Who is a 'true' refugee? On the limits of Polish hospitality

Why is a cat entering Poland from Ukraine treated differently than a cat from Afghanistan entering via Belarus? As most of Poland focuses on the reception of Ukrainian refugees, @olena_babakova, @fiakamila, @lidiajurek and @MartaKindler describe how refugees of other nationalities (and even their pets) are perceived as less deserving by the Polish authorities and Polish society. The double standard reflects the views of many, not only in Poland but in the entire European Union.

People seeking asylum in Poland

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Who is a 'true' refugee? On the limits of Polish hospitality

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Welcoming and unwelcoming discourses and practices

In numerous interviews in 2018, Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki underlined that Poland's policy towards forced migration is based on two principles: (1) providing aid at the source, supporting the countries from which people flee, financially or otherwise, and (2) making sure that Polish state borders are secure.

In reality, the implementation of this vision has had mixed results. Regarding the first issue, Poland spends only 0.14 % of GNP on 'development aid' abroad. When it comes to security, Poland has indeed been focused on the securitization of migration, in line with a trend present in the European Union for at least two decades. The leaders of the Law and Justice (PIS) party have spun a narrative of migration as a threat to Poland, a vision that was quickly taken up first by tabloids and later on by conservative newspapers and magazines (Krzyżanowski 2020).

Polish authorities decided not to accept refugees in 2015 under the EU's relocation and resettlement mechanism, citing security issues. They adopted this policy even though

During the 2015 parliamentary campaign, many minor political figures took up anti-refugee and islamophobic rhetoric

Left row presents the list of NOs - third "no" is "no for the islamisation of Poland".

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Poland's neighbour, Ukraine, has been under Russia's attack since 2014, and escalation was always highly possible. Then, in 2016, the ruling party drafted and implemented the Act on Anti-terrorist Activities, the first such regulation in Poland's history. As Witold Klaus (2017) notes, this law identifies every foreigner as potentially dangerous (giving authorities the possibility of wiretapping foreign residents without judicial authorization). Soon after, border officials started refusing to accept

asylum claims from people at the Polish-Belarusian border (Klaus 2020, Klaus 2022).

These unwelcoming discourses and practices are actually a new development in Poland. A longtime country of emigration, Poland is dynamically turning into a receiving country. Immigration to Poland was until recently primarily temporary and economic in nature.

In 1990, after the Swedish authorities turned back to a Polish harbour a ship with a few hundred asylum seekers from Africa and Asia, claiming that Poland was a safe country, Poland started developing a refugee protection system. The country ratified the Geneva Convention and signed a readmission agreement with Schengen countries. For many years, Poland's emerging migration policy (including forced migration) was guided by EU and international laws. As Witold Klaus writes, (2020) the europeanization of Polish migration law included positive developments, including social rights guarantees and procedural guarantees, particularly for asylum seekers and individuals in return procedures, as well as negative ones – assumptions of closed external borders, treating foreigners with suspicion and looking at migration overall as a security issue. Although after 9/11 and the so-called 'War on Terror' opinion polls indicated attitudes of fear towards Muslims in Polish society, for many years migration as such was not a topic of public or political debate. Opinion polls from May 2015 showed that over 70% of Poles were convinced that refugees should be welcomed in Poland. This welcoming attitude declined significantly in 2016, with 58% of Poles refusing to accept refugees.

In the first eight weeks since Russia's full-scale military aggression on Ukraine in February 2022, nearly 3 million people crossed the Polish border seeking refuge. Unexpectedly, the attitude of ordinary Poles shifted, resulting in a spontaneous, grassroots effort to help Ukrainians in distress. Whether in response to this solidarity or purely as a political tactic, the rhetoric of the current government concerning forced migrants changed dramatically, becoming welcoming to all… or seemingly all (numerous other European leaders similarly struck a different tone toward refugees in their speeches regarding the war in Ukraine). However, with each day of the war in Ukraine, the picture of who is welcome, who is merely tolerated, and who should be turned away, is becoming clearer and clearer.

