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How Can Europe Handle the Ukrainian Refugee Challenge?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has driven many people from their homes. Most of them are now seeking refuge in Europe. Fortunately, EU member states have learned from previous refugee crises: this time, they are willingly accepting people. For the first time, the EU has granted temporary protected status to all newly arriving Ukrainians. The European countries and the EU Commission are now working together to find efficient solutions and effective strategies to cope with the enormous challenges involved: UNHCR estimates that there will be nearly 8 million war refugees by June 2022. They need to be housed, they need healthcare, they need to be integrated into the education system and into the labor market. Currently, refugees are mainly concentrated in Eastern European countries. This entails additional costs for the respective governments. It is therefore of particular importance to find solutions for a fair distribution of the refugees and to share the financial burden among the EU member states. Ultimately, this orchestrated coordination will enable a better EU migration policy. In this issue of the CESifo Forum, our authors discuss how Europe can better and more efficiently address and solve all these challenges. The authors also provide helpful policy recommendations for national governments and for the EU.

Anders Åslund

A New Perspective on the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis

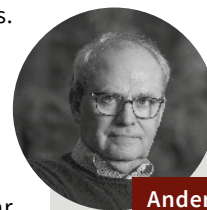
In 2015, Europe was hit by one big refugee crisis and in 2022 by another one. The first consisted of Syrian refugees and the second of Ukrainian refugees. Both refugee crises were very sudden and their size was similar, about six million people in each case, but the public reaction was very different. How can we explain that? The simplistic explanation is that Europeans felt sympathy with white Christian Ukrainians, but uncomfortable with Syrian Arabs, but this paper argues that the issue was much more complex.

Why were these two overtly similar refugee issues received so differently? There are many alternative answers. What mattered? Understanding of the cause of the refugee crisis? The size of the refugee flow? Its suddenness? Experiences of immigration? EU policy? Composition of the refugees? Costs? Duration? This paper considers all these factors and has attempted to assess what matters the most. It arrives at two major answers, which are not the usual explanations for the difference in response to the crises. First, the public understanding of the cause of the conflict was vital. Second, EU policy was of major importance to the public reaction.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CREDIBLE NARRATIVE

Traditionally, people humanely sympathize with refugees. They are suffering from something evil, and we who do not suffer want to help them. The Syrian civil war was incomprehensible even to well-informed Europeans. Syria is known as a most colorful agglomeration of ethnic groups and religions, and such a state is difficult for outsiders to understand. On the one side stood the inhumane dictator Bashar Al-Assad. On the other side stood ISIS, the fanatical Islamic State, while all kinds of other ethnic and religious groups fell in between.

Dozens of foreign parties aggravated Syria's domestic complexity. Russia, Turkey, and a score of Western countries had small numbers of special forces



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on Syria, overtly to fight ISIS, but also to check one another. The civil war slowly gained momentum from 2011 to the great exodus of 2015. Nobody succeeded in explaining to the public what the horrific civil war in Syria really was about. Several of the few heroic journalists who went there were killed. Therefore, no narrative evolved that evoked sympathy for the suffering Syrian refugees. Were they Muslims? Did they sympathize with ISIS? Were they Christians? If so, why did they sympathize with Assad? Without a credible narrative that arouses sympathy, no refugees are likely to attract much popular support among outsiders at any time.

The Ukrainian case could not be more different. From the outset, it was seen as a war between good and evil, between black and white. The situation was amazingly well known, because Russia had started its arms buildup in April 2021 and maintained it until its attack on February 24, 2022. To Europeans, it was obvious that Ukraine was a free, fairly democratic society, while Russia was an authoritarian, repressive society. Russia offered no explanation of its troop concentrations around Ukraine and until the moment of its assault it insisted that it would not attack Ukraine.

The United States and the United Kingdom did something innovative. From October 2021, their governments reported daily about the Russian arms buildup around Ukraine and assessed the risk that Russia would attack Ukraine based on fresh and highly-reliable intelligence. This was a novel way of using intelligence for public diplomacy. As a consequence, a few hundred international journalists flooded Ukraine, reporting from every corner of the country for three months before the war. Meanwhile, Russia imposed severe press restrictions, compelling most foreign correspondents to leave Russia. Thus, the media picture changed. Western journalists no longer reported from Moscow with an unintended but all too obvious Russian bias towards Ukraine. Instead, prominent international journalists without prejudices from the region conveyed what they saw, changing the international public perception to the benefit of Ukraine. Europeans saw a free country that was being threatened by an authoritarian aggressor for no acceptable reason.

