

REFUGEES LIKE US: UKRAINIAN REFUGEE SURGE DEMONSTRATES DOUBLE STANDARDS IN REFUGEE TREATMENT



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Abstract: The recent influx of Ukrainian refugees into European countries invites a reconsideration of the anti-immigrant position adopted by the European far-right. Unlike immigrants from MENA, Afghanistan, and African countries, Ukrainian refugees received a warm welcome from Europe. Despite the declining number of refugees from developing countries, the European far-right continues to demonize Afghan, African, and Syrian refugees. This expert brief demonstrates that not all refugee crises contribute to the rise of the far-right. By analyzing geographical and political factors that might promote Europe's biased refugee policies, this expert brief shows that cultural factors such as race and religion better explain certain refugee groups' preferential treatment. What Syrians, Afghans, and Africans living in Ukraine lacked was the appropriate religious and racial attributes. In the case of the European far-right, Islamophobic and racist elements are at play rather than the general immigrant identity. In other words, only certain immigrant groups trigger the electoral rise of the far-right.

Introduction

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the world witnessed another refugee crisis. UN sources indicate that the invasion has internally displaced some 6.6 million people, with 6.3 million Ukrainians crossing international borders into European countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Germany. Furthermore, more than 13 million Ukrainians are estimated to be confined in affected areas, and unable leave due to heightened security risks.¹ However, unlike Syrian immigrants, Ukrainians received a warm welcome. It appears that, at least in the short run, Ukrainian immigrants did not yet trigger another anti-immigrant wave in Europe. This expert brief demonstrates that not all refugee crises promote anti-immigrant sentiments or contribute to the electoral rise of the far-right within host countries.

Furthermore, this brief shows that immigration from Syria and African countries continues to be a source of controversy for European politics. Even though Germany accepted a substantial refugee population, the European Union spent considerable effort in building a "European fortress" to keep refugees from the "East" out. The EU also made a deal with Turkey to externalize the migration issue. Still, Syrian immigration contributed to the rise of far-right parties in Europe. The anti-immigrant parties also forced the mainstream parties to adopt a negative view of immigrants and ignore asylum rights by taking harsher measures against immigration from the MENA and Africa.² This eventually has given rise to anti-immigrant policies such as shipping immigrants to poorer African countries and treating them harshly in the Mediterranean Sea. The European countries did not hesitate to break the international law to turn back boats which caused deaths of thousands of immigrants.

This brief starts with a brief overview of the Ukrainian refugee crisis and how European countries responded to this crisis unfolding in their immediate environment. It then presents how the Syrian crisis affected European politics by strengthening anti-immigrant political parties in European democracies. The rise of the far-right contributed to the development of anti-immigrant policies, which are in stark contrast with the humanitarian, democratic principles espoused by the European Union.

“White” Like Us

The Russian invasion of Ukraine caused a humanitarian tragedy in the European periphery. Despite the Russian expectations of a quick victory, the Ukrainian defense demonstrated significant resistance thanks to the significant military aid sent by Western countries, thus stalling Putin’s plans for an immediate takeover. As the conflict continued, its toll on the civilian population became more serious, leading millions of Ukrainian civilians to flee and seek refuge in neighboring European countries.

The UN data shows the numerical trend for Ukrainian refugees since the onset of the Russian invasion (Figure 1). By September 29, 2022, 6.3 million Ukrainians fled the country while 6.6 million Ukrainians were internally displaced. Those who crossed international borders were primarily received by Russia,³ Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Italy, Turkey, and Spain. So far, Ukrainian immigrants have received a warm welcome from host countries and societies, a promising development considering the possibility of their extended stay. The Russian invasion even became a unifying force among European countries and created a certain sense of comradery against Putin’s imperialist encroachments on the EU’s borders.