The 'other' refugees

With massive numbers of refugees fleeing Ukraine, the EU triggered for the first time ever its temporary protection directive, introduced in 2001 following the conflicts in former Yugoslavia. It allows for the immediate and temporary protection of displaced persons from non-EU countries in the event of a mass influx. Poland quickly developed its own law, a special regulation which gives Ukrainian nationals who entered Poland on February 24th or later access to legal residence, social support, the labor market, and health care.

We can estimate the number of beneficiaries of the current law as at least 1.4 million people; as of early April, 1-1.1 million people have already left for other destinations. The law does not apply to those Ukrainians who were in Poland before February 24th [(approximately 1.5 million)](). It also excludes non-Ukrainian citizens fleeing Ukraine (except spouses of Ukrainian citizens). From the scant data available, we know that over 100,000 non-Ukrainian nationals have entered Poland from Ukraine. Who are these people?

Belarusians — from respected dissidents to representatives of Lukashenko's regime?

Belarusians and Russians make up a significant part of Ukraine's ca. 400,000 foreign population (according to Ukrainian Migration Office mid-2019 data). Some have been legal residents since 1991, others arrived after the invasion of Crimea in 2014, and others still after the fraudulent 2020 presidential election in Belarus.

According to the [Ukrainian border service data](), at least 10,000 Belarusians relocated to Ukraine between August 2020 and July 2021. Only several dozen of them applied for asylum, while three thousand received temporary residence permits. The rest preferred to take advantage of Ukraine's visa-free travel guarantees, which Kyiv had extended for Belarusians to up to 180 days in late 2020. We can also assume that Ukraine was supposed to be a (long) transit country for some new emigrants on their way to the EU**.** While Belarusian IT specialists received at least limited [support from the Ukrainian government](), other highly qualified Belarusian specialists, including doctors, met numerous obstacles when trying to obtain residential permits.

Those Belarusians who left Ukraine after February 24th were welcomed in Poland regardless of their migration status (Ukrainian residence permit; visa-free travel; irregular stay). They could count on the resources of the sizeable Belarusian diaspora (even 100,000 people after the new political emigration of 2020-2021) and NGOs that deal specifically with Belarusian immigration assistance (Belarus Solidarity Center, BY Help, The Belarus House, Białoruś 2020, and other) Thanks to Poland's experience of emigration assistance in 2020-2021, the new Belarusian refugees received at least basic help with housing and children's education.

After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine both 'old' emigrants and newcomers from Belarus faced discrimination in the housing market and public spaces because of the Lukashenko regime's support of the Russian invasion. Alina Koushyk from Belarus Solidarity Center reported in mid-March 2022 that her organization received around 160 documented claims about acts of discrimination against Belarusian migrants in Warsaw.

In April, owners of a club in Kraków denied comedian Slava Komissarenko – who has a warrant out for his arrest in Minsk for criticizing the authorities – the opportunity to organize a performance just because he was Belarusian. Slava has frequently donated the profits from his shows to Ukraine.

The Belarusian newcomers' legal status was supposed to be less pressing; most lawyers suggested Belarusians wait until the new legislation regulating the refugee issue was implemented, which they expected would offer them the same protections as it did the Ukrainians. But the legislation, introduced March 12, only covered Ukrainian nationals, causing much disappointment. Even Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsichanouskaya petitioned the Polish authorities to cover her compatriots with international protection. Her concern was more than justified: those Belarusians who crossed the Ukrainian-Polish border after February 24th and did not apply for any form of international protection or residence permit within 15 days, became in the eyes of the law 'illegal' immigrants who could face deportation. The issue was only resolved in early April 2022: Polish MPs voted to amend the law to give Belarusian citizens who had fled from Ukraine the right to apply for humanitarian visas, and after 18 months the right to apply for residence permits.

Russians — two-time refugees with no rights

Russian war refugees fleeing Ukraine, where many of them ended up as political emigrants, are arguably in an even worse position.

