croatia has accused Serbia of conspiracy in facilitating migrant border crossings. Escalating regional distrust has resulted in a system of careful monitoring of neighboring countries’ policies, with each state “upstream” along the migrant route declaring its intention to halt the refugee inflow if they detect that a “downstream” country has halted outflows.

The EU’s financial support has proved important for regional governments and NGOs, but the EU has shown weakness in enforcing or adjusting its own rules and policies, further exacerbating the insecurity of regional governments and heightening Balkan resentment of the EU’s failure to act, beyond monetary aid, on its humanitarian ideals.

RESPONSES TO REFUGEE MOVEMENT

Even though Serbia has been commended for its relatively exemplary treatment of refugees, the closure of outflows (by Hungary or Croatia) would necessarily pressure the government to forcibly block inflows from Macedonia and Bulgaria. Moreover, Serbians’ widespread tolerance (and often active support) of refugees seems to have been conditional upon the premise of refugees’ rapidly moving along to Hungary, Croatia, and elsewhere in Europe.

Despite the fact that refugees, almost without exception, do not intend to settle in the Balkans (hoping, rather, to reach Germany or other countries with higher employment rates), they routinely experience different forms of abuse along the Balkan route.

Findings from rigorous surveys conducted by workshop participants indicate that 80 percent have experienced trauma in a transit or host country, 64 percent have experienced physical or psychological abuse from local police, 56 percent have had traumatic experiences in detention, and 50 percent have suffered trauma related to local/host populations. The overwhelming majority (77 percent) experience depression and 60 percent suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD.

Governments and NGOs alike have a hard time establishing functional coordination along the Balkan route. In some cases, NGOs compete for external funding, a further disincentive to coordinate.

Several participants observed that the Serbian Ministry of Health facilitated better coordination in some respects

than other government ministries, but that this facilitative role took time to develop and was based on *ad hoc* initiative, not codified responsibility for migration issues.

Overall, NGOs adapted faster to changing situations and filled in the gaps created by government agencies’ slow responses and limited capacities. Workshop participants in Belgrade described an overall lack of training and personnel.

Primarily, the problem revolves around the lack of language skills, as well as some cultural unawareness related to the diversity of migrants moving along the route (comprising not only Syrians, but also Afghans, Algerians, Iraqis, Moroccans, Pakistanis, and a multitude of sub-Saharan African nationals). Psychological support has also been neglected, for refugees and for local personnel.

CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS AROUND MIGRATION

An underlying problem emerges from the outdated legal definitions of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Given the major problems inherent in attempting to distinguish between “asylum seekers,” “refugees,” and “migrants,” the resulting policies are ambiguous regarding “illegal” versus “irregular” border crossings. Furthermore, political elites have attempted to use the crisis to improve national image (demonstrating empathy), raise bargaining power with the EU (acting as the EU’s border guards), and solicit EU support in the domestic political arena.

Thus, political leaders may attempt to position migrants as political bargaining chips, not as a humanitarian responsibility. This is especially so for countries aspiring to join the EU.

Policy Proposals for Local, National, and Regional Interventions

In this context and in light of the need to address ongoing issues of migration and refugee flows in the Balkans, three sets of policy proposals are offered.

LOCAL INTERVENTIONS

Improve information flows: Refu-

1. **gees and host populations alike need “real-time” information, especially about changes in border policies.**

Refugees require information as much as they require food, shelter, and medical aid. They need information on current border closure policies, risks along the route, procedures they will undergo, the status of family and friends ahead of and behind them on the route, and what they can realistically expect once they reach a destination country.

By the same token, those living along the route need to know what the authorities at all levels are doing to secure and manage refugee transit and to address problems that arise, in order to prevent the formation of vigilante groups, among other risks to refugees and host communities.

Needless to say, local residents need timely information on how they can help government agencies and NGOs that are operating in the vicinity. This includes financial information; the widespread belief that refugees are “stealing tax dollars” (rather than receiving foreign aid) has fostered local resentment.

Optimize the use of technology,

2. **especially to help with local coordination, translation, and psychological support.**

Local activists and police officers en-

counter many problems of coordination, translation, and psychological support, mostly due to language barriers.

Following the example of some existing programs, technology such as Skype could be used to connect native speakers of Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and sub-Saharan African languages and dialects with activists and refugees along the migrant route.

Additionally, technology can provide cost-effective policy evidence, such as social media data from Twitter and Facebook, which can be used for better policymaking and monitoring.

