

# Welcoming Refugees: Sifting by Identity at the European Borders

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In the last decade, Europe has been experiencing an unprecedented flow of refugees from the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe. According to the United Nations refugee act of 1980, all refugees should be entitled to non-discriminatory treatment (Kennedy, 1981). This means that independently from identity, origin, religion, and race, refugees who involuntarily flee a political or social injustice in seek of shelter should benefit from the principle of non-refoulement and be accepted unconditionally. That is the theory. In reality, is this unconditional acceptance practiced? If not, on which basis are people in need of asylum sorted so that some are accepted and some rejected? These questions have led to the studying of the acceptance by some European countries of three different groups of refugees who were looking for shelter in the last five years. One group is from the Middle East including people from Syria, Afghanistan, or Bangladesh; another is from North Africa, including sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Africa; and the last one is from Eastern Europe, mainly consisting of Ukrainians fleeing the recent Russian invasion of their country. The experiences of these groups, as well as the reaction of directly concerned European political leaders, are assessed through testimonies, interviews, and news reports. A detailed comparison of these groups has prompted this article to conclude that identity plays an important role in the acceptance of those involuntary immigrants. As such, some groups are preferred and are more warmly welcomed than other groups. In this article, I argue that contrary to the refugee act of 1980, there is a double standard of acceptance of refugees at the European borders, and identity is the main sifting criteria. In fact, identity remains a stumbling rock to be surmounted on the road toward the achievement of a non-discriminatory acceptance of immigrants.

*Keywords: immigration; identity; refugees; Europe*

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## Introduction

The flux of a huge number of refugees to the European frontiers in the last decades has been known as the refugee crisis. It reached its climax in 2015 when an unprecedented 1.25 million people fleeing conflict zones in Africa and the Middle East stormed the eastern frontiers of the European Union (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). Some took the sea route to join the coasts of Italy, Spain, Greece, or Malta, while some waited at the Turkish or Polish frontiers. This crisis has created divisions in the union as each country sees the acceptance of refugees differently. Europe has adopted a few measures with the hope to defuse the crisis (Quinn, 2016, p. 278).

In the beginning, European countries maintained a welcoming policy. But since the end of 2015, their national policies have become hostile to refugees. For example, the hitherto hospitable Sweden has quickly adopted a rather hostile policy toward immigrants, invoking public security and the fear of the collapse of their national system (Ericson, 2018, p. 98). It has indeed not been easy for many countries in Europe to make space for international refugees. In February 2022, a few days after the Russian war in Ukraine, over 7 million Ukrainians were forced to leave according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). One wonders how they would find refuge in a Europe which already showed its incapacity to accommodate 1.25 million people back in 2015. Contrary to the natural expectation that the refugee crisis could get worse, things went rather smoothly. The Ukrainian refugees were accepted without complexity or fear of any collapse of the national system (Hafez, 2015). This inequitable acceptance of people looking for safety in Europe raised many questions on the criteria determining that acceptance: it seems to not only discriminate but also violate human rights (Wani, 1999, p. 206). Drawing evidence from public speeches of some European leaders and news reports on the refugees' situation, this article argues that identity is a key factor of acceptance and it prevails over any human right law. Identity is a broad term that links to concepts such as race, ethnicity, religion, or even language (Leve, 2011). In a study, Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke analyzed the formation of an identity. Taking insight from their work, this article considers identity as formed through the process of identification whereby a person categorizes himself (Stets & Burke, 2000). By categorizing oneself, a person is indirectly categorizing others as well. That category can be based on religion or race. From this angle, "white" and "christian" appear to be terms by which Europeans' identity can be defined. As a result, they are more likely to integrate people who, in the process of identification, fall in the same category with them. That was the situation with the Ukrainians refugees. Considered to be white and christians, to be birds of the same feathers, their acceptance would be without much complaint about national security. This is how identity serves to sift who enters Europe and who does not, and from this, the double standard approach to the refugee crisis has become transparent.

### **The Calvary of the Mediterranean Refugees**

Regardless of their legal status, all migrants are human beings and we owe them our best efforts to safeguard them and treat them with dignity, safety, and well-being. States are bound by clear rules of international human rights and refugee laws (and in armed conflicts, international humanitarian laws) regarding the treatment of migrants and refugees, including the principle of non-refoulement (Wani, 1999). In many places, however, we are falling short of ensuring the protection migrants are entitled to (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)'s report *One Humanity: Safety and Dignity for Migrants*, 2016).

The groups of people trying to enter Europe via the Mediterranean Sea are various. The UNHCR counts people from Egypt, Afghanistan, Iraq, Tunisia, Libya, and Cote d'Ivoire (UNHCR Situations, n.d.). The situation was considered a crisis when in 2015, the European Union officially received 1,255,685 asylum applications. The time it took to treat all these documents logically worsened the condition of the refugees and increased the number of illegal border crossings as new groups of people continued their attempt to reach Europe. This led to hot discussions among countries of the EU (Jones et al., 2017). This article examines how different groups of immigrants were welcomed. News reports from the French international news *Le Point* showed that out of the millions of requests, only 710,400 demands for asylum were granted. This was over half of the total applications but still insignificant as a solution to the crisis. Because rejected immigrants would find