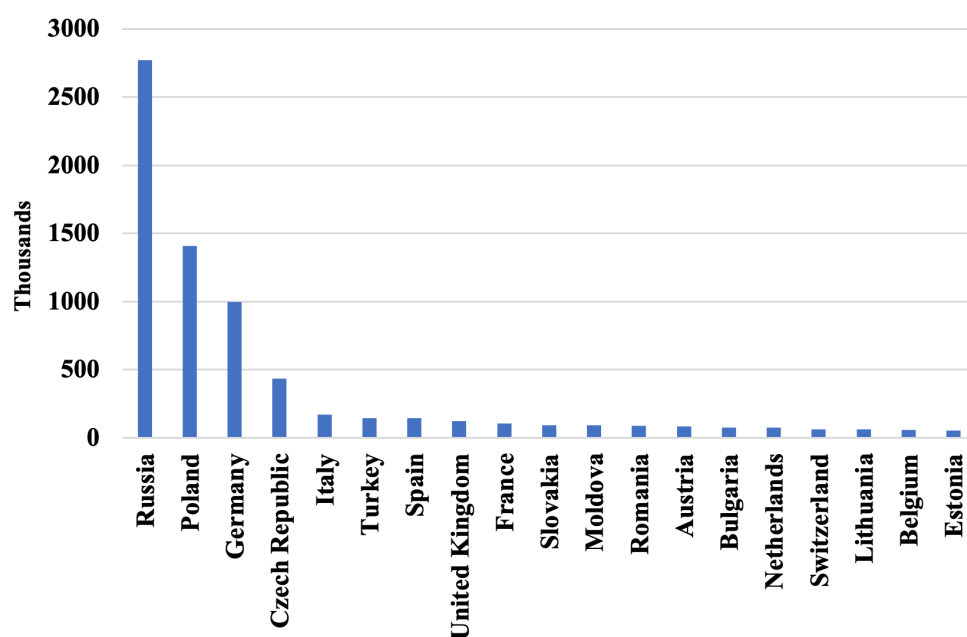


Figure 1: Number of Ukrainians recorded in European countries. Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 29 September 2022.

Given the criminal invasion and continuing threat of Russian violence, Ukrainians should be provided with opportunities for secure passage and safe living conditions. It is also quite normal to expect a similar attitude towards Syrian, Afghan, and African refugees. However, the attitude of international media towards the crisis revealed a deep-seated bias towards people from developing countries. Specifically, statements made by European journalists and politicians were deeply troubling and demonstrated stark double standards while covering the ongoing crisis.⁴

For instance, the CBS News senior foreign correspondent Charlie D'Agata revealed his bias while covering the Ukrainian refugee crisis; *"Ukraine isn't a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European –I have to choose those words carefully, too– city, one where you wouldn't expect that, or hope that it's going to happen."*⁵ The journalist apologized later, but he was not the only one reporting the Ukrainian crisis through xenophobic lenses. In a BBC interview, a former deputy prosecutor general of Ukraine, David Sakvarelidze, said that he got emotional because, this time, it was European people with *"blue eyes and blond hair"* that are being killed.⁶ Daniel Hannan from Telegraph was shocked that the war was taking place in a European country where people *"watch Netflix and have Instagram accounts, vote in free elections and read uncensored newspapers."*⁷ Phillipe Corbé from French BFM TV did not hesitate to draw comparisons with Syrians and stated that *"we're not talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Putin. We're talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives."*⁸ Similar comments were made by other European journalists who similarly emphasized how Ukrainian refugees were different than Syrians.⁹

The sheer tribalist approach towards the Ukrainian refugee crisis considers war a natural state for people of color (or for the people from the MENA).¹⁰ The biased language adopted by the Western media became an object of criticism for journalists across the globe. The US-based Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association issued a statement protesting the double standards.¹¹ Moreover, it was not only the mainstream Western media that thought that the more "civilized" refugees deserved more sympathy. European politicians promoted the preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees. Mariusz Kaminski, Poland's Minister of Interior Affairs, declared his country's support for *"anyone fleeing from bombs, from Russian rifles..."*¹² Unfortunately, Poland adopted a far less friendly approach towards Syrian refugees—who were also fleeing from Russian bombardments—when it let Syrian immigrants waiting in Polish-Belarusian borders freeze to death.¹³ Similarly, Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer,

who is known for his hardline position against Afghan refugees,¹⁴ stated that Austria will take refugees if necessary because Ukraine is different than Afghanistan.¹⁵

