

# REFUGEE ROADS

*A road documentary across Europe*

**A PROJECT BY**  
TIMO SCHMIDT & FLORIAN VOLZ

**IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH**  
TALI BARDE & SU-JIN SONG

PROJECT PRESENTATION

## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2016, two German students, Timo Schmidt and Florian Volz, set out from The Hague to cycle across Europe. The 71-day journey leads via Calais, Budapest and Lesbos to Athens. They cycle in the opposite direction along the Western Balkan migration route. Motivated through their background in International Studies, Timo and Florian seek to explore how the refugee crisis has changed since the formal closing of borders in early 2016. On their journey, Timo and Florian quickly realise that the stories of those still stuck in-between closed borders have everything but disappeared...

The footage from their bicycle journey provides unique insights into a time that has profoundly transformed EU migration policy, raised critical questions in the face of increasing populist voices, and pushed the issue of humanitarian responsibility into public European discourse.

The first leg of Timo's and Florian's journey is already available in the pilot episode of Refugee Roads. Overall, a documentary series with 8 episodes is planned and many hours of film material are still waiting to be edited. In terms of the post-production, we have received funding from the Film- und Medienstiftung NRW, which forms an essential cornerstone for our required budget. In addition, we are currently searching for further financing, as well as partners and sponsors who would like to support us.

// TRAILER  
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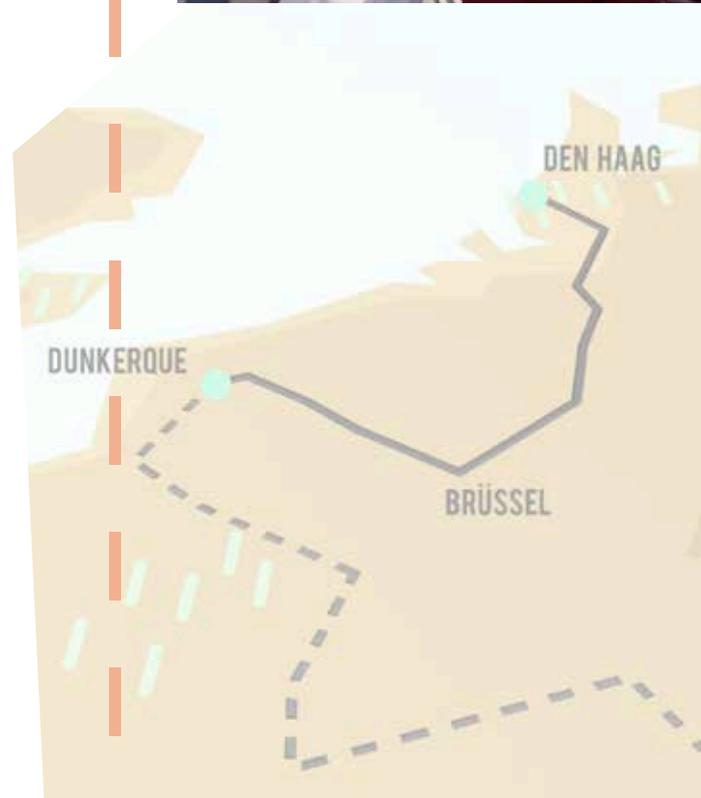


## PILOT SYNOPSIS

Did the reports about the challenges of the refugee crisis reflect the realities on the ground in the summer of 2016? How do the people fleeing war and persecution navigate their daily lives within 'Fortress Europe'? How does the current refugee situation impact the lives of locals? Can two students find answers to these questions by cycling to Greece?

Full of energy, Timo and Florian begin their journey in the first episode of Refugee Roads. After informally surveying the public on their opinion of the current refugee crisis in front of the European Parliament in Brussels, they conduct an interview with a migration expert from the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE).

Only a few days later they enter the La Linière refugee camp in France, where they observe the daily hardships of volunteers and refugees for several days. Not much time goes by before both feel out of place with their cameras in this 'otherworldly' place. The trauma of those who have fled is reflected in their collected images and stories. Soon, their initial enthusiasm gives way to a healthy respect for the challenges that are yet to come on the journey that lies ahead...



