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Serious world, unserious campaign

As Europe falls apart, America clowns around



A young Syrian woman and other migrants at the metal fence separating Macedonia and Greece on Feb. 28. More than 5,500 refugees and migrants were reportedly stuck at the border. (Petros Giannakouris/Associated Press)

by [Fred Hiatt](#)

ADASEVCI, Serbia

It is hard to watch the desperate, dignified families huddling around the phone-charging stations in the government shelter in this Balkan village as the clownish spectacle of a presidential campaign unfolds at home.

Foot soldiers of misery, they tumble out of buses and their first request is not for water, food or diapers. They have been on the move for weeks, in some cases months, and they need to connect — with relatives they've left behind and may never see again, with comrades who can relay rumors on the dangers of the road ahead.

They are escaping the wreckage of entire countries. [A million have washed into Europe](#) in the past year, and another million are [on the threshold](#). The continent's leaders see the mass migration as their starkest test since World War II. [Far-right xenophobic parties](#) are on the rise. Longtime commitments to free speech, tolerance and open borders are eroding. Many of the leaders despair at the absence of U.S. leadership and [the rise of Russian meddling](#).

Whatever your politics, you cannot fail to grasp that the problems are deadly serious, and any remedies complex and elusive. Meanwhile, the Republican presidential debates unfold like some grotesque game of playground taunting, with real problems, to the extent they are discussed at all, presented as amenable to easy solution.

Donald Trump vows to "[knock out ISIS](#)." His strategy? "We will, believe me. We will."

I tagged along to Adasevci with a congressional delegation led by Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.). The Serbian government was eager to show it is handling the migrants humanely. And it is — for the moment.

Migrants enter Serbia from Macedonia to the south, having walked, driven and sailed hundreds upon hundreds of miles. They ride an all-day bus northwest to this roadside motel converted into a shelter. Eventually they board a train nearby for Croatia and, they hope, points north.

But as prosperous countries to the north grow less welcoming, the peaceful progression across borders will begin collapsing in on itself, like passenger cars on a crashing train. [Sweden](#) lowered the gate first, followed by [Austria](#). Germany cannot be far behind.

"The basic question is, which country turns into a parking lot for refugees?" [Ivan Krastev](#), the head of a Bulgarian think tank, told the New York Times.

Sensing Europe's intended answer, the prime minister of Greece, [Alexis Tsipras](#), vowed, "We will not accept turning the country into a permanent warehouse of souls."

As long as the Islamic State is rampaging, the [Taliban is gaining ground](#), civil wars are consuming Iraq and [Syria](#) and [Libya](#) and Yemen, refugees will flow. Serbia can't fix the problems. The United States can't either, alone, but without U.S. leadership, they will metastasize.

The American taste for quick and easy solutions didn't begin with this campaign cycle. President George W. Bush tried to divide the world into good and evil, with us or against us, and the world did not fall into line.

President Obama acted as though pulling back from the arc of conflict would end the conflict. “The tide of war is receding,” he [proclaimed](#) as he announced the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq. Again the world failed to cooperate.

Now Republican presidential candidate Ted Cruz assures Americans that we can [carpet-bomb the Islamic State into oblivion](#), while Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders [promises to outsource the heavy lifting](#) to a mythical coalition of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia (deadly enemies, but never mind).

In fact, there are no answers without patient, determined U.S. commitment, diplomatic and economic and military, through international institutions when possible and around them when necessary. Such efforts will succeed sometimes and fail sometimes, at which point the only option will be to regroup and try again. None of which makes for appetizing sound bites.

In Adasevci, a 25-year-old woman told me she had walked across much of Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey with her husband, their 4-year-old daughter and other relatives. When I asked why she had left, she mimed the drawing of a veil across her face.

“The Taliban came back,” she said through a translator. “There is war, no food, no school.”

She said she hoped to go to Germany. “We have heard there is a good life there, well-organized, no war,” she said. But already she misses her homeland. “When the war finishes, we would like to go back,” she said.

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