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Compassion and National Interest:
Race, Culture, and Politics behind the Reception of Refugees of the Ukraine War

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On February 22, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, a neighboring East Slavic nation with whom it has long shared close cultural, historical, political, and economic links; however, the once brotherly and cordial relations have steadily grown more hostile and uneasy in the past decade, with the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea, both of which occurred in 2014, serving as the primary turning points for their bilateral relationship.

The exact motivations of Russian President Vladimir Putin for engaging in a costly and potentially unwinnable conflict are best described as confusing and opaque, but some of the reasons proposed include Russia's fear of Ukraine pursuing closer ties with the West at the expense of the former's key security interests and even possibly joining the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Association (NATO), protecting the Russian-speaking population from an alleged "genocide," the so-called "de-Nazification" of Ukraine, territorial revanchism driven by Putin's view of Ukraine as an artificial state that is essentially

indistinguishable from Russia, and the absurd biolabs theory.¹ All attempts to decode Putin's mind aside, the largest conventional war on the European continent since World War II has had wide-ranging tangible effects that Europe and the rest of the world will be forced to deal with both in the present and for decades or even centuries to come. One of these is the ongoing flow of refugees who have fled Ukraine because of the war. As of the present day, over 5.9 million Ukrainians have left their home country, making it Europe's worst refugee crisis since WWII.² The countries that are currently hosting the most refugees are Poland, Romania, Moldova, Hungary, and Slovakia, all of which are neighbors of Ukraine.³ Generally speaking, Ukrainian refugees have received a very warm and generous welcome, from both the political leaders and ordinary citizens. As a few examples, the Polish parliament overwhelmingly passed a law that guarantees Ukrainian refugees the legal permission to stay in Poland for 18 months with the possibility of renewal and access to the labor market, health care system, social benefits, and education if they apply for a PESEL number,⁴ and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban asserted that his country would let everyone in, referring to Ukrainian refugees.⁵ However, this stands in stark contrast to the way that many of the same countries reacted to refugees fleeing places like Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. In 2015, during the Syrian refugee crisis, Poland and Hungary took hardline anti-refugee stances and were the main voices that pushed back against

1. Georgi Gotev, "Putin's world: Selected quotes from a disturbing speech," *Euractiv*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/putins-world-selected-quotes-from-a-disturbing-speech/>.

2. "Ukraine Refugee Situation," Operational Data Portal, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, last modified July 19, 2022, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/>.

3. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Ukraine Refugee Situation."

4. Monika Sieradzka, "Poland's open-door policy helps Ukrainian refugees build new lives," *Deutsche Welle*, March 20, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/polands-open-door-policy-helps-ukrainian-refugees-build-new-lives/a-61192590/>.

5. Renata Brito, "Europe welcomes Ukrainian refugees but others, less so," *Associated Press*, February 28, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-refugees-diversity-230b0cc790820b9bf8883f918fc8e313/>.

the EU's plan to share the distribution of refugees.

One of the most named reasons for the vastly differing attitudes is the perception of Ukraine as a fellow civilized Christian and European nation, which excludes Ukrainian refugees from the discourse over integration and values that was all the rage when Europe had to reckon with the flow of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. Kiril Petkov, the Prime Minister of Bulgaria, fully endorses this sentiment when he bluntly remarked, "These are not the refugees we are used to... these people are Europeans. These people are intelligent, they are educated people. This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people we were not sure about their identity, people with unclear pasts, who could have been even terrorists. In other words, there is not a single European country now which is afraid of the current wave of refugees."⁶ Prior to Orban opening the door for Ukrainians, he frequently deployed xenophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric and proudly defied the European Court of Justice's ruling that Hungary's 2018 law banning individuals and organizations from helping migrants in applying for asylum violated European law.⁷ In response to a question over the shift in his government's approach to migration issues, Orban, quite similarly to Petkov, asserted that there was a difference between migrants who should be stopped and refugees who deserve all the help they can possibly get.⁸ This point of view is hardly limited to nationalistically minded politicians from Eastern Europe.

While reporting from Kyiv, Charlie D'Agata, a senior foreign reporter for CBS News,

6. Brito, "Europe welcomes Ukrainian refugees."

7. "Hungary's Viktor Orban to defy EU over immigration law," *BBC*, December 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59748173/>.