## EXCERPTS OF THE JOURNEY

### VIENNA (AUSTRIA)

During their stay in Vienna, Timo and Florian visit Habibi & Hawara, a restaurant run in cooperation with refugees and local cooks. One employee worked for seven years in Damascus as a manager for a beauty center, before starting to work as a waitress in the restaurant. She says: "Integration? That's a breeze for me. I go out and just talk to the people. And I love Vienna! I have a good job and many friends. The most beautiful place for me is the Prater. Lying in the grass and enjoying the peace ... I like that."

### BUDAPEST (HUNGARY)

In the centre of Budapest, Timo and Florian visit a refugee center set up by the St. Columba Church of Scotland. After their interview with the coordinator, they play football, table tennis, and basketball with the children. Timo embarks on a little wrestling match with a 51-year-old Iranian father and former wrestler. Timo, however, has to give in quickly – the two laugh, hug each other and drink lemonade.

### KELEBIJA (HUNGARY/SERBIA)

Timo and Florian cross the notorious border between Hungary and Serbia. In the transition zone, the two spot an area full of makeshift tents. They persuade the military to give them access and shortly afterwards they talk to a group of refugees who walked all the way to the border. Timo and Florian have great difficulty in finding words for the inhumane conditions they encounter. They launch a spontaneous crowdfunding campaign to return to the border zone a few days later with aid packages and hygiene kits.

### BELGRAD (SERBIA)

In the Serbian capital, they join Refugee Aid Serbia, an aid organisation, for a day. The coordinator Felix Thomson and the volunteers distribute daily relief supplies in an adjoining public park. Since 2015, there are several dozen refugees who sleep outdoors every night regardless of near freezing temperatures and wind. During the meal distribution, Timo and Florian meet Ahmad, who explains in almost fluent German how German authorities deported him after living in Berlin for 9 months.





#### **GEVGELIJA REFUGEE CAMP (MACEDONIA)**

At the southern tip of Macedonia, Timo and Florian meet Shergo Mousa and his family at the Gevgelija refugee camp. Shergo invites both students to look at his drawings, which help him to process his memories of fleeing to Europe. Shergo's daughter explains that she feels as if they live in a prison; the almost 200 residents are only allowed to leave the camp in case of a medical emergency.

#### **IDOMENI (GREECE)**

After the Macedonian Republic decided to barbed wire its southern border nearby Idomeni, images of people trying to jump the fence turned into a symbol of the refugee 'crisis' around the world. A German camera crew of the ARD broadcasting service, which followed Timo and Florian for two weeks, attempts to get footage of the fence; however, Greek authorities prevent them and quickly escort them back to the police station. Meanwhile, Timo and Florian meet a local farmer who bursts into anger when being asked about his experience with refugees.

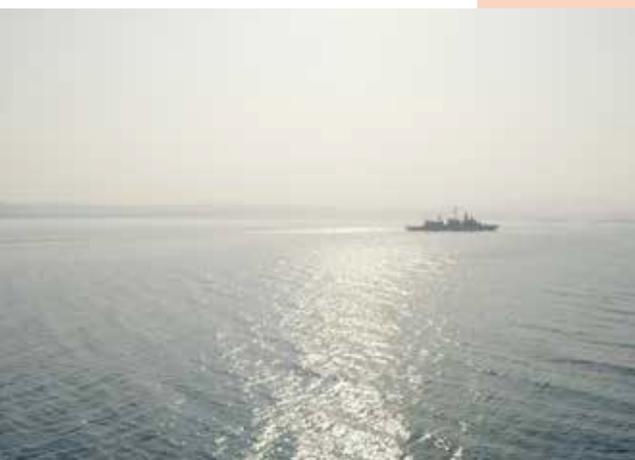


#### **THESSALONIKI (GREECE)**

During their stay in Thessaloniki, Timo and Florian are mainly concerned with the humanitarian situation in the Softex refugee camp. While a Syrian father tells them about depressing living conditions and malnutrition, an argument between two residents escalates right in front of them. Due to the precarious security situation and lack of medical care, a three-year-old girl died only three days earlier in the camp.

#### **LESBOS (GREECE)**

Timo and Florian visit Kostas Pinteris, a resident of the island of Lesbos, who has given up his job as a fisherman to rescue refugees fleeing from Turkey to Europe. They interview him on his fishing boat, which he temporarily uses as a search and rescue boat. Kostas is celebrated on the island as a local hero, but the traumatic stories indicate that he pays a high price for his recognition.



