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Who Deserves Deliverance? The Ideal Refugee and Proximate Humanitarianism: Comparing Syrian and Ukrainian Refugee Reception in Poland

Abstract:

This article argues that a normative figure of an "ideal refugee" operates as a Weberian ideal type in contemporary refugee governance, hierarchically ordering displaced people according to standards of conduct, affect, and political identity. Drawing on critical citizenship studies, the article traces how acts of citizenship and rightful presence produce legible and illegible refugee subjects across four disciplinary axes: managed passivity, performed gratitude, cultural legibility, and productive futurity. Empirically, I compare the recent cases of Syrian and Ukrainian war refugees in Poland to illustrate the effects of complying or failing to comply with the ideal, introducing the concept of "proximate humanitarianism" to capture how racial, religious, gendered, and geopolitical proximity are translated into institutional generosity or parsimony.

Keywords:

refugee, humanitarianism, Poland, Ukrainian refugees, Syrian refugees, ideal type

On February 24, 2022, Russian forces invaded Ukraine; within days, Poland opened its borders to the largest single refugee movement in Europe since World War II. By the end of that year, over 1.5 million Ukrainians had registered for temporary protection in Poland, with millions more passing through.[1] A wide swath of everyday Poles showed up at border crossings to offer rides, supplies, hot food, and spare rooms. The national government passed emergency legislation within weeks granting Ukrainians access to the labor market, healthcare, and education. The welcome was efficient, humane, and, by any comparative measure, extraordinary.

In drastic contrast, seven years earlier, the Polish government had refused to accept a single Syrian refugee under the European Union's emergency relocation scheme, citing security concerns and cultural incompatibility. Syrians who had crossed the Polish border through Belarus, in a crisis later revealed to have been deliberately engineered and manipulated by Aleksander Lukashenko's regime, were met with razor wire, water cannon, and a legal framework that effectively denied them access to asylum procedures.[2] At least thirty people died in the Białowieża Forest border zone in the winter of 2021–2022.[3] Many others were pushed back illegally in violation of the non-refoulement principle which states no refugee shall be turned back to a place where they fear a loss of freedom or life itself.

This leads to the question of why the two groups were treated so differently. Both groups were fleeing war and had legitimate claims to international protection under the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees; their widely differing receptions were not a product of any recognizable difference in formal refugee law. Here, I argue it was the product of two things: first, the normative figure of an "ideal refugee" encoded with racial, religious, gendered, and geopolitical criteria that formal law disavows but practice reproduces and second, the mechanism I call *proximate humanitarianism* or the extension of humanitarian aid only to those deemed worthy via the former.

The Polish case is not an aberration but an unusually transparent instance of a logic that has long operated across refugee governance regimes of the Global

1) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Protection Monitoring Brief #2: Poland."

2) Amnesty International, "Poland/Belarus."

3) Human Rights Watch, "Polish Court Rules."

North. The term refugee was legally defined by the UN following the end of World War II and referred specifically to individuals who had experienced statelessness in Europe.[4] These conditions were further contained within the context of the Cold War to explicitly include political persecution, yet even before 1951 we see repeated instances of explicitly rejecting non-ideal refugees like Jews and Armenians.[5] Context has always been a critical element in determining not only who was labeled a refugee, but which populations of stateless people were, more critically, deserving refugees. This article argues that the *ideal refugee* (used here as a stand in for ideal type but recognizing the word as having this meaning as well as the normatively desirable meaning of ideal) is a disciplinary construction whose coherence demands managed passivity, performed gratitude, cultural legibility, and productive futurity that are not racially neutral, though official definitions from refugee service organizations present them as such. To capture the specific mechanism through which racial, religious, gendered, linguistic, and geopolitical proximity are translated into institutional generosity, I introduce the concept of *proximate humanitarianism*, which is essentially the extension of humanitarian support to groups who follow the normative and culturally determined rules of the ideal refugee. I use the empirical case of Poland's recent treatment of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in the 2020s as a comparative example.