8. MTI-Hungary Today, "PM Orbán: All Refugees from Ukraine Taken Care of in Hungary," *Hungary Today*, March 4, 2022, <https://hungarytoday.hu/orban-ukrainian-refugees-ukraine-migrants/>.

made a grossly ahistorical comment about how the war in Ukraine was different from the previous conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan because Kyiv is “a relatively civilized, relatively European...city where you wouldn’t expect that or hope that it’s going to happen.”⁹

All of the statements above imply that victims of tragedies that occur in “European/Western countries” are more deserving of help, sympathy, and attention because they are supposedly not predisposed to war or terrorism the way that the “uncivilized” people of the Middle East are. By closely examining the response and representation of Ukrainian refugees in the countries that have taken the most, one uncovers a variety of cultural, political, and geographic factors that affect how nations see different humanitarian crises, rather than ideally treating them as all equally deserving of empathy and aid in the name of our shared humanity.

Poland is the country that is currently hosting the greatest number of Ukrainian refugees. With over 1.2 million refugees taken in, it has received more people from Ukraine than any other EU member state. While it has already been said that European countries have been very welcoming to Ukrainians, it is still noteworthy that a survey from the Market and Social Research Institute (IBRiS) has found that over 90 percent of Poles support admitting Ukrainians who are fleeing the war into Poland, and a separate survey shows that 64 percent are willing to personally help refugees.¹⁰ A firsthand account from Anastasia Lapatina, a journalist who writes for the Kyiv Independent, of what is going on at the Polish-Ukrainian border supports the data and calls what she saw “the best of humanity,” despite initially expecting to see “a humanitarian

9. Harper Lampert, “CBS Reporter Calls Ukraine ‘Relatively Civilized’ as Opposed to Iraq and Afghanistan, Outrage Ensues (Video),” *The Wrap*, February 26, 2022, <https://www.thewrap.com/cbs-charlie-dagata-backlash-ukraine-civilized/>.

10. “Over 90% of Poles support accepting Ukrainian refugees and 64% say they will help personally,” *Notes From Poland*, March 1, 2022, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/03/01/over-90-of-poles-support-accepting-ukrainian-refugees-and-64-say-they-will-help-personally/>.

catastrophe” that has sadly but understandably become an expected result of millions of people fleeing from war.¹¹ Lapatina recounts arriving Ukrainians being greeted at the railway station with an enormous bilingual banner that read “You are safe here,” and dozens of volunteers providing the refugees with basic necessities, such as food, hot beverages, clothing, cell phones with pre-paid plans, housing accommodations, and legal advice. On a broader scale, thousands of everyday Poles have demonstrated untold generosity through actions like “hosting Ukrainians in their apartments, driving them to places, or simply giving them money to cover basic needs...restaurants and stores around the country give Ukrainians discounts, while any services – including the train I took – are provided for free.”¹²

Despite the heartwarming tone of this editorial, Lapatina does acknowledge that at least part of the undeniably beautiful response from Poland most likely stems from pragmatic geopolitical concerns. It is very possible that Putin’s ambitions will not be satisfied by conquering and subjugating Ukraine, and Poland, as a former Warsaw Pact country in proximity to Russia, could very much be next on his list of targets. In other words, by successfully shoring up Ukraine, other countries in Moscow’s former backyard have a way to ensure that Russia will be unable to conduct similar acts of aggression against them. That fear is not unfounded. Ukraine is hardly the only former Eastern Bloc country that has been subject to Russian military aggression.

In 1992, during the Transnistria War, Russia intervened in support of the Transnistrian separatist forces, which helped them win against the Moldovan forces and gain de facto

11. Anastasia Lapatina, “Here at the Polish-Ukrainian border, I see nothing but humanity towards refugees,” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/06/polish-ukrainian-border-humanity-refugees/>.