Address prejudice: Misinformation

3. **about refugees creates unnecessary social tensions that are best addressed at the community level.**

Whether through town hall meetings, community discussions, traditional media campaigns, or social media outreach through Facebook and Instagram, local activists, NGOs, and government agencies have a large stake in assuring that the local/host population is not under threat, in order to maintain political stability and reduce risk and burden at the “micro” level, where activists operate.

Otherwise, a vicious spiral results: inability to help refugees feeds insecurity among residents and refugees, which threatens to escalate to violence. Humanizing refugees is therefore imperative.

NATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

1. **Add flexibility to labor laws.**

The most immediate fix is to open the labor market to refugees. Labor market integration must be done early, or refugees will join the informal economy (and be reluctant to leave it), as has been witnessed in Jordan. Of course, labor market integration must find a balance with politicized fears of refugees “stealing jobs,” even though such fears are not based on the evidence.

Studies in Turkey and Jordan, both several years ahead in the labor integration process, have shown that refugees overwhelmingly compete *with each other* for jobs, not with host populations.

Although this is a sensitive issue, failing to integrate refugees into the labor market often means failing to integrate them into society. Ultimately, allowing refugees to work is a net gain, because they can move out of welfare programs and contribute formally to the host country’s economy.

This recommendation cannot be limited to the national level, however; changes must be made in Balkans transit countries, where refugees are getting stuck due to border closures, as well as in destination countries in the EU.

Labor law reform is also needed in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey to reduce livelihood insecurity. Inability to work in these countries acts as a push factor for refugees, many of whom choose to make the dangerous and expensive journey through the Balkans in pursuit of better livelihoods than were available under the strict labor laws and struggling economies of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

2. **Improve coordination between and among NGOs and state agencies.**

Experts across the board have identified significant problems with the coordination of state and non-state actors, including international donors. (NGOs are addressed under regional policy.) It is important to emphasize the dual problems of inertia within the state apparatus and strong bureaucratization, especially in post-communist countries.

The emerging risk is an erosion of the rule of law and democracy in favor of expedience, which could have the unintended effect of encouraging autocratic tendencies. This is all the more important, given the EU’s tacit willingness to sacrifice the rule of law in these countries in exchange for short-term gains. Better coordination and training should result from systemic reforms, not from rigid centralization.

3. **Develop a new legal status between “refugee” and “migrant.”**

To integrate migrants and refugees into the legal system of a transit/host country, it is important to reform legislation that deals with refugee status. The conception of the refugee as outlined in the 1951 Convention no longer makes sense, given the reality of today’s protracted conflicts. Such a renovation should be much easier in non-EU countries, because they do not face the same challenges of multinational decision-making.

For example, a government could decide unilaterally that all nationals from conflict zones (such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq) would have a set of rights that was narrower than someone with full refugee status, but broader than the current minimal (and ambiguous) status of

Next Steps

migrants who are *en route* to a destination country. Such a shift would not require additional screening or interviews, as in the asylum process, because it would conceivably offer protection only until the first asylum application interview, several months in the future. Several experts suggested that this status follow the model regulating Cuba-US migration, which defines “orderly departure” (i.e., “orderly transit”).

REGIONAL INTERVENTIONS

1. Improve coordination between national governments and international NGOs.

Most participants agreed that the 1951 Convention is outdated, but that it would be very difficult to change. Moreover, the problems of formulating and implementing EU policies (such as a quota system to distribute refugees across EU member states) tend to foster unilateral solutions, improvisation, and distrust.

A multilateral approach is crucial, whereby countries in the Balkans could formulate a unified regional policy, inclusive of external nongovernmental actors. As it stands now, the EU’s limited capacity to deal with the crisis is leaving room for other global actors to promote their interests in a region that is already plagued by many frictions and lingering conflicts.

2. Increase personnel dedicated to the refugee challenge.

A key aspect of better regional coordination would be to pool resources to strengthen human resources, primarily for security, language/translation, psychological support, and cultural awareness about refugees’ countries

and regions of origin. Joint regional training centers should be established to benefit from scale and share best practices. This should not be a controversial issue in domestic politics, because it will allow cost-sharing with external donors. Participants universally accepted that managing refugee challenges in the region is possible, but requires human resources that are adequate to the scale of migration.