According to Free Russia House Kyiv estimates, more than 10,000 Russians came to Ukraine after 2014 to escape Putin's persecution. Some of them managed to obtain refugee status in Ukraine, and dozens had enrolled in an ongoing verification procedure. On the eve of the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the media reported that the Russian FSB had a list of activists to be captured and imprisoned; as social media discussions reveal, the Russian diaspora in Ukraine fears that some of its representatives could also be on the list. According to sociologist and historian Uğur Ümit Üngör, such violence against civilians is characteristic of wars with Russian involvement – the most recent example being the conflict in Syria. The author is convinced that Putin will not be lenient or restrained in this regard.

Poland let most Russian document holders cross the border with no larger issues. Those on Interpol's wanted list faced some difficulties (in Russia and Belarus, opening a fake criminal case to put a political dissident on the Interpol list is a common form of persecution). In contrast with Belarusians, Russian citizens cannot rely on the knowledge base or financial resources of a large local diaspora. There is essentially only one diaspora organization, a group called For Free Russia, which helps refugees with legal and practical issues in Poland (Russians for Ukraine). The association has a field office in Przemyśl, where Russian diaspora activists along with Poles, Belarusians, and Ukrainians have been delivering humanitarian aid to refugees who cross the Polish border. The usually Ukraine-based Free Russia House Kyiv relocated to Warsaw in early March and now organizes evacuations from southern and eastern Ukraine for all Ukrainian residents regardless of nationality.

To the best of our knowledge, most Russian citizens who escaped the war via the Ukrainian-Polish border traveled to other EU countries after a couple of days/weeks spent in Poland. They hoped to join established diaspora communities. What's more, western European countries – unlike Poland – consider Russians eligible for temporary protection status along with Ukrainian nationals.

Central Asians – a supposedly quick path to protection

Another group that fled Ukraine that is not covered by the new Polish regulation are citizens of Central Asian states. Here we should mention the citizens of Tajikistan in particular, who include several thousand labour immigrants, as well as political dissidents who sought refuge in Ukraine.

The Polish Foreigners' Office advised those who cannot return to their home countries to apply for temporary protection. Internet registration in four languages is available; and applications should be processed within 7-15 days. However, according to [governmental data](#) no one has received a favorable decision in such a procedure since the war in Ukraine began.

International students from Ukraine – a perplexing (lack of) response

Among those displaced by the war in Ukraine were [over 80,000 foreign students](#) from Asia (largely India and Central Asia) and Africa (largely Morocco and Nigeria). Uprooted, these young men and women hoped to reach safety, but also to stay somewhere that would allow them to continue their studies – an opportunity which Poland, with its universities underlining the importance of internationalization, completely missed by refusing to accommodate them. What's worse, these students experienced racist treatment from both Ukrainian and Polish border guards as well as regular Polish citizens, who seem to have overlooked that it's not only Ukrainian nationals who've had to flee this war.

While aid for refugees at the outset of the war came primarily from private citizens, the Polish government quickly organized travel for non-Ukrainian (and non-white) students. Although the students hoped to reach the capital to get help from their respective embassies, the government-organized buses took them across Poland to the other border – with Germany. The arrival of non-white and mostly male refugees in western Poland (Gubin, Słubice, Kostrzyn) in the first week of war, was met with surprise by local residents, who were expecting women and children from Ukraine. Much of the immediate public reaction was aggressive, strong enough to elicit concerned statements from officials who feared Poles would resort to lynchings. The newcomers were seen as the 'wrong' refugees. This sentiment found its outlet on social media and in front of the school gyms where the students were placed. Meanwhile, back on the Ukrainian border, in the town of Przemyśl threats against non-whites turned into physical violence. Nationalist groups targeted not only refugees of colour but also

non-white volunteers from Germany or Israel.