12. Lapatina, “Here at the Polish-Ukrainian border.”

independence for Transnistria (Transnistria is still de jure recognized as a part of Moldova by every United Nations member state). Russia was also directly responsible for starting the first real war on the European continent in the 21st century when it launched a full-scale land, air, and sea assault on Georgia in 2008 to support the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (other than Russia, they are both recognized as independent by Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru).¹³ Lastly, as mentioned previously, in 2014, Russia invaded and annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in retaliation for the success of the Euromaidan movement that favored a reorientation towards the EU and the West and the ousting of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. In late December of 2021, when whispers of a potential invasion of Ukraine were already circling though not widely believed, Russia released an extensive list of demands for the West to agree to in order to calm tensions on the continent and ease the crisis in Ukraine. The list included a ban on Ukrainian membership in NATO and the removal of all troops and weapons deployed to countries that joined the alliance post-1997, which includes Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania).¹⁴ If NATO yielded to Russia's demands, the security and protection of allies in Eastern Europe will undoubtedly be jeopardized beyond measure because an immediate response to an attack on a member state in that region would be rendered impossible. While Russia's wish list was never going to be anything more than a pipe dream, the willingness to openly express their preference for NATO to de facto retreat to where it was during the Cold War reveals that Moscow is not keen on respecting the

13. Peter Dickinson, "The 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Putin's green light," *Atlantic Council*, August 7, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-2008-russo-georgian-war-putins-green-light/>.

14. Andrew Roth, "Russia issues list of demands it says must be met to lower tensions in Europe," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato/>.

sovereignty of countries within its proximity and sees itself as entitled to a sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe.

Going back to Lapatina, other factors that have shaped Poland's warm welcome are the longstanding historical and cultural ties between Ukraine and Poland and the existing presence of a large number of Ukrainians who have immigrated to and successfully settled in Poland, which long pre-dates the ongoing war, so "Ukrainians are seen not as strangers but friends."¹⁵ An estimated one to two million Ukrainians already reside in Poland, many of whom left Ukraine because of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the start of the War in the Donbas. As a result, several Ukrainians currently fleeing have been able to reunite and find shelter with family and friends who are already in Poland.¹⁶ Maria Sobolewska, a professor of political science at the University of Manchester credits the existence of Polish TV shows centered around Ukrainians in Poland and how just about everyone in Poland knows at least one person who is originally from Ukraine, reflecting the way that "contact breeds trust and acceptance."¹⁷ Sobolewska acknowledges that it is obvious that "an element of racism" exists in the quick and eager welcome of Ukrainian refugees when compared to the response to refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, but notes that "cultural proximity is important for immigration support."¹⁸

The cultural proximity has roots in how the region's borders have shifted countless times throughout history, and, in turn, ethnicities, languages, and nationalities have also been the subject of exchanges. Lviv, a western Ukrainian city that once belonged to Poland, is now under

15. Lapatina, "Here at the Polish-Ukrainian border."

16. Laurel Wamsley, "Race, culture and politics underpin how — or if — refugees are welcomed in Europe," *NPR*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/03/1084201542/ukraine-refugees-racism/>.

17. Wamsley, "Race, culture and politics."

18. Wamsley, "Race, culture and politics."

threat from Russia, and shelling has been so close to the Polish border that windows in houses on the Polish side have been shaken. Due to how literally close the horrors in Ukraine are to home for Poland, a common sentiment among Poles is “this could be us,” which greatly contributes to the outpouring of empathy and support. Additionally, many Poles are old enough to remember their own country’s fight for freedom and democracy during the Cold War, so they fully sympathize and relate to what present-day Ukraine is going through, and this sense of solidarity motivates them to do everything they possibly can to help their neighbor.

Furthermore, the simple geographic fact of being a neighbor to Ukraine gave the Polish government no choice but to do their best to rise to the challenge, just as Turkey hosted three million Syrian refugees and Lebanon took in over one million. Lapatina briefly mentions far-right violence against non-white refugees and the chants of “go back to your country” directed at them. However, she asserts that “this should not be seen as representative of Poland’s response, and the compassion they have shown my fellow country people.”¹⁹ While Lapatina is correct in saying that most of the Ukrainian refugees have been hospitably received by their host countries (both the official government responses and personal anecdotes can attest to that), there is no denying that people of color have repeatedly faced patterns of racism, discrimination, and poor treatment at the Ukrainian border that cannot be dismissed as flukes or one-off incidents. There are a plethora of reports of Black people being stopped at border crossings to prioritize ethnic Ukrainians and then being left stuck for days at the border in horrible conditions. Videos exist of Africans getting shoved off of trains departing Ukraine and Ukrainians reprimanding and stalling Black drivers as they try to leave. Even more shockingly, there have been accounts of pets being