The pro-Ukrainian narrative was reinforced by the start of the war. It was all too obvious that Russia launched a war of aggression on Ukraine without any decent excuse. The Kremlin's official claim was to defend the peoples of the dictatorial "Donetsk People's Republic" and the "Luhansk People's Republic," two Russian-constructed statelets, against aggression from Ukraine, which did not exist. The authoritarian Kremlin claimed to desire the "de-nazification" of Ukraine, which was a democracy with a Jewish president. The Kremlin mendacity was as blatant as it was pervasive and convinced nobody outside of Russia. Virtually the whole of Europe saw the Russian-Ukrainian war in black and white. Russia was the aggressor and Ukraine was the victim that needed support.

THE SHOCK OF RUSSIA'S ATTACK

The Syrian civil war started in 2011 and evolved during several years without any clear direction. The civil war turned much worse in 2015, especially with the Russian bombing of Aleppo, but this was not well understood in Europe. After all, ISIS was a serious problem in Syria, and Russia was supposed to combat it. Media reported Russia's extensive bombing of hospitals, but that was only part of the reporting and did not arouse a strong public reaction.

The European perception of the war in Ukraine was very different. In the morning of 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale assault on Ukraine, although the Russian leaders had claimed for months that they had no intention of attacking Ukraine. By and large, Europeans had not expected this war, at least not on this scale. Europe was shocked and came together as never before, imposing severe sanctions on Russia, but also welcoming Ukrainian refugees. The European reaction was stark, and it was both at a national and popular level. Rarely has Europe been as united as it was on February 24. The European understanding of Russia's invasion of Ukraine was crystal clear from February 24. Russia was the culprit, and Ukraine was the victim. Good Europeans felt a duty to help Ukraine and Ukrainians.

DEMOGRAPHIC DEVELOPMENT

An issue that has received surprisingly little attention is the prior migration inflows. Two West European countries had received large inflows from the Middle East, namely Germany (mainly Turks and Kurds) and Sweden (many Christian Syrians, Iraqis, and Kurds). These were the two countries that welcomed Syrian refugees in 2014. In Southern and Eastern Europe, by contrast, surprisingly few people from the Middle East had arrived previously. The upshot is that locals are more prone to accept newcomers of nations that they know.

The Ukrainian migration to Europe was very different. It had been large for years. After Ukraine became independent in 1991, many Ukrainians went to various European countries to work or to study. Numerous Ukrainians, probably most, went home to Ukraine intermittently and then out to earn more money again. Ukraine's population statistics are highly unreliable as these migrant workers were usually registered as living in Ukraine, but the total number of Ukrainians in other European countries was probably 5–6 million before the war. Predominantly, they came from Western Ukraine. Most saved money while working abroad and built a house or set up a small enterprise after returning to Ukraine.

This vast Ukrainian migration attracted minimal public attention because it was appreciated. Central Europe saw many citizens move to Western Europe to earn more money. About two million Poles emigrated

to the EU and perhaps has many as one million Hungarians. As a consequence, all these countries suffered from a shortage of labor, but their populations were kept stable largely by the inflow of Ukrainians. The Ukrainian immigrants typically worked in agriculture, construction, and household, low-paid and temporary jobs. They were rarely competing with locals. Many Ukrainian migrants went back and forth. Many worked for a few months in Central Europe and then returned to Ukraine.

Most Ukrainians stayed in the four Visegrad countries, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary, which together probably absorbed about three million Ukrainian migrants before the war. Poland alone received at least one and a half million Ukrainian migrants, Czechia 600,000, Slovakia a couple of hundreds of thousands, and Hungary a bit more. The Ukrainians who went to Poland predominantly came from Western Ukraine. Many had Polish names and spoke perfect Polish. Ukrainian and Polish are close linguistically, and numerous West Ukrainian spoke Polish of old.

Ukrainians could also easily learn Czech or Slovak, West Slavic languages close to Ukrainian. Hungarian is a very different language, but Ukraine harbors a significant ethnic Hungarian population. Many of them emigrated to Hungary, which offers all people with ethnic Hungarian credentials Hungarian citizenship, which means EU citizenship – highly attractive to Ukrainians. Thus, these four countries, which had been most reluctant to receive Syrian refugees, had a long-standing habit of welcoming large numbers of Ukrainians.

The rest of the Ukrainian migrants were spread over many European countries. A few countries, such as Italy and Portugal, happily provided them with work permits, notably in construction and households. Poland and Germany competed for Ukrainian workers. On 1 March 2020, Germany introduced new labor regulations for non-EU citizens, the Germany Skilled Immigration Act, which made it much easier for Ukrainians to be legally employed in the country. Germany wanted to offer half a million Ukrainians work permits to ease the shortage of workers. This sparked concern in Poland, which feared losing its excellent Ukrainian workers (Khrebet 2020).