How can we explain such pro-immigrant attitudes from parties known for anti-immigrant stances? One might resort to geographical dynamics to explain the double standards adopted by international media and European politicians towards these two refugee crises. In this case, the reason for the biased approach would be related to Ukraine's geopolitical location. Ukraine is in Europe, while Syria is far from being so. Similar to the position of Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon in the Syrian refugee crisis, European countries, specifically the ones on the Eastern side, adopted more friendly policies due to their shared borders with Ukraine. In addition, the historical legacy of Cold War and brutal Soviet rule in the Eastern Europe contributed to the positive perception of Ukrainians, who are suffering at the hands of the Russian invasion.

In addition, Ukraine's political characteristics may have also led Europe to develop a biased approach to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Unlike Syria, Ukraine is considered a developing democracy in the European periphery. The country also aspires to membership in EU and NATO. Ukraine is geopolitically critical to NATO's long-term goals given its long borders with Russia. Despite the problem of corruption and electoral irregularities, Ukraine is not ruled by a single-party dictatorial regime dominated by a narrow dynastic clique. Contrary to Syria, Ukraine might be considered part of the European political project in the long run. Therefore, hosting Ukrainian refugees became Europe's way of supporting Ukrainian democracy against Russian expansionism.

Hence, geographical, and political factors give a certain legitimacy to the European attitude toward the Ukrainian refugee crisis. However, these factors fail to explain the racist treatment of refugees of color. In the early phases of the refugee influx from Ukraine, reports indicated that Nigerian students in Ukraine were being prevented from crossing the Polish border.¹⁶ Video footages show that Black people were being pushed off trains while Black drivers were stalled while they were trying to flee.¹⁷ There are even more worrying reports of animals being allowed on evacuation trains before Africans living in Ukraine.¹⁸

Therefore, the role of cultural factors cannot be downplayed while explaining Europe's preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees. The "white"ness of Ukrainian refugees and their shared Christian religious identity with European people invoked feelings of sympathy

within the European media and among European politicians. What Syrians, Afghans, and Africans living in Ukraine lacked was the appropriate religious and racial attributes. This is reflected in the media's racist coverage of the Ukrainian conflict and politicians' preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees. By doing so, the mainstream media and European statesmen fail to understand that racial origin, ethnic and religious identity, geographical proximity, and political institutions cannot be the rationale for providing refuge to victims of conflicts. However, European countries continue to keep immigrants from developing countries outside the European fortress.

The Far-Right's Favorite Immigrants

Contrary to the welcoming attitude towards Ukrainian refugees, immigrants from Syria and developing countries are largely prevented from accessing European shores. In response to the unprecedented refugee influx, the European Union made a deal with Turkey and promised financial help to prevent irregular migration.¹⁹ In addition, countries such as Denmark and the UK began to deport asylum seekers to the East African country of Rwanda to deter potential refugees.²⁰ The EU also created the *Emergency Trust Fund for Africa* to address the root causes of irregular migration and prevent more Africans from coming to Europe as asylum seekers.²¹ These attempts not only externalized the refugee problem, but also demonstrated the EU's unwillingness to grant asylum seeker status to people from the MENA and African countries. Despite decreasing the number of irregular migrants coming from these regions, these measures did not stop the rise of far-right parties.

The first surge of the European far-right followed the Syrian refugee influx after 2011. Several political scientists have drawn attention to the impact of refugee influx on the electoral success of radical right parties in Europe.²² Radical right parties such as Flemish Interest (Belgium), Danish People's Party (Denmark), Alternative für Deutschland (Germany), National Rally (France), Lega and Brothers of Italy (Italy), Freedom Party of Austria, Golden Dawn (Greece), Vox (Spain), and Sweden Democrats became major political actors in their respective countries. These parties are labeled as "anti-immigrant" as they carry out their electoral campaigns based on anti-immigrant sentiments.²³ After the Syrian civil war and the increasing number of refugees arriving in European countries, these parties expanded their electoral base between 2011-2016. Figure 2 shows that the first surge of far-right in consolidated European democracies continued without interruption until 2016. Following the migration deal between the EU and Turkey, we can observe that their electoral expansion paused briefly.