19. Lapatina, “Here at the Polish-Ukrainian border.”

given priority for boarding trains before Africans.²⁰

Some of the ones most affected by unfair treatment as they flee Ukraine have been international students from Africa and South Asia. Clement Akenboro, an economics student from Nigeria, was thrown off of a train from Lviv that was on the way to Poland by security guards and recalled all of the Black passengers being subjected to the same humiliating experience.²¹ Freedom Chidera, a five-year medical student who is also from Nigeria, said that guards at the Polish border discriminated against him, which included throwing racial insults. This was so traumatizing to Chidera that he needed to “detox [his] mind” and call his mother to get over “the worst experience in [his] life.”²² Korrine Sky, a medical student originally from Zimbabwe who now lives in the United Kingdom, described leaving Ukraine as being like the popular Netflix survival drama series *Squid Game* with “Ukrainians and Europeans at the top of the hierarchy, people from India and the Middle East in the middle, and Africans at the bottom.”²³ More than 600 Indian students were forced to take shelter under dorms because they had no information or instructions on how to evacuate.²⁴

Professional athletes also had good reason to fear the racist barriers. Maurice Creek, an American professional basketball player who has played college basketball for the Indiana

20. Rashawn Ray, “The Russian invasion of Ukraine shows racism has no boundaries,” *Brookings Institute*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2022/03/03/the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-shows-racism-has-no-boundaries/>.

21. Frank Langfitt and Eleanor Beardsley, “International students are facing challenges as they try to evacuate Ukraine,” *NPR*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/01/1083775486/africans-and-south-asians-are-having-an-especially-difficult-time-leaving-ukrain/>.

22. Langfitt and Beardsley, “International students.”

23. Ray, “The Russian invasion of Ukraine.”

24. Langfitt and Beardsley, “International students.”

Hoosiers and the George Washington Colonials and had signed with MBC Mykolaiv of the Ukrainian Basketball Super League, was stuck in a bomb shelter for 24 hours and feared that he would be turned away at the border by Ukrainian soldiers before he was able to escape to Romania and fly home.²⁵ However, there were also accounts of the kindness and helpfulness of Ukrainians. Francis Chukwura, a student aiming for a master's degree in economics, does not begrudge the fact that Ukrainians were given priority on the trains leaving the country because, unlike the displaced Ukrainians, people from Africa have a home to return to after leaving the country. Chukwura and his group of fellow Nigerian students received coats and shelter at a hotel from the Ukrainian government as they were working to evacuate. He ended up gaining a great deal of respect for Ukraine and its people as he watched them fearlessly fight against the Russian invasion and suggests that Western countries should do everything possible to support Ukraine because it is unfair to leave Ukraine to fend for itself in this dire situation.

Rayshawn Ray, a Senior Fellow at The Brookings Institute and Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park, writes that the adjective European “has become a code word for white and a justification of the primary reason that people should care about the conflict, displacement, and killing,” a way of thinking that has been applied not only to refugees from “problematic” countries like Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan but even to non-whites who are caught in the same boat as Ukrainians that are fleeing the Russian attack on their homeland.²⁶ The human rights campaigner Nyasha Bhubo writes that, according to a number of European leaders, “refugees of white-European, Christian orientation are preferable. Others who are Black,

25. Aishwarya Kumar, “Former NCAA basketball star Maurice Creek heads home after getting stuck in Ukraine,” *ESPN*, March 3, 2022, https://www.espn.com/mens-college-basketball/story/_/id/33408315/former-ncaa-basketball-star-maurice-creek-heads-home-getting-stuck-ukraine/.

26. Ray, “The Russian invasion of Ukraine.”

Arab, and especially of Muslim faith are to be violently kept out. This is the rhetoric that has built over the last 11 years since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, and has set the stage for the current locking out students of colour leaving Ukraine."²⁷ In other words, “European” and “white” are seen as interchangeable with civilized, educated, Christian, middle-class/prosperous, and normal, traits that nearly universally have positive and familiar connotations in Europe and the rest of what is colloquially known as the Western world, while non-white refugees are all too commonly treated with suspicion and even outright hostility because they are stereotyped as too culturally different/foreign to ever fully integrate into their host countries and truly belong (usually through learning and speaking the language, adopting everyday customs and behavior, and participating in and contributing to civil society), as a drain on the state because they refuse to get jobs and work and prefer to collect benefits, yet simultaneously as threats to the job security of native citizens, and as potential sources of crime and terrorism. All of the negative stereotypes of the so-called “typical” refugee mentioned above carry the implication that non-European and non-Christian societies are inherently inferior and uncivilized or, at best, simply too far removed from European culture and values, which enables governments and ordinary citizens to justify their refusal to welcome them. The logic follows that if there is a group of people who likely will take up money and resources, constantly break the law or engage in religious/political terrorism, or remain perpetual foreigners, it is a matter of “common sense” to not take any of them in for the good of the country and its citizens.

