

**The refugee paradox during wartime in Europe:
How Ukrainian and Afghan refugees are (not) alike**

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The refugee paradox during wartime in Europe: How Ukrainian and Afghan refugees are (not) alike

Abstract: Since Russia invaded Ukraine in March 2022, Ukrainians have been displaced from their country in record pace and in massive numbers. Although some have been displaced within Ukraine, most have fled to Poland, Moldova, and other European countries. The European and American public's reaction to these large refugee numbers has been overwhelmingly positive, with outpourings of humanitarianism and solidarity. This reaction stands in stark contrast with the apprehensive and rather negative reactions from Europeans toward Afghan refugees following the Taliban's violent takeover in May 2021. In this *IMR* Dispatch from the Field, I reflect on the similarities and differences in reactions to Ukrainian refugees in the current crisis and Afghan refugees following the Taliban takeover in May 2021. Despite important similarities between these two refugee groups, there are, I argue, various reasons why the European and American public may feel closer to Ukrainian than Afghan refugees or why they perceive the former to be more deserving of aid. I highlight the role of symbolic threat, a conscience collective, and ethnicity. Furthermore, the looming fear of the aggressor in this conflict (Russia) may play a larger role in the European and American public's reactions than in other refugee crises.

Keywords: Ukraine; war; deservingness; refugees; Afghanistan; refugee crisis; Europe; United States

Introduction

As Russia's invasion of Ukraine has escalated rapidly since early March 2022, with non-stop news media coverage on European and American traditional and social media informing their respective audiences of each new development, widespread reactions of disgust and disapproval continue to echo around the world (Lichterman, 2022). As Russia intensifies its military efforts and the United States and Europe (attempt to) provide military and humanitarian support to Ukraine, the people of Ukraine are forced to take up arms, flee their homes, or hide in bomb shelters. Currently (as of early May 2022), the UNHCR estimates that nearly 15 million Ukrainians are displaced (IOM, 2022; UNHCR, 2022). A little over 8 million of them have remained in Ukraine (IOM, 2022), an estimated 7 million have fled the country, with neighboring Poland, Hungary, Moldova, and Slovakia as main reception countries (UNHCR, 2022).

Both the size and speed of this migration have caught Europe by surprise (Adler, 2022). Most of the main reception countries do not have the necessary facilities and infrastructure to accommodate the large numbers of refugees that are currently crossing their borders (Howard, 2022). Many other European countries have reacted to these countries' accommodation shortages: efforts to (temporarily) house large numbers of Ukrainian refugees are underway in many European countries (European Commission, 2022a; Walker, 2022a). In addition, in early March 2022, the European Union (EU) activated provisions of the 2001 Temporary Protection Directive, which provides unlimited admission of specific types of refugees (in this case: Ukrainians) during times of crisis and immediate and automatic acceptance of refugee status without requiring an asylum (Walker, 2022b). Thus, Ukrainian refugees currently avoid a lengthy administrative process of recognition and, rather, have rapid access to essential services and a work permit for an initial period of three years (Martin, 2022; Walker, 2022b).

Despite the much-needed solidarity that unfolded in Europe and the US in recent weeks, it is also striking that no voices of disapproval have emerged in the main reception countries (and Europe and the US more generally) regarding the reception of these refugees (European Commission, 2022b). And why should there be? Ukrainians are being violently displaced from their homes and from the country in which they were born and raised. The harrowing images speak for themselves. However, a similar scenario unfolded not too long ago. In May 2021, as US

President Joe Biden ordered the last of the remaining US troops to evacuate Afghanistan, the Taliban tried to re-take control over the country (Miller, 2021). Given that many Afghans had collaborated with Western countries over the past decades, they feared violent repercussions if the Taliban succeeded in taking back control of Afghanistan (Faiez et al., 2021). As a result, their reactions to this perceived threat to their life were similar to those of Ukrainians: Afghans tried to evacuate the country *en masse* in a few weeks, with many dying as they tried to leave (Reuters, 2021). Although the United States and its (European) allies tried to evacuate as many Afghans as possible in the short time that was available, reactions of Americans and Europeans to these new arrivals were far more negative (Barros, 2022; Mammone, 2021). Political actors throughout Europe (e.g., Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orban) also warned that hosting these Afghans may lead to many additional refugees entering Europe in the following months (Shankar, 2021). Although the situations in Ukraine and Afghanistan are (somewhat) comparable, the reactions of the American and European public to the reception of these two different groups of refugees are clearly different. What, then, is the difference between Afghan and the Ukrainian refugees?