#### **GREEK-TURKISH BORDER (MEDITERRANEAN)**

At the personal invitation of the captain of the Norwegian Frontex mission, Timo and Florian spend a night shift aboard their search and rescue vessel. The Frontex team provides them with an insight into the patrols on the Greek-Turkish border. During the twelve hours, they learn first-hand how the discourse surrounding European border security is operationalised in practice.

When the idea for Refugee Roads was born in the late summer of 2015, our main objective was to gain an insight into the refugee crisis and its influence on everyday life in the Balkans. Instead of merely collecting facts and figures, we wanted to explore meaningful stories from individuals whom we would meet along our journey; not only refugees, but also members of local communities, political advisors and volunteers affected by the influx of refugees seeking protection.

Bicycles as a means of transportation are a unique way of conveying the experience of ‚travel‘ and ‚road‘. Instead of just discussing point A and point B, we also focus on the journey in-between and highlight what it means to travel long distances, and to overcome geographic and mental boundaries. In doing so, this documentary challenges fixed notions of national identity and explores bureaucratic practices in the face of transnational consciousness.

## FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

TIMO SCHMIDT & FLORIAN VOLZ

One year later we arrived at the destination of our journey in Greece. Refugee Roads has deeply impacted our lives. Before, we were students who only dealt with the refugee crisis at an academic level, but through numerous interviews and observations we found ourselves amidst the ‚crisis‘. Encounters with volunteers, supportive organisations, local residents, and above all refugees themselves gave us a new perspective that no university could have taught us.

Now, we would like to pass on and multiply the informative effect of Refugee Roads with the public. In doing so, we want to appeal to young viewers of our age in order to make the abstract ideas revolving around the ‚refugee crisis‘ accessible and tangible. It is our honest and raw approach, our impartiality and our learning-by-doing attitude that distinguishes this travel documentary from media reports and therefore makes it a highly valuable contribution to the public discussion.



## PRODUCERS' STATEMENT

TALI BARDE &  
SU-JIN SONG



When two students talk about a bicycle trip from the Netherlands to Greece, we would normally first think of a backpacker adventure across Europe. But when Timo and Florian told us about their extraordinary journey through the refugee camps along the Balkan route, it quickly became clear to us that their 80 hours of footage do not focus on their adventures, but instead on their personal encounters and interactions with the various people they met along the way.

The material provides room for those fleeing across Europe to speak for themselves: they tell of their experiences, why they left their homeland and what happened to them during the arduous journey and in the camps themselves. This creates an impressive and intimate picture of people whose desperation drives them to Europe – regardless of the dangers and often uncertain outcome. Europeans who are directly or indirectly affected by the influx of refugees also have their say. Not only volunteers and relief organisations, but also opponents of immigration – citizens who feel threatened by refugees in their own lives and therefore reject the ‘welcome culture’.

The development of the two protagonists serves as a red thread along the way. We can accompany Timo and Florian as they grow through their journey. We track how their initial, unprejudiced enthusiasm transitions to a solid and realistic perspective on the issues they face. Meanwhile, the constantly moving camera creates a sense of actually moving along with them. The unpolished view is a unique selling point of this project due to its point-of-view cinematography; its raw images and authentic stories.

Between profound, insightful and moving observations and encounters, we also find moments marked by humour and cheerfulness – necessary ways to compensate for the challenges that arise when undertaking such a journey. The way Refugee Roads provides access to gaining a better understanding of refugee issues is unique in this form.

One question may be asked at this point: Why is such a project still relevant today? Although the year 2016 may feel far away, the urgency of the topic remains unchanged. Not only are thousands of people still fleeing, many of them are also still stuck in precarious circumstances in overcrowded camps in the Balkans. The interest of most media outlets has declined although the repercussions of the ‘refugee crisis’ will continue to echo through Germany and Europe for a long time to come.

We also aim to align Refugee Roads with current affairs by addressing key political changes that took place since Timo and Florian first set out on their bikes – whether it be Brexit, governmental changes in Italy, anti-immigration rhetoric in Hungary, or political rivalry in Germany’s Bundestag. Refugee Roads takes us back to the birthplace of these pressing political debates that continue to challenge European identity and solidarity today.



## STATUS QUO & STRATEGY

Timo Schmidt and Florian Volz already wrote a blog during their trip, continuously informed their community via Facebook and launched fundraising campaigns. With the help of over 1000 followers and with the support of 140 crowdfunders, we were able to produce the first episode.

