

Ukraine War: When Good Refugees Turn Bad

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When the first Russian forces began entering Ukrainian territory in February 2022, the instant reaction from Europe, the UK, Canada and Australia, was one of open commitment to Ukraine's refugees. The relentless human trains heading westwards were initially embraced by Poles, whose history with Ukraine is, at best, tense and sketchy.

Across Europe, walls came down in dispensation for this new type of refugee, tolerated and tolerable by the populists and the border security types, all summed up by comments from the Bulgarian Prime minister Kiril Petkov, who [declared](#) the fleeing Ukrainians "intelligent" and "educated people". They were certainly "Europeans" and were not like the "refugee wave we have been used to", the sort packed with individuals with "unclear pasts [and] who could have been even terrorists." For a time, governments could distract attention from brutal border policies directed against swarthier irregular arrivals.

The enlarged spirit of generosity was also aided by the perpetrator of the attack: the West's habitual bugbear, and the number of notably eastern and central European states that had anxiety aplenty about Russian territorial ambitions. To date, estimates suggest that 7.9 million people have fled the war, with [4.7 million](#) registered under the European Union's temporary-protection directive.

While such levels of generosity shown towards refugees were overflowing, clear exceptions were made towards others suffering from the conflict. Other groups of refugees, be they of African, Indian and Middle Eastern background, found themselves facing rather different treatment at the Polish-Ukrainian border. A [number of accounts](#) of obstructions and violence were reported, suggesting an arching attempt to aid Ukrainian refugees, and a distinct lack of enthusiasm for helping others.

The South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation, through its deputy director-general for public diplomacy, Clayson Monyela, [expressed concern](#) about how Africans “were actually, you know, put in different queues or lanes, if you want to call them that, but also at the back. So, we had to intervene to ensure that our people are assisted to cross.”

The image of the exceptional Ukrainian refugee, to be welcomed rather than questioned and judged, has not been etched in stone. For all the compassion and interest shown towards the millions who moved westwards, most in anticipation of returning, the effluxion of time has proved telling.

In anticipation of summer tourist arrivals, noble Bulgaria turned the tables on a number of Ukrainian refugees staying in out-of-season hotels. In June last year, Minister of Tourism Hristo Prodanov, in [noting](#) that 56,000 refugees were being housed in such hotels, expressed his concern that these would have to be vacated for the tourist season.

The previous month, signs of irritation were evident in the Petkov government, with Deputy Prime Minister Kalina Konstantinova expressing the view that the hotels were a finite “luxurious experience”, and that the Ukrainians were getting increasingly demanding. On June 2, Konstantinova [apologised](#) to all “Bulgarians and Ukrainians who felt offended by my words”.

The populists are showing growing discontent. In some cases, such as the Polish nationalist Konfederacja (Confederation), which [argues](#) that Poland is being increasingly “de-Polonised”, they are dismissed as insignificant squeaks in the political landscape. The narrative of privileged Ukrainian refugees thriving as patriots suffer is, however, one that is not going away.

The steep spike in the cost of living, helped by eye watering rises in energy prices, has aided the curdling of kindness. In September, Friedrich Merz, Germany’s leader of the opposition centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU), [told](#) Bild TV that Ukrainians had begun specialising in a form of “welfare tourism”. “What we’re seeing is welfare tourism on the part of these refugees to Germany, back to Ukraine, back to Germany, back to Ukraine.”

While not specifying a number of how many were actually engaged in such opportunistic practice, he could only conclude that it was “large”. Germany’s thorough bureaucratic counters have tended to overlook such figures, whether by accident or design.

The concern from Merz was a traditional one about the uses of welfare and what motivates its grant. It was “unfair and the population has a right to consider it unfair” that the homes for refugees and German welfare recipients be generously heated while working class Germans struggled with energy costs. While Merz subsequently apologised for his remarks, the sentiment was out of the bag and running through the ranks.

In October, thousands of Czechs gathered in the capital to protest against the centre-right government, demanding an early election and discussions with Russia regarding gas supplies for the winter ahead. Ukrainian concerns [were far](#) from the mind of event organiser Ladislav Vrabel. “This is a new national revival and its goal is for the Czech Republic to be independent.”

These movements do not augur well for the bleeding hearts of Ukraine’s refugees. With

some alarm, an article from *Social Europe* [reads](#) like a dispatch from a public relations bureau. Anything negative regarding the refugees from Ukraine must be countered. These are all due to “Russian disinformation”. Populist parties must also be confronted and corrected. “European politicians,” the authors argue, “should shape the debate around Ukrainian refugees.”

The conflict shows no promise of abating in the new year, though there are murmurings about an eventual compromise that is bound to agitate all parties. Till then, more criticism is bound to emerge from states hosting large numbers of refugees previously admired as victims of Russian aggression in need of protection. Not all of it will be fed by Russian misinformation, and not all will be populists hugging the fringes of lunatic inspiration.

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