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COMMENTARY

On war in Ukraine, double standards and the epistemological ignoring of the global east

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War is back in Europe. It actually began in 2014 with Russia's intervention in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea and was prepared for no later than spring 2021 when Russia held large military exercises at the Ukrainian border and at that occasion established the infrastructure for its attack. From November 2021, there was convincing evidence that a Russian invasion was imminent. During this period, the head of the Russian security council publically threatened the EU with the arrival of millions of refugees. Alerted by this escalation we prepared scenarios for the scale of displacement in case of war predicting up to 9.9 million displaced persons (Düvell & Lapshyna, 2022). This is not, of course the first war in Europe in recent decades, we remember the war in former Yugoslavia and the many people who were displaced, but we hardly noticed the wars in Georgia in 2008 or Armenia in 2021. But just like in 2014–2015, when Turkey was overwhelmed by several million Syrian and other refugees - whole families were sleeping rough, in parks and under bridges and visible to all - the EU was ignorant and complacent. There was and still is no organised communication channel between science and policy and no early warning systems in place for cases of large scale displacement. War could have been prevented, and so could have been displacement, had the West responded more robustly. But all warnings had been ignored. This to us is the greatest frustration!

As a consequence, 24 February saw the beginning of the largest and fastest crises of displacement in Europe since WWII. Within four weeks as many people were displaced as during the first four years of the war in Syria. To date, conventional reports refer to 12–14 million displaced persons, over 8 million IDPs and about 5.9 million refugees, 2.4 million in non-neighbours of Ukraine and 1.26 million returnees. However, such figures are misleading, as usual, and imply certainties we do not have and they should not be replicated without critically reflecting on their shortcomings. For example, initially, arrival figures were sufficient but over time migration became more dynamic and onward or return migration were not sufficiently recorded so that net migration figures are lacking. In contrast to much quoted IOM figures of 8 million IDPs, national experts suggest much lower figures, 4.5 million, whilst only 1 million IDPs are registered with Ukrainian authorities. And whilst there were 2.9 million arrivals in Poland many moved on, for example to Germany. And still, many millions remain in Ukraine, some even under

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conditions of daily bombardment but we know little about what holds them back except that many seem to be the elderly.

Strikingly, 85% of the refugees are women, this deviates from the usual pattern that the majority of refugees are men, notably in the EU, where in 2015 among those arriving 73% were male. Also, the very notion of 'Ukrainians' neglects the diversity of this group, as in fact there are 130 recognised minorities in Ukraine including Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Muslims, Jews as well as Tartars, Roma, Azeris and Bulgarians to name just a few. Apart from media reports we know very little about these refugees: Who are they? Where are they from? How did they escape? How was it organised? What did they experience? Where are their family members? What are their aspirations?

The invasion is a stark reminder that Russian imperialism since 1979 is a key driver of forced migration as in the cases of Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Georgia and now Ukraine as well as Syria. Russia also fuels conflict and displacement in Libya and Mali. There are reports that Syrian, Chechen, Lebanese and Iranian mercenaries are fighting on the Russian side in Ukraine, that there are International troops on the Ukrainian side while Turkey confronts Russia in Syria and Libya, the west engages in an economic war, and there is an ongoing cyber and information war while Russia continues to threaten a nuclear war. In addition, some Russian actors already threaten Poland and the Baltic countries with war. So, are we already in a kind of WWII? Is the question still how to avoid war between the West and Russia or rather is it how to stop the aggressor, the threat of further attacks on ever more countries and the displacement this causes? For too long, the biased focus on western perpetrators or even subtle anti-Americanism has prevented exposure of Russia as an imperial actor and thus a cause of forced migration. Equally and widely ignored is another facet of imperialism, in the form of Russia's disgraceful treatment of Central Asian republics as sources of cheap labour and thus a kind of 'homelands'.

The war brings (back) to Europe a range of gruesome features known from the past or other parts of the world. One is the devastation of cities, what the Nazis did to Leningrad in the 1940s has been repeated by Russia in Grozny, Aleppo, Homs, Hama and now Mariupol in Ukraine. Possibly hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians have been deported to Russia by the Russian authorities, just as so-called 'unreliable populations' in the 1930s (Blitz & Lewis, 2022). The invaders commit war crimes including the systematic killing of civil, rape and disappearances (UNHCHR, 2022) as previously witnessed in Bosnia and recently in Ethiopia. Whilst initially, Russia was probably hoping to take over most of Ukraine and its major cities, industries, natural resources and workers without much resistance, it is now destroying and depopulating the territory, a genocidal policy resembling the fate of Syrians, Bosnians, Rohingya and Uyghurs. Russia was also hoping to destabilise the EU with the arrival of millions of refugees.