Roma — caught between negative stereotypes and blatant racism

On February 27th, Ukrainian news agencies reported that Roma in the Kherson area captured a Russian tank. This spurred a number of social media posts about the Roma *stealing* the tank from the occupiers. These posts (including one from Poland's president) were seemingly good-natured and heartwarming, but actually perpetuated anti-Roma bias and deeply rooted stereotypes. The appreciation of the brave act was interwoven with commentary on the assumed cultural traits and behaviors of Roma. The act was portrayed as cheating, stealing, outsmarting foolish Gadje (non-Roma), as opposed to patriotism, of defending one's country.

While other unarmed civilian villagers or Ukrainian farmers would have been perceived as heroically capturing the tank from the occupiers, Roma, as is their alleged custom, were said to have stolen it. The way the 'stealing Roma' stereotype played out in this case was notable. While it spread a positive message about this least liked social group, it was also based on the very attribute that makes Roma the least liked. This narrative also reveals a certain paradoxical psychological mechanism. In a world that has lost all sense of predictability and has become a domain of chaos, violence, and cruelty, the stealing Roma restore a certain constant element from the normative order of the old world. What can one expect from Roma? Not bravery, not heroism, but stealing.

'My Tsygany, ale my tezh Ukraintsi' [We are Roma, but we are Ukrainians too] overheard a colleague at the train station in Kyiv. It was a response to some non-Roma people fearmongering about the Roma and their allegedly thieving ways. When some arrived at Polish reception shelters, they were told not to take too many clothes because the volunteers believed that the Roma would profit off the clothing by selling it at markets. Their children are perceived as loud. A Polish Roma volunteer was told off by a Ukrainian volunteer in Warsaw, who said *I don't want any Gypsy to mess around here.* Reception centers contact Roma organisations in Poland to take care of *their own people* as if they were not Ukrainian, because other Ukrainian refugees don't want to e.g. share washing machines at the shelters with them. Roma organisations and activists, along with some Gadje activists, have been on standby since the first days of war. However, their capacities are limited. They are able to facilitate communication (in Romani, but also in Ukrainian and/or Russian), comfort people in distress, and help them with finding temporary or permanent accommodations. They are not able to take care of all Roma refugees from Ukraine, yet this is what they are expected to do more and more frequently. There has been a number of reports on Ukrainian Roma in Poland and the problems they encounter by OKO Press, Gazeta Wyborcza, Newsweek Polska.

Jews — a case of positive discrimination

While the Roma have been subject to 'classic' prejudice and discrimination, one can argue that Jewish refugees from Ukraine are experiencing 'positive' discrimination. The number of aid actors willing to specifically provide aid to Jewish refugees from Ukraine is large and their network is dense. Many refugees are taken over by Israel which 'repatriates' Jewish refugees from Ukraine, while the other refugees are subject to [strict visa procedures from the Israeli side](#), which often spells anxiety in mixed families.

Before the outbreak of the war, the size of the Jewish minority in Ukraine was estimated to be between 100,000 and 350,000 people, depending on the criteria. This made it one of the largest Jewish minorities in Europe. Since the beginning of the war, thousands of Jews left Ukraine for all directions (including for Russia). In Poland, Ukrainian Jews are efficiently intercepted by Jewish organizations, which direct them to Warsaw and from there arrange plane travel for them to Israel. Some Polish volunteers are focused on helping primarily Jewish refugees. Some Jewish refugees decide to stay in Poland or go to Germany, fearing Israel as another conflict zone. Observers interpret the assistance provided to Jewish refugees in Poland as proof of a break in this country's historical discrimination against the Jewish minority.

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Finally, there are 1,000-plus [people from countries like Afghanistan and Syria](#) who were granted various forms of protection in Ukraine, but who also had to flee the country and whose eligibility for refugee status was questioned in Poland.

Who is a 'true' refugee? The construction of a politicized category

In the Western public imagination, there's a particular image of what a refugee should look like: poor rather than rich, female rather than male, and sick rather than healthy. As refugees began fleeing Ukraine, we saw an important public debate start to play out: are we more welcoming to Ukrainians because they are white, unlike, for example, Afghanis or Syrians? (See: [Amren](#), [Notes from Poland](#), [The Guardian](#), [The Conversation](#)). Or is it because they are Christian? Or is it because they are largely women?