illegal ways to enter Europe, which worsened the crisis. That situation forced countries in Europe to apply more drastic measures such as building walls, installing barbed wires and posting armed guards on the coasts (Surwillo & Slakaityte, 2022). This revealed the degree of hostility that some groups of immigrants were faced with in Europe. By August 2021, many countries had built walls at their borders to protect Europe from illegal refugees. The last wall to date as reported by Euronews was the Turkish concrete wall at its frontiers with Iran, to stop refugee fleeing from the Taliban in Afghanistan for fear of becoming the “refugee warehouse” (Turkey Builds a Border Wall to Stop Refugees from Afghanistan, 2021). Turkey, Latvia, Poland, and Lithuania have already erected barbed wires or fences on their borders (Surwillo & Slakaityte, 2022). The Europeans have been strengthening the controls over their borders. According to the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle, Europe has been militarizing its borders since 2015 and has not yet stopped (Russell, 2019). Many reports from humanitarian organizations corroborated the opacity of the European borders to the two groups of refugees and how deadly border crossing to Europe could be. It was even reported that coast guards deliberately tried to sink migrants’ ships in 2015 (Smith, 2015). That situation has alarmed many human rights organizations. Stop Wapenhandel, a Dutch organization, for instance, reported that “Under the banner of ‘fighting illegal immigration, the European Commission plans to transform its border security agency Frontex into a more powerful European Border and Coast Guard Agency”. This would cost a lot of money, which I think could be used to provide temporary shelters for the immigrants. Reports Euronews estimate the value of border protection at 15 billion euros in 2015, an amount which could be raised to over 29 billion euros by 2022. These examples help to understand European reception of non-European migrants coming from the Middle East and Africa, who are mostly Muslims. Explaining how being a refugee has become a synonym for tragedy, Mark Akkerman, a researcher at Stop Wapnehandel (Dutch Campaign Against Arms Trade) wrote: “Leaving a war-torn country, where families have witnessed brutal experiences of death and destruction, they then come face to face with more violence on Europe’s borders” (Akkerman, 2016). What has become clear here is that not every refugee is met with such a tragedy.

### **The Ukrainian Refugees**

From the breakout of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, to November 2022, around 7,891,977 refugees have found refuge in Europe (UNHCR, November 2022). How were they able to find the space that about 1.25 million Africans, Syrians, and Afghans were unable to find in 2015 and 2016 and from which they continue to be fenced out? Observing news reports, it can be deduced that in Europe, Ukrainians are preferred over the other categories of refugees. In reference to a documentary by the German broadcaster Deutsche Welle on the situation, civilians and communities have warmly prepared places for any Ukrainians fleeing their country. According to news reports, some families voluntarily drive to Ukrainian frontiers to find people they could help (BBC News, 2022).

Poland has been the most welcoming. The UNHCR has acknowledged that by March 2022, the local government had sheltered over 2 million Ukrainians. While Poland expresses its availability for more Ukrainians, news reports show that citizens and local volunteers, and NGOs came together to create a community to support Ukrainian refugees (BBC News, 2022). The priority given to Ukraine can also be seen as many universities across Europe have offered the opportunity to Ukrainians to continue their degree at their premises. According to data provided by the platform for education, Erudera.com, universities in Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom have

volunteered to assist incoming Ukrainian students whether academically, financially, or through legal advice. According to the International Crisis Group, “Foreign funds poured in soon after the full-scale invasion began” and “government officials, politicians, and civil society figures are cooperating in ways they had never imagined in order to help the displaced” (2022, p. 9).

### **Identity Matters**

In the previous sections, I first tried to explore Europe’s disparate receptions of non-European refugees and Ukrainian refugees. The differences are blatant. There is an obvious preference for the Ukrainians over the other groups (Opiola et al., 2022, p. 14). This preference is based on their identity as geographically European, added to the fact that they are white, and Christian. They fall in the category inside of which the accepting side finds himself. This is what could be understood from the speech of the French far-right politician known for his anti-immigration policy, Eric Zemmour. He declared in a meeting with his followers on March 6th, 2022 in Toulon (Provence province, France) that “There are people who are like us and people who [are] unlike us. Everybody now understands that Arab or Muslim immigrants are too unlike us and that it is harder and harder to integrate them” (Al Jazeera, 2022). From this statement, the idea of likeness, resemblance, or similarity is obvious. Those criteria form the identity of a person and can now be understood as the reasons sustaining Europeans’ behavior towards refugees. Identity has fueled what the American news channel CNN qualifies as “selective empathy on refugees” (Saifi, 2022). In a March 16, 2022 article by Zeena Saifi, CNN revealed that this kind of selective empathy is shared all across Europe. In the same line with the French politician cited before, Bulgaria’s Prime Minister Kiril Petkov affirmed: “These are people who are Europeans, so we and all other countries are ready to welcome them...”. Similarly, Moldova, Lithuania, Armenia, and Georgia were also ready to do their best to welcome the Ukrainians (Secieru, 2022).

As seen from the declarations of some political leaders in Europe, the determinant criteria for accepting refugees from Ukraine is identity. As far as refugees are concerned, Europe’s identification process has led them to more affinity with the Ukrainians than with the other refugee groups. That is how identity can serve as a sifting criterion in the refugee crisis and it will continue to prevail over many international laws.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have tried to point out the preponderance of identity over international law in European countries’ treatment of war refugees. In matters of identity, we have seen how people prefer others based on physical or religious similarities. As such, people are likely to accept, care, and show affinity to people who share more resemblance to them. This social condition helps to explain part of the reasons why Ukrainians have been welcomed in greater numbers and received more financial aid than African, Afghan, Syrian, and any other non-European refugees. For the latter groups, their way to exile ended most of the time in chaos (Akkerman, 2016). That was the case in this article, which led me to conclude that people will continue to sift by their own identity in whatever social group or institution.

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