

UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN SCANDINAVIA, OR HOW TO TALK ABOUT MIGRATION WITHOUT TALKING ABOUT IT

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Abstract. The reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 indicated a multiplicity of standpoints, different positionalities, and power asymmetries, in particular in the Western academy. Representatives of the mainstream migration research centres as well as individual researchers, while recognising the importance of solidarity with the Ukrainian people and with Ukrainian scholars, emphasised simultaneously that all other migrants around the world should get help from the EU governments on the same level as Ukrainian war refugees. Moreover, the majority of published research articles (by November 2022) in Migration Studies argue that non-Western, but white and Christian Ukrainians have been accepted in a much better way than non-white migrants from African and Middle Eastern countries who experienced much harder obstacles trying to enter Europe and that therefore, this particularly welcoming reception of Ukrainians in the EU is direct evidence of racism. Such hegemonic framing overshadows and sidelines studies of the everyday experiences of Ukrainian refugees and the multiple challenges they have been facing in the EU, where the mid- and long-term prospects of their integration remain questionable.

Keywords: Ukrainian refugees, Ukrainian-Russian war, Central Europe, knowledge production, postcolonialism.

In this short essay, I will describe my experience at a migration conference using the autoethnographic method, through which I reflect on my identity of being Ukrainian in origin and being a migration



researcher. After this conference, I became mainly interested in the unequivocal conclusions of many migration scholars before any comparative studies about the reception of Ukrainians and other migrants had been done.

Could I give you a hug? – my colleague, a migration researcher, whom I met yesterday for the first time at the conference mingle, asks me. She has just finished her presentation about how Norway manages Ukrainian refugees who, in her opinion, were much better received in comparison to other refugees. Before her presentation, she publicly expressed apologies to me in case her presentation would trigger me as a Ukrainian. And now, after the panel finished, she wants to be sure I do not feel hurt.

Even though such disclaimers about possible triggering might be part of the collective habitus in Western universities, I was a little bit struck by her apologising. Why did she say it? Is this conference not a place for a professional discussion where we all, despite our nationalities and life experiences, are gathered to talk about our research *per se*?

I tried not to overanalyse her words and asked her instead how the Norwegian national policies deal with Ukrainians seeking temporary protection and whether there is a broader public discussion about their future in Norway. Today, Ukrainians are officially called refugees, while having the rights as asylum-seekers, under the Temporal Protection Directive.

The document was first adopted after the wars in former Yugoslavia and activated for the first time on 24 February 2022. It allows Ukrainians to enter the EU and to stay in the country but not to make (and go through) an individual application for refugee status as all other asylum seekers, not covered by the Directive, have the right to do.

My colleague listens to my question carefully and answers that she has not done any research on this yet, but everything seems to be fine with the Ukrainians, as it was with the other refugee groups (e.g. Bosnians and Kosovars in the 1990s). However, she emphasises, what is different today is the unprecedented support for Ukrainians from European societies, with all the signs of spontaneous help and empathy from many people. It shows clearly, in her opinion, that EU countries and their citizens differentiate between refugees (European and white vs. non-European and non-white), and that this has to be changed, for example by reforming the Convention for Refugees from 1951.

Her words got direct support from the panel audience.

I thought for a second whether it would be relevant to ask her if she sees any difference between short-term and long-term perspectives of the EU reception for Ukrainians and other migrants. How can one consider the fact that Ukrainians freely entered the EU border as being discriminative against others when Ukrainians had the right to enter and stay in the EU for 90 days already since 2017? Considering

this, how could this situation be solved in another way at the Polish, Romanian, Slovakian, and Hungarian border when millions of Ukrainians tried to cross the border in panic with their biometrical passports? Are Ukrainians really 'privileged' by the European Union when they found themselves in the waiting rooms of receiving societies at least for one (but most probably more) year, without any chance of getting real refugee status, and as a consequence, access to Western welfare programs? Many of these people lost housing and family in Ukraine, so the only solution for them is to start life from scratch. At the same time, this is not possible in their current status, and they will live in full uncertainty for an indefinite time until new policies arrive.

However, all these reflections stuck in my throat. No one seemed to be ready for such a discussion. The atmosphere of the audience was consensual and united already without any questions at all.

Could I give you a hug? – my colleague asks me when the panel is finished. I looked at her for a few microseconds and thought how empirically interesting this moment is. Being a migration scholar and activist, who stresses the importance of inclusivity and anti-racial policies, she is so prone to talk with me about my feelings, but not about my research which is, ironically, about the newest case of colonial and imperial atrocity.

The panel where I presented my emerging research data from the fieldwork conducted in Ystad, one of the Swedish municipalities, was the next in the conference schedule, and my pilot project was the only one on the matter made after February 2022 among the other 200 papers at this conference. I came there with the freshest results from my study of Ukrainians fleeing from the war to Sweden. But neither my empathetic colleague nor others who were somehow involved in the discussion about Ukrainians at the previous panel came to listen.