On the need to suffer to be a 'true' refugee… A broader picture

After the economic crisis of 1973-74, Western European countries' migration policy evolved to restrict labour migration, while also giving access to legal residency to those applying for refugee status and to family members of foreigners who had already settled in those countries. The expansion of the EU and the common market in the early 2000s led to a migration consensus of sorts: the need for foreign labour will be filled primarily by citizens of new member states, while the barrier to entry for citizens of third countries will remain extremely high.

Terytorialsi - Zawsz... ✓ · 27.02.2022 ...
Różnica między migrantem, a uchodźcą?
Te zdjęcia mówią więcej niż tysiąc słów.

#Terytorialsi #ukraina #wojna #Belarus
#granica #migrants #uchodzcy #refugees

💬 964   🔁 1052   ♡ 3494   ⬆

A meme tweeted by the Territorial Defence Force with the description: 'What's the difference between a migrant and a refugee? These pictures are worth a thousand words.'

There were two exceptions: highly qualified workers, and refugees. The EU was proud to be a 'humanitarian superpower'. This approach pushes until today many third-country nationals who do not fall into either of these two categories to use unregulated routes of entry. Thus, the only opportunity to move to the EU for blue-collar workers from third countries often turns into a competition where you have to cross the border in dangerous conditions and then prove your suffering. Getting a visa as a supermarket worker or hairdresser is unrealistic.

This binary of 'become an IT specialist' or 'prove that you are suffering a lot' seemed to have been overturned by the Central European countries' migration policies. Less receptive to refugee cases, the Visegrad Four, the Baltics, and the Western Balkans created relatively liberal migration laws in the 2010s, favouring, in contrast to the 'old' EU, inexpensive labour from third countries. Countries such as Poland, Czechia, Lithuania or Croatia created a model in which citizens of Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, or Bosnia and Herzegovina are considered a pool of low and medium-skilled employees.

In recent years, it seemed that demographics and economic growth would push the entire EU, if not to fully adopt, then at least to adapt elements of the Central European model. However, the war in Ukraine might slow down this process; moreover, it may reverse it in Central Europe itself. We already see that the Polish government has provided Ukrainian refugees with access to the labour market and social benefits previously inaccessible to most labour migrants.

But even if they are now in effect labour migrants, the expectations remain the same: refugees must always be suffering. In early March, some on Polish Twitter complained that the Cracow Zoo was packed with Ukrainian refugees who got free tickets from the city (the implication being that rather than enjoy the zoo, they should quietly sit and cry in hospitable Polish homes). The journalist and pundit Lukasz Warzecha conducted an 'audit' of cars with Ukrainian license plates following the surprised

observations of some social media users that many luxury cars now visible on Polish streets and highways had Ukrainian plates. There are reports on social networks that Ukrainian women do not accept every job they are offered. Some support the women and encourage them to fight dishonest employers, but others are quick to condemn them. The refugee evokes sympathy while s/he is unhappy and grateful. As soon as s/he begins to show subjectivity (not taking everything that is given), tension arises.

According to opinion polls, as of early March [90% of Poles were ready to help Ukrainians](). But how many are ready to show not pity but partnership and solidarity? For years, state propaganda has been repeating that the primary manifestation of Polish hospitality towards foreigners is the opportunity for a migrant to work. Quite predictably, this linked the migrants' presence in the country with their labour market usefulness. This meshes with the overall subordinate place Ukraine holds in the Polish national imagination, a result of historical entanglements and power asymmetries between the countries. With this way of thinking, it is very difficult to push for discourse that focuses on partnership and solidarity.

Not refugees, but 'weapons' in a 'hybrid war'? On criminalisation of forced migrants

On Poland's eastern border people seeking refuge from war and other atrocities receive very different treatment from both the security forces and regular Poles.

