Ukrainian Refugees are Everywhere, Especially Woman and Children

The war in Ukraine has, as expected, brought yet another flow of migrants. This latest wave is being greeted with either flag-waving enthusiasm or weary resignation, but few are noticing that it adds a new dimension to the existing refugee and geopolitical situation.

Most refugees come from Third World countries and live in other Third World countries. Despite Europe constantly complaining about being under siege from waves of migration, Europe only houses a tiny fraction of the world’s refugee populations, 85% of whom are in developing countries and 27% of whom live in the least developed countries on earth – hardly in the process of escaping to a better life.

But this wave is of Europeans, fleeing to other European countries. They may be Eastern European, therefore considered automatically poor, criminal and of dubious politics, but they are from a European country.

They are in the same position as dispossessed persons from Allied countries, such as Russia, were during and after World War Two, who likewise feel they should be welcomed as friends by those who maintain their dispossession is an assault of Europe and its values.

That is not happening. Some are going as far, tongue in cheek, as to claim that these refugees are Putin’s secret weapon – and how he is [somehow] acting in cahoots with “deep agents” in Ukraine in a scheme to depopulate the country of its women, making them into poor and needy migrants in nearby countries, mostly under the guise of
refugee status.

Already the impact of the influx of new migrants is being felt in places like Georgia, which is seeing a spike in rental prices. It is not only Ukrainians, but well-off Russians, including many from Belarus, who are coming to set up shop and to establish and reestablish businesses in sanction free zones.

Iranians and others step aside, as a new migrant flow is coming to Europe; people often well-funded, who see the war as a chance not to fight over residency permits but to be fast tracked as refugees, with benefits and immediate status. Or at least that is how it is seen, in the traditional manner of those who would rather continue funding the wars which cause these migrant flows than help their victims – and by governments who believe this will suit their domestic electoral advantage, without taking into account the difference in character between these refugees and others.

Facts get in the way

Most fleeing the current conflict are indeed legitimate refugees. The UN believes that the total number of refugees may top as many as seven million—and that as many as 18 million Ukrainians will be affected by the war.

The majority of these refugees have fled to neighbouring Poland, despite its reputation as increasingly nationalistic and anti-immigrant, and then to Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and other European Union countries, as well as to Moldova and to Russia itself. The number of Ukrainians fleeing to neighbouring countries has recently reached 1.5 million in 10 days, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

According to UN data, more than half of those fleeing Ukraine went to Poland and more than 116,000 to Hungary to the south. Moldova has taken in more than 79,000 and 71,200 have gone to Slovakia. These numbers are increasing each and every day, hour-by-hour, and they should only be viewed as a distribution of where the refugees are initially ending up.

It is worth noting that these flows are being increased as a result of the EU agreeing to give immediate protection to Ukrainians escaping the war, including instant rights to live and work within the bloc, and also offering them access to social service benefits like housing and medical care. However it can also be noted when such rights and benefits have been removed in previous years for other refugees; this has not led to the hoped-for long term reduction in numbers, but rather the opposite.

Moldova has by far the largest concentration of new refugees per capita, with almost 4,000 per 100,000 residents. Its president has appealed for international help in dealing with the numbers arriving.

Get to know the hero!

There have been some isolated cases of Ukrainian men dressing up as women in order to make it across the Ukrainian border, as recently reported in the Turkish media. A short commentary on this, "An interesting refugee caught at the border. "Get to know the hero." was shared on social media and attracted many likes.

This was actually the fault of Ukraine, not Europe’s attitude. Women and their children are allowed to seek refugee status after leaving Ukraine; men between the ages of ages of 18-60 are prohibited from leaving the country under martial law because they are expected to fight.

However this in itself can be regarded as “grounds for oppression”, and is seen as such in some cases, such as those of former child soldiers in Liberia. It may be Ukraine’s law, but Europe can ignore it, rather than leave people at the mercy of the enemy – unless the idea is to force Ukrainians to stay to gain propaganda points, or avoid sending their own soldiers.

Open arms depends on origins!

But we only need to remember previous surges of refugees to see that not all refugees are treating with the same open arms. Race, culture and politics underpin how — or if — refugees are welcomed in Europe.

According to NPR, “the open-arm welcome for those fleeing Ukraine stands in sharp contrast to the treatment of previous waves of refugees from places like Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Just two months earlier, Orbán said Hungary was keeping its restrictive immigration policies: “[W]e aren't going to let anyone in."