Jennifer Sciubba, an associate professor of International Studies at Rhode College in Memphis, Tennessee, a global fellow with the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C.,

27. Nyasha Bhobo, “In Ukraine's crisis, Europe snaps back into default racism. Just ask the African students trapped at the border,” *The New Arab*, March 2, 2022, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/ukraines-crisis-europe-snaps-back-default-racism/>.

and author of the recent book *8 Billion and Counting: How Sex, Death, and Migration Shape Our World* traces the origins of the intense scrutiny that refugees from certain countries must go through before they are granted asylum, with the EU's open door for Ukrainians being a notable exception, to the overwhelming fear of terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. She says that after 9/11, which was carried out by hijackers from the Middle East and affiliated with the Islamist terrorist organization al-Qaeda, "migrants came to be seen as a potential threat as they fled areas of the world associated with security risks."²⁸ This heralded a dramatic shift in the way that refugees were discussed; more specifically, "they became perceived as a national security issue, rather than simply a humanitarian one."²⁹ That is why the discourse around refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, regions that are majority Muslim and frequently linked with terrorism and extremism, constantly includes an emphasis on vetting their backgrounds for any signs of past criminal and/or terrorist activities.

Europe itself has suffered from deadly acts of terrorism carried out by Islamic extremists, including, but not limited to, the Madrid train bombings, the murder of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam, the 7/7 London bombings, the Charlie Hebdo mass shooting, the series of coordinated shootings and suicide bombings in Paris in November 2015, the 2016 Brussels bombings, the vehicle-ramming attack on a Bastille Day celebration in Nice, the 2016 Berlin Christmas market truck attack, the bombing of an Ariana Grande concert at the Manchester Arena, and the 2017 attacks in Barcelona. While one absolutely should not downplay the multitude of attacks committed by terrorists who are not motivated by Islamic extremism (the 2011 Norway attacks committed by domestic terrorist Anders Behring Breivik that killed 77

28. Wamsley, "Race, culture and politics."

29. Wamsley, "Race, culture and politics."

people is just one of many incidents of far-right, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, and nationalist violence in Europe) or ignore the millions of ordinary Muslims that call Europe home (they indisputably vastly outnumber those that hold extremist beliefs or participate in terrorism) and not all of the individuals involved in the instances of Islamic terrorism listed above were migrants (in fact, a significant number of them were actually born in the same European countries they attacked), the continuous and sometimes embellished narratives of “places like Iraq and Afghanistan, Syria, other places across the Middle East and North Africa” being breeding grounds for terrorism and migrants as some kind of Trojan horse and the very real experience of horrific attacks on European soil by Islamist militants, a lot of whom do have some sort of connection to the same countries/regions, makes Europeans wary about letting in migrants from said places, regardless of their dire situation.³⁰ Sciubba says that it is difficult to say if the concerns are nothing but “racism couched in national security terms,” and the understandable wish to keep your country safe from terrorists of every kind and the hatred of Muslims and/or non-Europeans are “incredibly analytically hard to separate.”³¹ However, one could accurately tie the two things together and say that “there was an assumption, or a greater fear, of people fleeing from conflict areas where there have been terrorist incidents or the association of terrorism.”³² Sciubba mentioned how, during the Cold War, which was prior to refugees being intrinsically coupled with matters of national security, Western countries, generally speaking, happily took in people fleeing the Eastern Bloc, in part to send a compelling ideological/political message about how much better democracy and capitalism were than Soviet-style communism.