In attempt to explain the differences in the responses to the refugee crises, too much public attention is being devoted to old history, claiming that South and East Europeans do not like Muslims because of their experiences with the Ottoman Empire, while recent experiences with different ethnic groups appear more important. Germany and Sweden that had accepted recent immigration from the Middle East were happy to accept more, while those that had no such recent experience reacted negatively. Conversely, the Central European countries that had extensive experience with Ukrainian migrants were happy to welcome more Ukrainians. This was also true

of Europe more broadly. It had extensive experience with Ukrainian migrants, and they had faced few or no problems. Ukrainians were known and welcome, even desired, before Russia attacked Ukraine.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EU POLICY

The EU had a clear refugee policy both in the case of Syria and Ukraine, but these policies could not have been more different. The EU policy on Syrian refugees was a legacy policy on political refugees not designed for Syria, while the EU adopted a specific policy on Ukrainian refugees.

Streams of refugees from Syria began in 2011. They flew primarily to Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. In 2014, the flow continued from Turkey to Greece. Suddenly, in 2015 Greece received more than 800,000 Syrian refugees, and the EU woke up to a serious Syrian refugee crisis.

The EU had a legacy policy for political asylum seekers, the so-called Dublin Regulation of 2003, which was replaced by a law in 2013. It stated that political refugees were supposed to apply for asylum in the first EU country they entered (European Parliamentary Research Service 2020). In practice, that meant that refugees usually stayed in the first country, but Greece, a relatively poor country with a population of 10 million, was overwhelmed by refugees. In 2015, a flow of Middle Eastern refugees, mainly Syrians, but also some Afghans and others, started literally marching up along the highways through Europe. They were blocked at some borders, such as Hungary, while Germany welcomed more than one million and Sweden 160,000, though most other EU countries closed their borders. The total number of refugees was not large but the process was fairly anarchic and politically contentious.

The EU decided to try to resolve the Syrian refugee problem by persuading Turkey to stop them from crossing the border to Greece and keeping them in Turkey. This meant that the EU in fact declared that it did not want Syrian refugees if it could avoid them. In March 2016, the EU agreed with Turkey to limit the number of asylum seekers entering Greece. Irregular migrants attempting to enter Greece would be returned to Turkey. In exchange, the EU agreed to resettle Syrian refugees from Turkey on a one-to-one basis, reduce visa restrictions for Turkish citizens, pay 6 billion euros in aid to Turkey for Syrian migrant communities, update the customs union, and re-energize stalled talks regarding Turkey's accession to the EU (Terry 2021).

Europe never embraced the Syrian refugees. Few tried to understand them or their cause. Almost the whole of the EU, with the exception of Germany and Sweden, reckoned that the inflow of Syrian refugees was undesirable, and that the EU thought it worthwhile to stop this inflow and contain it in Turkey even at a high monetary cost.

The EU developed a futile policy of trying to allocate quotas of Syrian refugees to various countries. Everything went wrong with this policy. The Syrians did not want to be ordered to certain countries but preferred to choose themselves, and the East Europeans did not want to accept quotas of refugees. It led to a major tension between the European Commission and the new East European members, which was highly unnecessary because the refugees did not want to stay in those relatively poor countries in any case. In practice, nothing really came out of it apart from a lot of intra-EU tensions and the conclusion that this divisive policy should not be continued or repeated.

EU policy on Ukraine could not have been more different. It consisted of three major steps. The first and formally most important step was the conclusion of an extensive “EU-Ukraine Association Agreement” of more than 2,000 pages. It was completed and signed in March 2014, just after the Euromaidan, but it came officially into force on September 1, 2017.¹

For ordinary Ukrainian citizens, the second step of visa freedom agreement that came into force in June 2017 was far more important. It allowed Ukrainian nationals who held biometric passports to travel visa-free to Schengen Area countries for up to 90 days within a 180-day period (Barry, Appleman & Leiden 2017). This opened the floodgates of temporary Ukrainian migration to Europe for holidays, work, and study. Before the war, probably 40,000 Ukrainian students studied at Polish universities for free and without bureaucratic hazards.

These two decisions inadvertently prepared the ground for the unexpected Ukrainian inflow of refugees from February 24. The EU offered quite extraordinary “temporary protection” for people fleeing Ukraine: “At a special meeting of the European Council, on 24 February 2022, the EU’s Heads of State or Government expressed full solidarity with Ukraine and its people and invited the European Commission to put forward contingency measures. Three days later, on 27 February, the Justice and Home Affairs ministers indicated “broad support” during their extraordinary meeting for the idea of activating the Temporary Protection Directive (Directive 2001/55/EC). On 2 March, the Commission formally proposed to grant temporary protection in the EU to those fleeing the war in Ukraine. On 4 March, the Justice and Home Affairs Council unanimously adopted an implementing decision introducing temporary protection due to the mass influx of persons fleeing Ukraine due to the war” (European Parliamentary Research Service 2022).