People trapped at the Polish-Belarusian border have become a tool in the geopolitical game between Belarus and its neighbours, including Poland. They are subject to so-called 'weaponisation' by the Belarusian regime as a way to force the EU to renew dialogue with Minsk and lift its sanctions. Generally, 'weaponisation' of migration goes hand in hand with the 'pushback' policy and a [response from the affected countries that centers on security](). EU institutions' representatives have frequently and unanimously [called the current crisis an example of a 'hybrid threat']() orchestrated by the Belarusian regime.

What we see on Poland's border with Belarus is very similar to the treatment of migrants arriving at the EU's other external borders, with one notable difference. The narrative about 'hybrid threats' or 'hybrid war' frames the situation as a 'man-made migration crisis' and thus allows for and justifies different reactions and solutions. In other words, if you follow this logic, pushbacks on the Polish-Belarussian border are not the same pushbacks that happen along the Balkan route or in the Greek-Turkish border region of Evros. As [Felix Bender argues](), the political nature of the crisis and 'weaponisation' of migrants by the authorities and societies of the destination states, 'legitimises their treatment as other than human. In this context, they are a means to a political goal, allowing for reactions we would otherwise find abhorrent with regard to human beings: denial of the right to protection from persecution or violent pushbacks'.

The problem of unequal treatment of refugees concerns not only blocking the border for some and opening it for others. For those who have managed to cross the border, discrimination also continues within the country. The law allows Ukrainian refugees to be accommodated by private citizens (this form of accommodation has been predominant) and it stipulates financial support for hosts for the first three months. They also have the right to work and can move freely within the country. This differs vastly from the conditions faced by other asylum seekers, both in Poland and in other EU member states. But the contrast is starkest when we look at the situation of refugees who have crossed the Belarusian border, especially those who are accommodated in closed and guarded detention centres. The latter fact renders their refugee presence in Poland a de facto criminalised act. Information gathered by Amnesty International exposes these places as extremely hostile institutions that perpetrate a long list of abuses against refugees. In addition to the overcrowding and underfunding of these centres, refugees face insults, humiliating personal searches, forced medical treatments (tranquillisers), and the use of stun guns (see recent [report by Amnesty International](#)). The centres (e.g. in Wędrzyn, Krosno Odrzańskie) severely restrict the list of items that they will accept as donations for the refugees (shavers without razor blades, shoes without shoelaces). Needless to say, no such restrictions are put in place for donation requests for Ukrainian refugees.

It is telling that the contrast between the open-door policy towards people fleeing Ukraine on the southern part of Poland's eastern border and the pushbacks of 'illegal immigrants' on its northern section, have been [noticed and condemned by Ukrainian organisations operating in Poland](#).

Refugee women versus refugee men

In public perception, largely shaped by Polish government media, Ukrainians fleeing the war — unlike the refugees at the Belarusian border — fulfil the image of refugees with whom to empathise. There's their skin colour, but also their gender – and the intersection of the two (Zessin-Jurek [2022](#)). Due to the decree on general mobilisation that keeps men aged 18-60 in Ukraine for potential military conscription, it is primarily women and children who cross the border. There are just ca. 3% men aged 18-60 among the Ukrainian refugees who received Polish identification number PESEL till the early April 2022. The Polish perception of Ukrainian refugees is shaped by a mechanism described by sociologist [Cynthia Enloe](#) – the combination of 'womenandchildren' as innocent victims of conflict. This amalgamated view of women and children blurs the distinction between these two groups, takes away their agency, and presents them all solely as victims.

Part of being 'the ideal victim' is being subordinate, weak, unable to protect oneself, and having to entrust one's survival to helpers, whose role thus becomes very prominent (Christie [1987](#)). From Miriam Ticktin's research ([2017](#)), we also learn

about the categories of 'vulnerable' and 'innocent' as organising empathic responses to atrocities and building a binary divide between deserving and undeserving of help. This divide also suggests that not all men are innocent. It corresponds to the vision of men as entangled in war and killing, as those who fight or should fight, supporting the charge against the refugees who have found their way to the Belarusian border, as well as the southern borders of Europe since 2015. It is an accusation that these refugees — overwhelmingly men — are leaving their countries in order to serve their own interests rather than stay and fight for their homelands. Related to this is another accusation: that the men are abandoning their families, women and children, to selfishly seek salvation for themselves in Europe. Moreover, as men, they all fall under the generalising judgement that none of them are innocent victims, as defined by Enloe. Unlike Ukrainian refugee women, they are suspected of coming to Europe mainly to benefit from the EU's welfare state system.