3. Evaluate policy and develop institutional memory.

Several workshop participants questioned the sustainability of infrastructure to manage the refugee crisis, especially given the prolonged nature of the challenge, as international conflicts drag on. In fact, migration crises are expected to proliferate, not decline, due to climate change, civil wars, collapsed states, and other international stressors.

Europe must recognize that the scale of future refugee waves might be even larger than those experienced so far by Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, the Balkans, and the EU. To prepare for such scenarios, there has to be a conscious effort first to evaluate existing policies and adapt those that have failed, and then to build and preserve institutional memory from local, national, and regional governmental and nongovernmental institutions. *Ad hoc* fixes that help Syrian refugees today can be adapted based on evaluation and codified to help the refugees of tomorrow.

The role of academia and policy institutions in these long-term actions cannot be overstated.

As was widely stated during the workshop, *there is no refugee crisis in the Balkans and Europe; there is only a policy crisis.*

The challenges faced by Syrian refugees—and all refugees seeking a better life in Europe—are manageable, but they require policy adaptations to make more effective use of regional human resources, capital, and political will.

The two most significant overarching challenges to the region are the disorganized and politically discordant nature of the Balkans and the EU’s attempts to “push back” migrant flows without providing adequate resources to help

Balkan states manage the overwhelming numbers of people who are attempting to transit to Europe.

We encourage policymakers, practitioners, and academics to reference these policy recommendations and tailor them for their unique circumstances. BCARS and CIRSD are available to discuss these and other ideas.

We thank all participants for their valuable contributions.



Above: Fearing violence from armed vigilante groups, smugglers have widely stopped accompanying refugees on the Bulgarian leg of the Balkans route, leaving groups of refugees alone to navigate, find food, water, and shelter, and protect themselves while walking for days through the forests of Bulgaria to reach Serbia.



Top Right: Shelters at the temporary camps that have sprung up along the Balkans route’s borders are not weatherized. There is a lurking health safety concern from cold weather and storms as Europe moves into fall and winter.



Bottom Right: Squatter buildings have become makeshift shelters along the refugee route, with well meaning residents giving out (or selling) everything from food and water to plugins for refugees to charge their cellphones.

BCARS is grateful to its partner institution, the Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD) in Belgrade, Serbia.

This document is the result of a collaborative fact-finding and discussion process and interviews convened under a modified form of the “Chatham House Rule”; in other words, although participants are free to use the information from the workshop, neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other participant, is specified in relation to a particular statement or set of views. Every effort has been made to provide a clear and accurate overview of participants’ views and comments.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of BCARS, CIRSD, or other partners.

Principal authors are Mladen Mrdalj and Denis J. Sullivan.

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Photos provided by

BCARS staff and volunteers

Photos from the Cover

Row one, from left to right:

Dr. Denis Sullivan, Director BCARS, makes opening remarks to the workshop participants: “We come here today to put our minds together to workshop ideas from academic, policy, UN, NGO, and activist perspectives.”

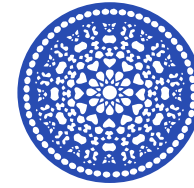
Refugees at Horgos build makeshift shelters from improvised materials and foliage after finding themselves stuck when Hungary closed its border with Serbia in 2016.

Aid workers respond to a hunger strike from some 400 refugees who walked from Belgrade to Horgos, protesting the border closure by Hungarian authorities and living conditions in Serbia.

Row two, from left to right:

Border policies along the Balkans route change sporadically: refugees rarely know border policies until they reach checkpoints. If a refugee comes to a closed border and does not have money to afford a smuggler, they are forced into extended stays--often months--in temporary shelter arrangements.

The Belgrade workshop benefitted from a diversity of participants from academia, think tanks, government agencies, and the aid practitioner community across the Balkans region.



BCARS, the *Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies*, is an international network in which policymakers, practitioners, and scholars from the United States, Europe, and the Arab region meet and work collaboratively to advance policy and research, strengthen a scholarly community, and mentor the next generation of policy analysts and scholars, especially for understanding the Arab Region.

www.bcars-global.org



CIRSD, the *Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development*, is a public policy think-tank registered in Belgrade.

CIRSD’s mission is to provide high-quality, independent analysis and offer innovative, practical recommendations with the aim of strengthening peaceful cooperation between States and increasing responsiveness to changing global circumstances; encouraging a more inclusive and equitable international system; and advocating sustainable development as the foundation of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

CIRSD is committed to help deepen the understanding of economic, social, environmental, and foreign and security policy choices of different States and organizations.

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