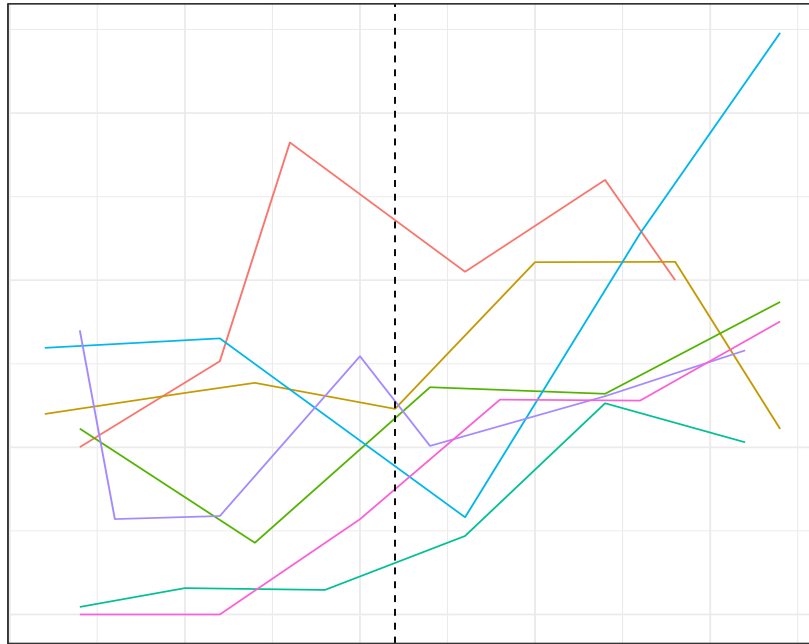


Figure 2: The percentage of vote received by far-right parties in Europe since 2000. The dashed black line indicates the elections after the onset of Syrian Crisis.

Now, we are observing a second rise of the European far right. The most recent parliamentary elections in Italy, France, Netherlands, and Sweden proved that far-right parties are far from ceasing to exist but, in fact, entrenched their positions in the electoral arena. These parties are no longer transient actors. Instead, they became influential players not only in their respective countries but also in the European parliament.²⁴ Even in countries where the far-right parties electorally regressed (i.e., Austria, Denmark, and Germany, Figure 2), they still received a substantial popular vote and a significant number of seats in parliaments. In Italy, the far right captured the incumbency. The first (Brothers of Italy) and third (Lega) ranking parties in the 2022 parliamentary elections are parties known for strong anti-immigrant sentiments.

However, it would be difficult to attribute the second rise of the European far right to the arrival of millions of Ukrainians. One would expect an “anti-immigrant” party to promote policies against all immigrants, but the European far-right avoids targeting Ukrainians, instead emphasizing the dangers of immigration from the “Orient.” Specifically, the European far-right draws attention and continues to demonize immigrants from MENA, Afghanistan, and Africa. For instance, the new Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, does not avoid sharing her strong views on immigration from these regions.²⁵ She promised to accelerate repatriations, more stringent asylum rules, and a naval blockade of North Africa to prevent migrants from accessing Italian shores by sea. Her tough policies were not referring to Ukrainian migrants.

What Meloni shows us is the fact that anti-immigrant policies adopted by European far-right refer to a specific type of refugee population, that is, Syrians, Afghans, and Africans. Therefore, it is safe to say that the far-right's anti-immigrant position is shaped by Islamophobic and racist sentiments.