Symbolic threat and the Ukrainian-Afghan distinction in the field

In reality, there are few differences: both groups would have preferred to stay in their country, but the threat that a foreign or domestic enemy posed to their lives decided otherwise. They arrive in reception countries with little to no financial or material means. However, the perceived symbolic threat toward the Ukrainian refugee is likely to be limited for both the European and American public. Symbolic threat refers to the fear that migrants challenge the in-group's religion, values, belief systems, ideology, or worldview (Stephan et al., 2009). This perceived threat can be either real or perceived harm inflicted by migrants with differing values, norms, and beliefs, and migration scholars have shown that it is a major source of prejudice (Ata et al., 2009; Constantin & Cuadrado, 2021; De Coninck & Matthijs, 2020; Riek et al., 2006). Previous studies that focus on anti-immigrant sentiment among the European public have shown that perceived outgroup threat is not the same for all types of migrants: recent survey experiments demonstrate that Europeans feel less threatened by migrants from European countries than by those from non-European countries (Czaika & Di Lillo, 2018; De Coninck, 2020). Sharing a similar

value system – which, in this case, is reinforced by the fact that Ukraine has been taking steps to join the EU and NATO in recent years – likely contributes to Europeans and Americans’ sympathetic sentiments towards Ukrainian refugees (Davidov et al., 2020). Regarding Afghans, previous studies have shown that American and Europeans generally believe that these migrants hold more conservative values regarding gender equality, sexual orientations, power balances, and other societal areas than much of the Western population (Davidov et al., 2020; Kalkan et al., 2009) – beliefs that have been substantiated by a number of studies (Eskelinen & Verkuyten, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2014). This divergence in values between Afghans and European and Americans likely triggers these feelings of perceived symbolic threat, which reduces support for the reception of these refugees (Stephan et al., 2009).

However, symbolic threat consists of more than (not) sharing value systems and worldviews (Stephan et al, 2009). Ukraine is strongly represented in mass events on a global scale that contribute to a *conscience collective* among audiences and participants of these events, such as mass sporting events or music festivals (Bravo et al., 2020; Press-Barnathan & Lutz, 2020). The representation of a country in such events is not trivial, nor are its effects. Emile Durkheim (1912) acknowledged that ‘games’ (i.e., sports) appear to have been born out of religion. He saw similarities between specific mass events and religion and their potential to build this conscience collective. Important in this regard is the role of collective rituals - “moments of collective effervescence, where the fact of congregating to carry out actions generates a special energy in the participants” (Bravo et al., 2020, p. 2). Participating in these rituals, even through spectating, contributes to social capital-building by reinforcing social cohesion, cooperation, trust, and the perception of social support in a community (Putnam, 2000). Applied to the current situation, we observe that Ukrainians compete in European football competitions, are active on digital gaming platforms, participate in the Eurovision Song Contest... Although seemingly trivial on their own, a Ukrainian presence in these mass events enables Europeans and Americans to sometimes put a ‘real’ face to this crisis (Real & Mechikoff, 1992). An Afghan presence in mass events consumed by Western audiences is largely non-existent (Aydin & Martinova, 2021), which represents another stumbling block that may prevent Europeans and Americans from identifying with them in positive ways.

Another characteristic that has already received considerable attention in the current crisis is ethnicity (Bejan & Bogovic, 2022). Here, we follow Chandra's (2012) definition of ethnicity: what distinguishes ethnic categories is that 'descent-based attributes' (e.g., physical features like skin color) are necessary for membership. This is not to say that ethnic categories are unchangeable nor that descent is the only criterion for membership (Onuch & Hale, 2018). Rather, in this perspective, membership of an ethnic group is obtained through a mechanism that typically heavily depends on descent, but can also be influenced by language, religion or other sets of cultural attributes (Chandra, 2012; Onuch & Hale, 2018). In recent years, not only has xenophobia been on the rise in the US and Europe, but so has Islamophobia (Wieviorka, 2018). In Europe and the US, anti-Muslim sentiments have become stronger since 9/11 and following a number of terror attacks in the early to mid-2010s in Paris, Brussels, Madrid, and London (Frey, 2021; Helbling & Meierrieks, 2022). Although studies sometimes struggle to disentangle ethnicity from religiosity, particularly when it comes to anti-Muslim perceptions, De Coninck (2020) has shown that the European public prefers migrants with the same ethnicity over migrants from another ethnicity. Ukraine's ethnic and religious composition more closely resembles those of other European countries (Onuch & Hale, 2018), while a large number of Afghan refugees are Muslims with a different ethnic background (Pew Research Center, 2017). Although it is difficult to gauge to what extent that ethnicity is the only or most important characteristic that shapes differential responses to Ukrainian and Afghan refugees, it undoubtedly contributes to an extent.

