

## Episode 5: Engaging with Humans behind the Headlines

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[ANNOUNCER, MUSIC UNDER]

*“This program is a production of Rutgers Global.”*

[MUSIC UP FULL]

[OPEN MONTAGE OF SOTS FROM TV SHOW, MUSIC UNDER]

*“Rutgers’ vision//globalized world//international learning//unique opportunities//global health//study abroad//expand my horizons.”*

[MUSIC UP FULL]

[HOST JAYNE CHACKO, MUSIC UNDER]

*“This is... Rutgers Around the World— a finger on the pulse of all things global at Rutgers.”*

[MUSIC STINGS]

**HOST:** Hi I’m Jayne Chacko, Rutgers junior and host of this podcast, Rutgers Around the World.

Since 2013, more than two million people – many fleeing violence and persecution in their countries – have attempted to cross the Eastern Mediterranean Sea to the European Union, with Greece as the bridge. In the face of this population influx, Greece and the broader region are struggling to cope with what has been described as worst humanitarian crisis of the century.

Our next guest has close ties to Greece and relief efforts in the region. Dr. Elektra Kostopoulou is a lecturer in Modern Greek Studies at Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences. She helped create the new summer study abroad program, “Migrants and Refugees in the East Mediterranean.” In this program, Rutgers students travel to Leros, Greece, for three weeks and ACTIVELY ENGAGE with the realities of the human story behind the headlines. Dr. Kostopoulou, thank you so much for joining us!

**ELEKTRA KOSTOPOULOU:** Thank you so much for having me!

**HOST:** How has your personal background as a Greek citizen and your experience as an Ottoman historian helped shape this program?

**ELEKTRA KOSTOPOULOU:** So my connection to the program is twofold. As a historian I focus on population movements, humanitarian disaster, and regional and international approaches to these issues in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As a Greek citizen, I have been one of the many affected directly by this so called refugee crisis that takes place as we speak in the Eastern Mediterranean. My family lives on one of the tiny little islands that currently form the gate to the European Union. My mother has been very actively involved in the broader mobilizations that take place in Greece in support of migrants and refugees.

**HOST:** Many would say that experiencing a situation like this one close on the heels of a financial crisis can only make matters worse in Greece. But you say that’s not the case, why?

**ELEKTRA KOSTOPOULOU:** Well, because it forms an opportunity for action. And, amid widespread frustration and a disastrous feeling of being powerless amid this current financial crisis, helping others but also helping yourself has become an opportunity for so many Greek citizens to reclaim their present and future and to feel once again being a citizen on the ground. So their approach to the humanitarian, the disaster, the pain of others becomes also a force of empowerment for themselves.

**HOST:** Can you describe the program and how it combines academic coursework with cultural immersion?

**ELEKTRA KOSTOPOULOU:** That was one of the most challenging aspects of the program given that the format was quite experimental. So what we have tried to do is provide our students with the necessary material to prepare them for traveling to the region and for gaining a better understanding for local dynamics both past and present through selected sources, secondary literature, and so on and so forth. So every day we would have daily discussions on the assigned readings. But the main strength of the program in my view was that the students had to serve on a daily basis at the local shelter, interacting with actual human beings beyond the literature, beyond numbers, beyond titles, beyond the headlines.

**HOST:** And that face-to-face interaction is something you can't learn from literature really.

**ELEKTRA KOSTOPOULOU:** Absolutely not. So this is precisely why we are taking them all the way to the frontline. The students were exposed to a chaotic situation. This is how real life looks like in Greece on any of these islands these days. So it wasn't necessarily a pretty story, it wasn't a romanticized story. But I do believe that was the main strength of the program. I think some of the students were a little shocked initially, that became an invitation for them not to just follow guidelines, but to take initiative.

**HOST:** So students are expected to complete a final paper at the end of the program. It is a project that will continue their engagement with the pressing issue. Can you give us an example of the projects you'd like to see?

**ELEKTRA KOSTOPOULOU:** The sky is the limit (*laughs*). I want to see the students moving beyond the limitations of international and local politics, bypassing bureaucracies, and empowering a community of civilians, of citizens.

**HOST:** Yah, there is only so much you can do on campus and many students feel like limited or helpless that they can't go beyond Rutgers. But you can.

**ELEKTRA KOSTOPOULOU:** That was precisely the idea. That if you take them there, if they interact with people directly, if they see what the problems, the actual problems, constraints, challenges, but also potentials are on the ground, they may come up with solutions that we cannot even imagine. So a number of tangible ideas that we are currently exploring is to focus on the arts, right. Organizing for instance a mini festival, here on campus with the participation of students and refugees who currently live in New Jersey. Another student came up with a wonderful idea about letter writing, to engage the refugees themselves, to have them share their own experience through letter writing, and to bring their voices to New Brunswick, to New Jersey, in written format and vice versa.

**HOST:** What did you like best about the program and what direction do you see it going in, in the future?

**ELEKTRA KOSTOPOULOU:** I think it is extremely important that we come up with tangible solutions that are going to improve life on the ground for the displaced. So we are working on a number of projects,

future collaborations creating educational opportunities that will help more students to access higher education, but also to help families and communities. To me it's an opportunity to do something that has a direct impact on human lives when most needed and that's a very, very liberating feeling, a sense of empowerment for us as well considering that we so often feel hopeless. So it's an opportunity for me to use my expertise as much as I can to do something about the present.

**HOST:** Dr. Kostopoulou, thank you for joining us in the Rutgers Global studio today.

**ELEKTRA KOSTOPOULOU:** Thank you so much.

**HOST:** That was Dr. Elektra Kostopoulou, lecturer in Modern Greek Studies and faculty director of the "Migrants and Refugees in the East Mediterranean" summer study abroad program. To find out more about the program or any of our other study abroad offerings go to [global.rutgers.edu](http://global.rutgers.edu).

That's all for this episode of Rutgers Around the World. Join us next time as we discuss all things global with members of the Rutgers community. Thank you for listening!

*[MUSIC STINGS]*