However, the humanitarian and political crisis the arrival of over one million refugees in 2015 and 2016 caused in the EU was not repeated, at least in the initial 4 months of the invasion. Similar to the initial welcome of Syrians and others, civil society is providing support to Ukrainian refugees. However, back in 2016, public resentment, fuelled by Islamophobia, had quickly prevailed whilst in 2022 there are only few signs of solidarity and resilience fading. But the positive reception of Ukrainians does not represent a change of the EU's refugee policy, as some commentators suggest. Instead, in the Mediterranean, people still die at sea, that push-backs at Polish, Greek, Croatian, Italian and Spanish borders are a daily occurrence and that on the Greek islands inhumane conditions persist. It is also highly doubtful whether a possible surge from Afghanistan would face the same favourable response upon arrival in Europe as Ukrainians. In fact, it became apparent that the current European legal framework is a patchwork of asylum, subsidiary protection, temporary protection and toleration and there are strengths and weaknesses of all of these. All this raises concerns over a racial bias leading to a two-tier regime of refugee reception.

The empathic response to displacement from Ukraine is shaped by an intricate series of factors: geography, race, religion, regional politics and migration systems, European history and the perceptions, sentiments and obligations these entail. For 30 years, Ukrainians have been integrating in large numbers with Europe from below through migration, as workers, traders, students, husbands and wives and tourists. Prior to the war, there

were over two million Ukrainian immigrants in the EU. In addition, in Germany, there are over 2.5 million immigrants from the Soviet period, many sympathising with Ukrainians and also many unsympathetic. Because of geographic proximity and pre-war visa-free travel arrangements, Ukrainians could reach safety fairly easily; therefore, no protection gap arose and the humanitarian crisis of 2015 was not repeated. Further to this, it is felt that the attack on Ukraine is an attack on Europe, on European values and on all Europeans, even that the war may spill over to EU member states such as Poland, Romania, Lithuania and others. Also, vivid memories of (fleeing from) Soviet occupation contribute to empathy expressed towards Ukrainians under Russian attack. All these factors explain the welcome of Ukrainians; it is not simply inspired by racial perceptions though it is certainly one factor out of many.

Nonetheless, with regards to the hosting and integrating of millions of displaced Ukrainians in the EU and elsewhere, there are three usually overlooked but problematic aspects. First, whilst the speediness with which temporary protection was provided to Ukrainians appears like preferential treatment it nevertheless only offers short-term protection and thus a more precarious outlook than the status refugees from other countries enjoy. Second, the diversity of the population prohibits a one-size fits all approach so it is necessary to take into account the diverse needs and vulnerabilities. Third, for long, Ukraine has been suffering from a shrinking population, in part due to migration, as it has been a pool of (cheap) labour and skills for its neighbours in the east and west for many years. The war greatly accelerates this process and has depleted Ukraine of much of its population. Conventional discourses on brain drain fail to capture the dramatic scope of this process. Future debates on long-term local integration, return and reconstruction need to consider this issue whilst recognising the aspirations and agency of the affected people.

Finally, claiming that Ukrainians are favoured because 'they are blond and blue-eyed' (e.g. Lenoard, 2022) ignores the diversity of the population; those who make such claims have probably never been to Ukraine. Have those who criticise that Ukrainians are favoured as Christian questioned that Turkey welcomed Syrians because they were Muslims? We wonder whether some of those who shout loudly 'Racism' could be the same who for years took no interest in the 1.5 million IDPs or other refugees in Ukraine, the persecution of Muslim Tatars in Crimea or the fate of those who lost their homes in Moldova, Armenia, Georgia and Chechnya? There have been times when researchers stepped on one another's toes in Istanbul, Lesbos or Morocco whereas few international researchers visited Kyiv, Odesa or Moscow. Also denouncing the discrimination of people of colour as racism during the evacuation could well be hasty judgement given that people were prioritised on the basis of vulnerability (women often with children, elderly and handicapped) whilst young men including young black students were prevented from boarding trains. Such incidences instead require thorough analysis of the intersectionalities at stake. Could it be that those pointing toward some 'double standard' - favouring Ukrainians while discriminating Muslims or black People—thus end up with yet another double standard—privileging some groups more in research while ignoring others? It occurs to us that several of the shortcomings and premature assumptions mentioned here is informed by yet another structural epistemological bias, ignoring the global East (Müller, 2020), 12 countries with 280 or so million people. In particular, conventional thinking of the world as a simple binary of a Global North and a Global South results in a huge blind spot in all regions east of 'the West'. The 'global south' reflects a positionality—a post-colonial approach—that fails to recognise the 1940s experience of the Nazis categorising Easterners as sub-humans or the post-Soviet approach. One result of this bias is the ignoring of Russia as yet another a colonial power, the Ukrainians' history of fighting against subjugation and for statehood, displaced persons in the region or the diversity of its people. This requires some reflection on how to think about the world and expansion of research on the Global East. Migration studies still have a long way to go (e.g. Düvell, 2021).

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