Opinion: What Europe's embrace of Ukrainian refugees says about its treatment of others

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March 10, 2022 at 11:08 a.m. EST

Ukrainian refugees board a bus after arriving at Hendaye train station in southwestern France on March 9. (Bob Edme/AP)

For the past two weeks, the eyes of the world have been riveted on the tragic fate of Ukrainians facing violence waged by Russian President Vladimir Putin. The shocking images of tens of millions suddenly struck by war have deeply moved the European psyche, and an unprecedented wave of solidarity has united European countries in support of welcoming refugees from Ukraine.

Seventy-nine percent of French people favor accepting Ukrainians in distress, echoing President Emmanuel Macron's commitment for France to "take its share." Other government members reminded people of "our responsibility of solidarity toward refugees."

Such unanimous generosity should be the normal political response to any human tragedy. But it is difficult to miss how this resonates in a European context where immigration is frequently discussed as a threat rather than a human right.

The reaction contrasts with the response toward Afghans last summer. At the time, 51 percent of French people opposed the welcoming of Afghan refugees. Macron, for his part, displayed a less empathic face, saying in response to their plight: "We must plan and protect ourselves against large irregular migratory flows."

What explains this discrepancy? As Ukrainians were desperately trying to escape from their country, disturbing comments started to spread, some of them compiled and shared on the Twitter account "Caisses de Grève." Videos show a succession of White commentators using the most despicable arguments to justify treating Ukrainians differently from other refugees. "We can tell that they are fleeing, they are not migrants who will adopt a logic of immigration," says one. "They are culturally European … very close," adds another. "There is a difference between Ukrainians who take part in our civilizational space and other populations who belong to other civilizations," comments yet another, while a fourth claims, "This is a high-quality immigration that we'll be able to take advantage of."

When questioned about the racism of those comments, a White journalist answered: "French people tell themselves, 'Ukrainians look like me, drive the same car, and are 3 hours far from Paris' [by air]. There is a 'proximity identification' that French people have less when it comes to Afghans; it is not racism but proximity."

It was not just commentators making such statements. "These are not the refugees we are used to … these people are Europeans," said Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov.

I am amazed by the acrobatic contortions used to avoid saying the obvious: Ukrainians are White and European — though some African countries are closer to Paris than Kyiv — and, according to colonial standards, they should not suffer so atrociously. Such statements, problematic on so many levels, are fueled by layers of racism and white supremacy. War and misery are seen as the normal state of Black and brown people, but White people facing the same horror is viewed as shocking. Through that lens, Whites' feelings are valued more than those of others, and European-ness is equated with humanity and relatability.

This is what African residents of Ukraine bitterly experienced at the border of Poland. The choice of using terms such as "refugee" rather than "migrant crisis" encapsulates how the suffering of White people is validated, while migration from other regions is constantly questioned, as if Black and brown people have a natural ability to handle hardship.

On a multiethnic continent, this raises questions about how Europe sees itself — and how millions of non-White citizens and residents should be treated. There is a large gulf between the newfound understanding of the challenges of migration, and the typical European stance stigmatizing immigration and deploying all means possible to prevent migrants from crossing borders.

Last week, the 27 European Union countries decided to apply for the first time a 2001 directive, granting "temporary protection" to those fleeing Ukraine. This allows them the right to work and access to housing, education, medical care and welfare benefits. In France, they can access free public transportation via trains.

Meanwhile, since 2014, more than 20,000 people have drowned in the Mediterranean because they were trying to escape an unenviable fate. It is heartbreaking knowing that the E.U. has always had the means to save them — but instead often criminalized them, making their journeys even more dangerous. In fact, the involvement of European countries in conflicts outside the continent and our historical and current responsibility for the growing climate crisis have triggered waves of migration. Those people should receive the same kind of solidarity granted to refugees now fleeing Russian aggression.

The cruelty faced by Ukrainians seems to have opened many eyes, including those of Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, who was praising a "zero refugee" policy a few months ago. The current situation should set a precedent and push the E.U. to make welcoming refugees the norm, in line with our much-vaunted European values.

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