It is hard to ascertain how many of these are true refugees, fleeing from war, or people seeing the conflict in Ukraine
as a golden opportunity to establish themselves in other countries. In many cases, it will be a bit of both. But that should have no part in the calculation of whether they were driven from their homes, or can now return to them. Whether motivations are suspect is a political decision, not based on empirical evidence, and as such should not be taken into account when assessing the circumstances people came from, the only evidence permissible when determining refugee status.

“En route between the Ukrainian city of Lviv and Poland, security guards dragged “all the Black guys from the train,” said Clement Akenboro, an economics student from Nigeria.”

Refugee flows make better breaking news headlines than do the domestic economic and political conditions, lack of opportunities and endemic corruption which stifles growth and prosperity. However this does not mean that everyone fleeing a situation not on the front page of the newspapers or diplomatic dispatches doesn’t have equally genuine reasons for fleeing persecution.

**Our friends in the news**

This being West versus Russia, the same games are being played with people’s lives for the sake of political gain. For instance, a Tbilisi City Assembly co-ordination group has been established to support Ukraine, and act as mechanism for collecting humanitarian aid for Ukrainians. But this even includes providing support to citizens of Ukraine who are visitors to Tbilisi, and not officially designated as refugees.

This group describes how it has taken on a significant mission. “We must do the most possible [in order to] stand by Ukrainian tourists, who, because of the hostilities in their homeland, are stuck in Georgia. Also, it is vitally important to collect and sort out humanitarian goods for Ukraine. A lot of structures are well-organised in addressing the needs of Ukrainians. We want to use our resources effectively and the group will work to address the needs of Ukrainians,” said Giorgi Tkemaladze, a spokesperson for the Tbilisi City government.

However these tourists are the ones coming with money, not only their bags and the clothes on their backs, those who saw the war coming and are ready to reestablish themselves in a safe haven. This impacts the real estate market, and makes finding affordable housing difficult for locals.

In some countries, property was purchased with the anticipation that the day would come where it would be necessary to relocate. In Georgia, many real estate transitions in recent years have been with people with the same passports, who came with guarantees, who are now being deemed legit refugees.

But if you question the official policy in this case, even though the official policy in most other refugee waves is the exact reverse, your comments are perceived to be on the level of another Rivers of Blood speech, the one which saw Enoch Powell, until then widely considered the most qualified person to be the next PM of the UK, marginalised and labelled a rabid racist.

It also means you are designated a supporter of Putin – which means being blacklisted, not only in the sphere of journalism but many professions, including politics.

**Wait and See!**

The problem of Ukrainian and “nearby refugees” is only now opening up a discussion of the geopolitical consequences, as since the fall of Communism it has been treated as a theoretical model, despite the intra-European immigration which has continued unabated. Furthermore, no mention is yet being made of IDPs, internally displaced persons within their own countries.

Massive relocations of people can change the demographic makeup of regions and impact language policies. Relatively small numbers being presented as massive inflows can hinder efforts to create Nation States which are more often than not artificial constructs.

Most refugees end up gaining some sort of status, or just stay in the countries they find themselves in, incorporated into the society, with their children raised in a new culture and assimilated. For example, even if Palestine would be able to gain statehood and recognition on the world stage, and the Arab-Israeli conflict was brought to an end, it is doubtful if many diaspora Palestinians would want to pull up stakes and make it back to their rightful homeland and participate in state building.

This is not in itself a bad thing for anyone. Considering the birth dearth in Europe, the aging population, and the
need for workers and consumers, especially those with skills, many European countries will experience a windfall with a flow of migrants, regardless of how they obtain their status.

The problem is not just the number of Europeans dropping below the replacement rate but the average age of the population, based on the shape of the age pyramid. The continent-wide fertility-rate is now 1.5 children per mother, far below the “replacement rate” of 2.3, generally said to be the birth rate needed to keep a stable population. It should come as no surprise that Germany, which once had one of the lowest birthrates in the world, now has the most liberal refugee policies, and not just in terms of numbers but in encouraging workers who are willing to take the less glorious jobs, involving manual labour and lower wages.

However all of this is being packaged in the usual political way, practical facts notwithstanding. The refugee flows to Russia from Ukraine are not being addressed in the international media, because Russia has to be the villain they are fleeing from, not the devastation caused by the war itself. Consequently these people will receive no international support, like the widows of the large numbers of British soldiers withdrawn from the Western Front to try and keep the Tsar in power, until he lost.

If a bomb hits you, it doesn’t matter where the bomb came from. Consistent refusal to help most refugees, then branding people who are not refugees at all as a better class of refugee when it suits you, does nothing to help refugees, nothing to resolve conflicts, and everything to disconnect the public from the authorities by creating an alternative reality only politicians can inhabit.

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