The reactions to the material were consistently highly positive. Several local media outlets, as well as the European magazine of the ARD and the Deutsche Welle have recognised and disseminated our authentic and informative message.

In autumn 2017, the Cologne film team won the „Media & Migration NRW Prize“ of the Film Festival Cologne for the pilot episode. The award and several official selections at international film festivals reflect an existing demand and interest for the production.

More than 70 hours of additional footage is now waiting to be edited. Altogether, we are planning an eight-part documentary series with a maximum running time of 20 minutes per episode. For the post-production we are currently looking for further partners and sponsors who would like to support us, so we can close the last financing gaps of the required budget.

In order to ensure our series is ‚up-to-date‘ we are allocating part of the financing to explore innovative and creative ways to address current debates on refugees and migrants in Europe. The ultimate goal behind these efforts is to make Refugee Roads a timelier and thus more compelling project.

Aiming to address the largest possible audience, an online distribution is the primary objective. This can be done either directly via platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo, but also via the online library of a cooperating TV channel.

Timo’s and Florian’s contacts with NGOs, aid organisations and academic circles will help spread and promote the series through various channels. Taking into account the younger target audience and the complex subject matter which includes various background information, we aim to develop a transmedia concept. The blog and the online community of the two filmmakers already form a good basis for this endeavour. In addition to the filmed footage, audio interviews as well as an audio diary exist in which Timo and Florian have frequently captured their personal impressions.

In short: the material is readily available in all its rich shapes and colours. It is our heartfelt wish to make the experiences and stories of Timo and Florian accessible to as many people as possible.

Not only do we want to address humanitarian and socio-cultural issues, but we also hope that Refugee Roads will contribute to the development of a more positive understanding of those who have fled to Europe; leading away from the fear of the unknown and towards a more humane and informed view of those affected.



## THE FILMMAKERS

Timo Schmidt currently works as a research assistant for the UNDP in East Jerusalem. He recently finished his Master of Science (MSc) in Migration Studies at the University of Oxford, where he specialised in economics and governance of migration. For his master's thesis, he explored the topic of integration politics in Germany. He completed his BA in International Studies at Leiden University and spent a semester in Morocco. During the multidisciplinary program, he learned Arabic and specialised in the culture, politics, history and economics of the Middle East. Prior to Refugee Roads, Timo was involved in several migration-related projects in both the Middle East and Europe.



Florian Volz completed a BA in International Studies at Leiden University. He focused on diplomacy, migration development and development work in East Africa and learned the African language Kiswahili. Florian has previously worked on various social projects and charity events. In the second half of 2017, he studied Negotiation & Conflict Management at Rider University in the USA. In the summer of 2018, he interned in the economic sector of the German Embassy in Kenya.

## PRODUCTION



Tali Barde works as a freelance director, writer and producer in Cologne. As an autodidact, he produced his feature film debut 'For No Eyes Only' with his production company Avalon Film. After an international festival tour in late 2014, the award-winning youth thriller was released in German cinemas. In addition to working on new film projects, Tali directs commercials and works as a lecturer in acting at the Studiobühne Köln. In 2016 he was selected for the Berlinale Talent Campus. Tali is currently developing several fictional series in writers' rooms and has just completed the prestigious Serial Eyes program of the dffb in Berlin.

Su-Jin Song lives in Düsseldorf. Already at a young age, she began to work in film and television for international co-productions between Germany, USA, South Korea and worked for international film festivals. After completing her film studies in 2014 at the ifs international filmschule cologne majoring in creative producing, she worked as a producer for a Cologne based film production company. In 2015 she began her master's degree in Game Development & Research at the Cologne Game Lab. Mainly located in Europe and South Korea, Su-Jin works as a writer, director and creative producer for international film and transmedia projects. In addition, she takes on consultancy roles in interactive media and games.



## THE CREW

**DIRECTOR POST-PRODUCTION:** TALI BARDE  
**EDITING:** LEO HOFFMANN  
**SOUND DESIGN:** MARCO HEIBACH  
**MIXING:** JASCHA VIEHL  
**MUSIC:** BART LYBEERT, PETER GERNAEDTS  
**COLOR CORRECTION:** ZOLTAN M. GELLER  
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