Meloni's anti-immigrant attitude is shared by European governments in general.²⁶ The existing literature on the far-right already shows us that far-right parties challenged the mainstream parties to move towards anti-immigrant policy positions.²⁷ As a result, European countries began to prevent refugees who attempted to access European shores through the dangerous Mediterranean Sea. Recent reports demonstrate that European coast guards treated immigrants at sea harshly and pushed back their boats to prevent their access to Europe.²⁸ By doing so, European coast guards have further endangered the lives of the civilians on the boats who already embarked on a dangerous voyage. Since the onset of the Syrian conflict, almost 20,000 thousand immigrants died in the Mediterranean Sea in their pursuit of security (Figure 3). More recently, 94 people died when their small boat sank off the Syrian port of Tartus.²⁹

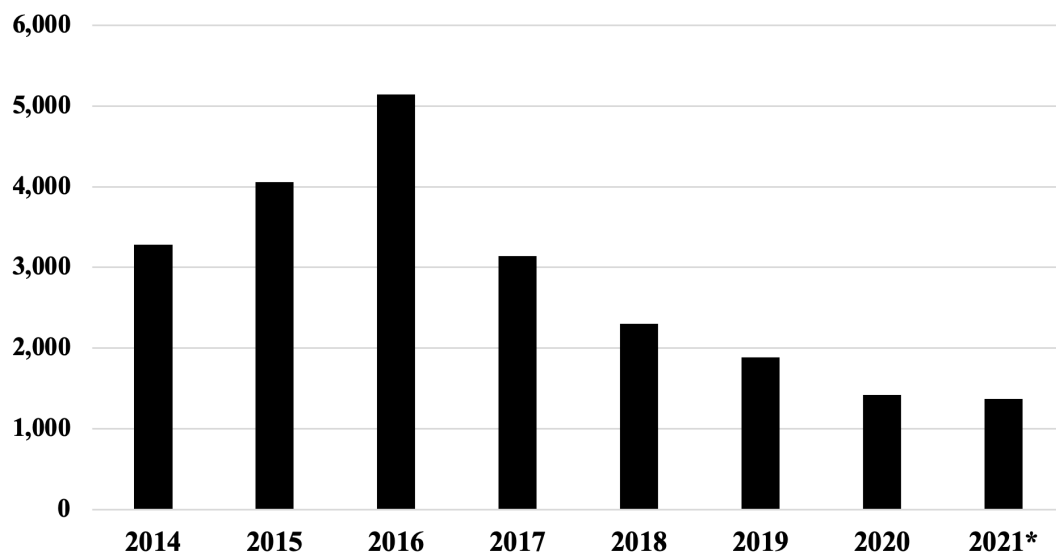


Figure 3: Number of recorded deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea from 2014 to 2021. The data for 2021 ends in September. Source: Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1082077/deaths-of-migrants-in-the-mediterranean-sea/>)

Conclusion

The Russian invasion triggered another refugee influx into European countries. In general, European countries adopted friendly policies towards the incoming Ukrainians. However, this refugee wave also revealed the deep-seated biases towards refugees from the MENA, Afghanistan, and African countries. This brief shows that cultural factors better explain the European approach to Ukrainian refugees, while the union continues to prevent irregular migration from other conflict zones.

In this background, far-right parties continue to occupy important positions in European politics. These parties garner popular support by demonizing refugees from the developing world in their electoral campaigns despite the declining number of refugees from such places. Therefore, the recent influx of Ukrainian refugees invites a reconsideration of the anti-immigrant position adopted by the European far-right. This expert brief demonstrates that not all refugee crises contribute to the rise of the far-right. By analyzing geographical and political factors that might promote Europe's biased refugee policies, this expert brief shows that cultural factors such as race and religion help us to better explain the preferential treatment of certain refugee groups. What Syrians, Afghans, and Africans living in Ukraine lacked was the appropriate religious and racial attributes.

Ukrainian refugees deserve opportunities for secure passage and a safe living environment. Nonetheless, it is also necessary to draw attention to the biased approach adopted by the international media and European politicians toward different refugee crises. Given the ongoing conflict and credible threat of violence in Syria, it is quite normal to expect a similar attitude towards immigrants from other zones of hot conflict. The concept of providing refuge must be independent of geographical, political, and cultural factors. Indeed, all immigrants deserve the same amount of empathy and aid.

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