In the popular imagination, the legitimate refugee is still primarily a helpless victim waiting for assistance, rather than a person taking matters into their own hands. Female refugees from Ukraine — many of whom wish to start working right away — may very well be the ones to change this refugee stereotype, which presents women as passive. But even the above gender criterion is not applied in the same way. While mothers from Ukraine are seen as caretakers of their families, the presence of mothers from Syria at the Belarusian border was met with a completely different reaction. These women were accused of being irresponsible and of endangering their children during the crossing to Poland.

A cat from Ukraine versus a cat from Usnarz

The mechanism of empathising with helplessness and rescuing defenceless beings has also strongly manifested itself towards animals. A wave of empathy toward Ukraine refugees has extended to the pets that cross the border alongside them. These animals have become the subject of countless heart-wrenching reports about 'unusual runaways'. Donation collection points for refugees include a must-have corner for pet food and pet carriers. In the first days of the war, Polish media of all political outlooks also unanimously rooted for Ukrainian zoo animals, some of which were transported from Ukraine to the zoo in Poznań.

Perhaps surprisingly, the dividing line between legitimate and illegitimate refugees also runs through the animal world. A few months earlier, media controversy erupted around the so-called 'Usnarz cat' case (Usnarz is a village on the border with Belarus, which in the Polish mind became equated with the beginning of the humanitarian crisis in summer 2021). While part of the media reacted with concern to the sight of a cat who travelled all the way from Afghanistan with its owner and was being prevented from entering Poland along with its owner by the Polish border guards, anti-refugee sceptics saw the narrative

around the cat from Usnarz as a case of media manipulation calculated to evoke sympathy.

Not our responsibility… 'post-colonial concerns'

The final element that we would like to highlight is how the image of an 'acceptable' refugee has distant historical roots. Polish-Ukrainian interactions have a long and complicated history. Although Ukrainian World War II crimes are mentioned occasionally in the context of Polish aid for Ukrainians (by the extreme right), the majority of Poles don't seem to believe this is the time for this kind of reckoning with the past. Similarly, international historians do not expect Ukraine to now address its past in relation to the Holocaust – e.g. in the context of the so-called Azov group.

In Poland, the memory of Volhynia seems to be overshadowed by a sentiment dating back to the times of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, that Ukrainians belong to a family of nations of sorts, at the head of which once stood Poles, their 'elder brothers'. Today, these Polish brothers are wealthier (again) and better placed in terms of security. The spontaneous, immediate nature of the Polish aid response can also be attributed to this common past.

One can speak here of a form of post-colonial sentiment that many Poles feel towards Ukrainians. This argument becomes clearer if we notice that the majority of Poles do not have such caring, albeit paternalistic, feelings towards refugees from Africa or Asia. On the contrary, for many years the

government media have been suggesting that refugees from these countries are the post-colonial responsibility of the European West. And since Poland has never profited from these distant territories and has not effectively meddled in the politics of these regions, Poles should now bear none of the consequences of European colonisation.

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The discourses and practices towards refugees described above dominate in Polish society and are promoted by the Polish state, but are by no means the only ones. Their adherents claim that refugees from the Middle East or Africa are a threat to Poland, naming various reasons for this. Beside a supposed terrorist threat, the most frequently raised issue is that of Polish cultural identity. In their view, 'true' Poland is white and Catholic. This simplistic view on Poland, but also on Ukraine (thus the problem, for example, with the Polish reception of the Ukrainian Roma) has been emblematic of the recent years' response of Poland towards not only refugees but also economic migration. Apart from the followers of the 'true' Poland theory, there is of course no shortage of Polish social actors who think and act differently, following the principles of universal humanitarianism.

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