This encounter happened at the largest migration research conference in the Nordic countries that was held this summer. The main topic of the event was the politicisation of migration studies and how it impacts societies and the research community itself. According to the statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees from September 2022, since the beginning of hostilities, the Ukrainian refugee wave is considered one of the largest migration waves in the world today, involving nearly 7 million people. Over 4 million refugees from Ukraine have registered for temporary protection or similar national protection schemes within the last six months. However, nothing of that was discussed during the migration conference gathering Nordic migration scholars. If Ukraine was mentioned at all, it was always framed in the same way: the way Europeans handle Ukrainian refugees is a clear example of European racism toward other asylum seekers.

Even before the war, migration flows from Ukraine dominated European statistics for a long period. Ukrainians took first place

in the number of first residence permits among non-EU migrants during the last few years, 80% of which received labour visas (Residence permits 2022). A majority of Ukrainian labour migrants developed a permanent transnational lifestyle: they worked in the EU having families in Ukraine or experienced other forms of circular migration (Fedyuk & Kindler 2016). When the full-scale war started in February 2022, Ukrainian labour migrants' diasporas (especially in Poland) came to play an essential role in accepting newcomers, providing practical everyday solutions as well as trying to find long-term political and social ones. Their actions are a good example of how transnational migrant networks make an impact on the receiving communities.

Among those who have fled from the war since February, the majority were women, and the majority of them came with children. With some exceptions, there is no debate in the European Union about their right to integration in the receiving countries, and the main burden of their adaptation lies on the shoulders of local activists and civil society.

In the Scandinavian context, where the social model is based on access to social welfare, in which refugees typically get in line with their refugee status and residence, Ukrainians are left at the total economical margin, and no one would dare to say for how long. Sweden, Denmark, and Norway have accepted similar numbers of Ukrainians (on average 40 000 in each country), in addition to the relatively small Ukrainian diasporas living there before. All these newcomers, being refugees by fact, after receiving the temporal protection status continue to have the rights of asylum seekers – the right to work, the right to urgent medical help and some social allowance (in Sweden, for example, a maximum of 180 Euros per month in the best case) if any. Their staying there is possible only because of the help they receive from the local communities and civil society. However, in different ways and with varying success, these women try to build a new life structure having no idea how long they will stay here, facing transformations of gender and other social roles in their families divided by borders and war, and experiencing unavoidable downward social mobility in their professional careers.

Getting back to the conference, one simple question worries me: why are those processes and aspects in the ongoing and diverse migration wave not interesting for migration scholars? Even if migration studies are highly politicised and polarised, how did it become possible that moral discourse (whichever it was) could replace the epistemological interest in arguably the largest refugee phenomenon in Europe since the Second World War which is happening right now and right here?

What do we have behind this rhetoric with so little interest in facts? And where is the space for the subalterns' voices?

The Western monopoly on knowledge production and distribution has been much discussed before, and there is a debate on the

importance of anthropology in Central Europe as a mostly “theory from the peripheries” for European anthropology. One of the most prominent scholars on socialist societies, Katherine Verdery, noted in 1971 when she did her research in Romania: “The great books [of anthropology] dealt with Oceania, Africa, or Native America – with ‘primitives.’ [...] Eastern Europe was less well known to anthropology than was New Guinea” (Verdery 1971: 14).

However, Dace Dzenovska and Larisa Kurtovic (2018) have recently argued that there are several themes in which Eastern/Central Europe can teach the West about the future. They name, for instance, the knowledge of totalitarianism/authoritarianism, knowledge of fascism/nationalism, and knowledge about Russia.

I am not sure if these lessons can be useful for some of the Western migration researchers until they are ready to apply to their actions and mindsets the same postcolonial lenses that they are ready to use in analysing European colonialism. As Gill Valentine (2016) points out, postcolonial theory has tended only to focus on those spaces where Western European colonialism has had a territorial and political history. However, it could be analytically fruitful for the Western academy to start seeing Russia as an imperial subject which has overt imperialistic ambitions, and as a consequence, take a closer look at the social and cultural processes taking place in Ukraine and other post-communist countries. Russia today is obsessed with destroying Ukrainian culture, language and people, and has portrayed Ukrainians as Russians who are just manipulated by the West (Putin 2022). Russian political elites see Ukraine in this way because they believe Ukraine is the core element without which Russia will not be itself. This was obvious for many Ukrainians during the centuries, and now this is clear to Ukraine’s neighbouring countries including the Baltic states, well aware of Russia’s imperial intentions towards its neighbours. The enormous migration wave from Ukraine to the European Union is not a consequence of a regional war between two countries, Ukraine and Russia, but a part of a much bigger ideological escalation started by Putin against European civilisation and democracy. Probably, because of this, one day, despite the previous unpopularity of Central/Eastern Europe’s themes, Western (and especially Scandinavian) migration scholars will start their considering of the region and the war, its premises and consequences, with a deeper interest in the facts.

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