30. Wamsley, “Race, culture and politics.”

31. Wamsley, “Race, culture and politics.”

32. Wamsley, “Race, culture and politics.”

The current Ukrainian refugee crisis can be compared to the earlier Cold War-era attitude towards migrants and escapees because, in both the former and the latter, European countries in the Western alliance have a strategic interest in pushing back against a hostile Russia and taking in people fleeing as a direct result of Russian actions/policies is one of the most concrete and meaningful ways that they can fulfill that goal. The reasons why countries like Poland feel they have a vested interest in doing what they can to help Ukraine have been discussed at length. In short, it is largely driven by their own memories of life under Soviet hegemony and the possibility that, if Ukraine falls to Russia, it may trigger a domino effect where Putin is emboldened to target other countries in Eastern Europe. Lastly, 90% of the fleeing Ukrainians are women and children³³ because the Ukrainian government has prohibited all men aged 18-60 from leaving the country.³⁴ In contrast, at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, around three-quarters (73%) of the asylum seekers were men.³⁵ While gender stereotypes are hardly a strong basis for national security policy, women, children, and old people certainly do not evoke fears of being potential rapists, secret terrorists, or dangerous criminals the same way that young adult men do. That is because, in our popular consciousness, the demographics that make up the vast majority of the Ukrainian refugees fit the stereotypical image of what vulnerable and harmless people who are deserving of help look like.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the Ukrainian refugee crisis contained a perfect

33. Rachel Treisman, "The U.N. now projects more than 8 million people will flee Ukraine as refugees," *NPR*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/26/1094796253/ukraine-russia-refugees/>.

34. Asha C. Gilbert, "Reports: Ukraine bans all male citizens ages 18 to 60 from leaving the country," *USA Today*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2022/02/25/russia-invasion-ukraine-bans-male-citizens-leaving/6936471001/>.

35. "Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015," *Pew Research Center*, August 2, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/>.

combination of factors to ensure a near-universal welcome from European countries that were previously skeptical of accepting migrants from the Middle East and North Africa. The fact that Ukraine is a largely Christian and “white” country, universally considered to be part of Europe, and with strong cultural and historical ties to countries such as Poland (the country taking in the most refugees), renders concerns about a failure to integrate and threats to the “traditional culture and values” moot. All of that, combined with the fact that women and children are the main groups fleeing their home country, neuters the fear of these particular refugees being a Trojan horse for people who will break the law and engage in terrorism. Moreover, Ukraine’s neighboring countries, specifically Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova, believe that they have an obligation to lend help and aid for reasons motivated both by genuine solidarity and political and security calculations. The former comes from the fact that all of the aforementioned countries, like Ukraine, vividly remember life under the Soviet yoke during the Cold War, allowing them to empathize with the suffering and resilience of Ukrainians and believe that Ukraine deserves the same protection and security that they enjoy through NATO and the European Union (except Moldova, all of these countries joined both after the fall of the Iron Curtain). The latter is rooted in Russia’s repeated habit of threatening the security of and intervening in the affairs of countries in its former sphere of influence. If Putin is successful in his war in Ukraine, who knows which one of Russia’s ex-satellite states will be next? From this perspective, a victorious Ukraine is an indispensable bulwark.

There is little point in debating over which group of refugees is more deserving of acceptance. Rather, it makes much more sense to analyze and deconstruct the external factors, circumstances, and narratives that led governments and people to react so utterly differently to two of the worst refugee crises ever seen in post-WWII Europe, specifically Syria and Ukraine.

In the larger scheme of things, there remains a plethora of pressing long-term questions about migrants and refugees in Europe without quick or easy answers. They include how to tackle the vicious cycle of societal alienation and religious radicalization in certain diaspora communities, and whether countries will have enough funds, resources, and infrastructure to handle the continued stream of refugees coming from Ukraine.³⁶ As known, migration has always served as a proxy for politics/ideology, identity, and national interests, and refugees are no exception. An imperfect but apt analogy to what is happening in the here and now is how, during the Cold War, the Western Bloc was eager to take in refugees fleeing communist countries such as Cuba, Vietnam, and the Soviet Union and its satellites but was reluctant to extend the same courtesy to people escaping countries ruled by Western-backed dictators. The adage remarking that the more things change, the more they stay the same seems to apply quite well here.

About the author

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36. Yuliya Talmazan and Malgorzata Krakowska, "Poland welcomes Ukrainian refugees with open arms — but will the country crumble under the weight of the crisis?" *NBC News*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/poland-ukraine-refugee-crisis-russia-war-vladimir-putin-conflict-rcna21967>

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