Aggressor-based threat: A new characteristic?

While much of the research on outgroup attitudes studies the public's perceived threat of migrants (e.g., Stephan et al., 2009), the open and humanitarian reactions, especially from Europeans, to Ukrainians in the current crisis may also be stimulated by a different type of threat: a fear of the aggressor in this conflict. Although Europe has certainly known armed conflicts since World War 2, the geographic proximity of the conflict and the fact that the aggressor wields the largest arsenal of nuclear arms in the world may also affect reactions to Ukrainian refugees. Regardless of how unlikely the actual odds are, especially Europeans may fear that Russia will not stop at the borders of Ukraine and continue on a 'conquest through Europe' (Tapalaga, 2022).

Welcoming reactions by Europeans to Ukrainian refugees may reflect the hope that other Europeans would be treated with the same respect and openness that they show these refugees if they have to flee. Given the greater distance between the US and the conflict in Ukraine, this factor may be less relevant for Americans. For Afghan refugees, the European public may not have felt the same degree of threat. Although some analysts argued that the Taliban's resurgence may lead to a growing terror threat in Europe and the United States (Schindler, 2021), this perceived threat may remain more latent until a terror attack takes occurs.

Conclusion

While it is currently unclear how long the Russian invasion will continue – let us all hope for a swift and peaceful resolution, it remains of vital importance to provide a welcoming environment for these (and all other types of) refugees, given the severe mental and emotional distress that they have been forced to endure in recent weeks. In this Dispatch from the Field, I have provided a reflection on why the European and American public's reactions to Ukrainian refugees may be more positive than toward Afghan refugees less than a year ago. While a number of characteristics have been highlighted – the European and American public's cultural proximity to Ukraine, the shared conscience collective, a similar ethnic and religious background, there are undoubtedly other elements that have not been mentioned (e.g., the large-scale social media coverage of the Ukraine war on Twitter (Chen & Ferrara, 2022)). Nonetheless, it remains important to be aware of the manner in which the European and American public perceives different 'types' of migrants in different ways. Most importantly, we need to avoid falling into the trap to suggest that someone who belongs in one category or the other is somehow more 'deserving' than another. This conflict highlights the fact that Europeans and Americans do not consider all migrants to be equally deserving of aid: distinctions are made between migrants based on a number of migrant characteristics (e.g., ethnicity) to determine who should (temporarily) be helped by national governments in times of crisis.

I want to end this Dispatch by emphasizing another phenomenon that may be relevant for future studies on this topic. As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, the framing of news media and political actors of the virus's Chinese origins led to an increase in prejudice

and hate crimes against Asian Americans, particularly in the United States (Wu et al., 2021). Early reports indicate that Russian citizens and enterprises are now also facing considerable prejudice in Europe and the United States (Adam et al., 2022). In future studies that investigate differences in public responses to Ukrainian and other types of migrants, it may be useful to also mirror these findings with prejudice towards Russian migrants to provide more insight into the conceptual differences that are made by the public in the development of anti-immigrant sentiment.

With this Field Dispatch, I briefly reflected on the underlying dynamics behind the different responses of the European and American public towards Ukrainian refugees and Afghan refugees. As the Ukraine war continues, public responses towards Ukrainian refugees will undoubtedly become a prominent area of investigation for migration scholars in the near future. With these reflections, I have highlighted some key areas of investigation: feelings of symbolic threat as key drivers of divergences in attitudes between Ukrainian and Afghan (or perhaps more broadly, Muslim) refugees, the positive effect of familiarity with Ukraine thanks to its participation in global events, and the perceived threat of Russia as a driver of welcoming reactions. While differences in attitudes between different 'types' of migrants is an area of migration studies that is attracting a growing scholarly interest (De Coninck & Matthijs, 2020), is also remains important to encourage policy makers and the public to move beyond categories like 'migrants' and 'refugees' and highlight differences in responses to migrants. As I have tried to briefly show, there are far more key similarities between Ukrainian and Afghan refugees than differences. Studying the drivers of differences in attitudes may challenge the ways in which the (Western) public holds simplistic assumptions about individuals and groups with complex migration trajectories.

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