This decision applied to Ukrainian nationals, but also to other nationals who resided in Ukraine when the war broke out. All refugees from Ukraine received work and resident permits for three years with full

social benefits for up to three years in any EU country without any particular permission. It did not force refugees to stay in one specific country, so the Ukrainian refugees were allowed to move freely within the EU once admitted to EU territory (European Parliamentary Research Service 2022). The EU treatment of the refugees from Ukraine was really quite extraordinary. Since it also applied to other nationals who resided in Ukraine, the potential complaint about discrimination against other nationals was avoided.

The EU decision on refugees from Ukraine was adopted unanimously at the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Everything was different from the treatment of the refugees from Syria. The EU had solved the problem by activating its old Temporary Protection Directive of 2001. Its rules were clear, requiring no further discussion. No negotiation was required about where the refugees were to stay. So far, nearly half the refugees have chosen to stay in Poland and the rest are predominantly in Central Europe and Germany. Because of the horrendous Russian aggression, the Ukrainian refugees have been widely welcomed by ordinary Europeans.

Hopefully, the EU will draw substantial conclusions from these two very different policies with equally different outcomes. First, the Dublin principle turned out to be dysfunctional, leading to an excessive burden on the first arrival country, Greece for Syrian refugees, and intra-EU conflicts. Fortunately, it was abandoned for the Ukrainian exodus. Second, the idea of quotas of refugees for different countries had no attraction for either refugees or receiving countries. It is good that it has been abandoned. Third, clear general rules for work, residence, and social benefits should be established, as has been that case with refugees from Ukraine. Finally, it is important that bureaucracy is minimized. Thus, it appears as if the EU has drawn all the right lessons from the Syrian refugee drama and applied them appropriately on the Ukrainian conundrum.

THE COMPOSITION OF REFUGEES AND THE PERCEIVED DURATION

A few words should be devoted to the composition and perceived duration of the refugees. Europe has received plenty of migrants from Eastern Europe. Many of these migrants are temporary and go back and forth. The same was true of Polish migrants in Western Europe in the 1980s. Naturally, much depends on what will happen to Ukraine in the next few years. If it takes off, as Poland did from 1989, people are likely to go back in large numbers. Even in the highly successful United States, the overall statistics indicate that half of all the emigrants have returned to their countries of origin. Many in Europe, not least Poles, draw parallels between Ukraine and Poland, expecting that many will return home. The Syrian migration has been quite different since Syria has been in

¹ ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT between the European Union and Its Member States, of the One Part, and Ukraine, Official EN Journal of the European Union, 29 May 2014, https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2016/november/tradoc_155103.pdf.

a terrible state for a long time. The main traditional European recipient countries, Germany and Sweden, have not seen much of a return of migrants to Syria for that reason.

The composition of the refugees has also been very different. From Syria, families or young men emigrated. The prominence of young men aroused the suspicion that the real aim was for work, which has been less appreciated. From Ukraine, the outflow has consisted of three groups: women, children, and old-age pensioners, but virtually no men since Ukrainian men of the age 18–60 have not been allowed to leave the country because of potential military service. Women and children arouse compassion and no fear. Given that only some members of the families depart, the perception that they will return dominates.

CONCLUSIONS

This discussion of the similarities and differences between the two main refugee flows into Europe after World War II leads to two major conclusions. What matters most appear to be two points, the narrative as understood in Europe and EU policy.

Europeans did not understand what the civil war in Syria was about or who fled and why. Therefore, they had little sympathy for the refugees from Syria. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in contrast, was as plain as it gets. It was a war of aggression without any plausible excuse, so Europeans embraced the case of the Ukrainians both at a political and a personal level. In Syria, the main concern was perceived to be ISIS, and Russia was supposed to fight it, and so was the Syrian government, while dozens of other countries were somehow involved. The drama was too complex. In Ukraine, it was black against white. Russia was the attacker, and Ukraine the defender. Russia is a cruel authoritarian state, while Ukraine is a free and basically democratic state.

EU policy is to a considerable extent driven by public perception within Europe, but it is also dependent on prior EU rules. The transformation of the EU policy on refugees from Syria to Ukraine illustrates how flexible and sensible the EU can be because it has several alternative sets of policies that it can apply. The Syrian refugee drama showed that the Dublin principle made little sense, so it was discarded. The country quotas for reception of refugees were highly contentious, so they were abandoned. What was needed was general liberal rules for refugees, and the EU had such rules on its books and dug them up.

While the EU confusion over the refugees from Syria was a considerable embarrassment, the EU's deft handling of the refugees from Ukraine to the apparent appreciation of all member states is a considerable achievement.

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