The article presents relevant literature on refugee subjectivity, citizenship studies, and racialized humanitarianism, situating the present argument and demonstrating how it contributes to these literatures theoretically and empirically, paying special attention to the theoretical framework of Isin's acts of citizenship, Nyers' abject cosmopolitanism, and Fassin's moral economy of humanitarianism. I then move on to the relevant axes of the ideal refugee and use the empirical example of Syrian and Ukrainian war refugees in Poland. I conclude with reflections on the broader implications for citizenship theory and refugee advocacy.

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4) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "1951 Refugee Convention."

5) The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 was specifically passed in the US to set quotas on "racially undesirable groups" during the Armenian genocide and the Wagner-Rogers bill of 1939 to save 20,000 Jewish children was defeated in the US because of claims that they simply could not be assimilated.

Situating the Ideal Refugee

The question of who "counts" as a refugee has generated extensive scholarship across law, political science, anthropology, and sociology. Roger Zetter's foundational account of the "refugee label" draws attention to how bureaucratic categorization strips displaced persons of complexity, producing a generic identity that serves institutional rather than human needs.[6] For Zetter, by the late twentieth century, the label became so bureaucratized and politicized that it functioned primarily as a rationing device, allocating protection to some while rendering others invisible.[7]

Liisa Malkki's ethnographic work with Hutu refugees in Tanzania and Kenya identifies a "humanitarian gaze" that demands refugees appear silent, grateful, and outside of politics.[8] Under that gaze, refugees who engage in political speech, organize, or express anger are problematic. The refugee camp is not simply a space of protection but a technology of depoliticization, that produces "bare humanity" rather than political subjects. Emma Haddad's work extends this claim, situating the refugee within the international state system as a constitutive outsider; refugees are not failed citizens but structural leftovers produced by the logic of sovereign citizenship as the only legitimate mechanism by which one can claim rights and protections.[9] It is the nation-state system that inherently sets up who gets to be a citizen and claim rights as well as hierarchically organizing citizenship via the relative status of various nations.

The racial dimensions of refugee governance have received sustained attention in recent scholarship. Nadine El-Enany reads British immigration law as continuous with colonial conquest, arguing that the border preserves the spoils of empire for racially qualified beneficiaries.[10] Gurminder Bhambra identifies a "methodological whiteness" in political and sociological accounts of migration that renders race invisible as an organizing principle.[11] Paul Gilroy's account of postcolonial melancholy

6) Zetter, "Labelling Refugees," 39–62.

7) Zetter, "More Labels, Fewer Refugees," 172–92.

8) Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 377–404.

9) Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society*, 26–42.

10) El-Enany, *(B)ordering Britain*, 162–70.

11) Bhambra, "Brexit, Trump, and 'Methodological Whiteness,'" S214–S232.

explains the defensive cultural politics of states like Poland and others who envision the refugee as a threat to their imagined cultural homogeneity.[12] Scholars working on Central and Eastern Europe have noted a paradox in that states with relatively recent histories of mass displacement, like Poland, have been among the most resistant to refugee reception.[13] At the same time, Poland has faced repeated battles to establish itself and its sovereignty throughout history, and that plays an important role particularly in the context of the Russian invasion of an adjacent neighbor.

Recent work has deepened the analysis of race and humanitarianism in the European context; Balogun's research on eugenics and Central and Eastern European racial formations[14] and his work with Ohia-Nowak on geographies of race in Poland[15] provide the regional empirical grounding for the present argument. Elissa Helms' analysis of racial hierarchies along the Balkan migration route[16] and Balogun's comparative work on the global color line in refugee reception[17] demonstrate that the differential treatment of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Poland is not an isolated instance but part of a structured and documented pattern.

The second Russian invasion of Ukraine has generated a rapidly expanding literature documenting the explicit racial and civilizational language used by European politicians and journalists to justify the exceptional welcome extended to Ukrainians.[18] Commentators noted in real time that Ukrainians were described as civilized, like us, and not the refugees we are used to seeing. These are all characterizations that demonstrate the racial hierarchy that refugee governance usually reproduces through more coded mechanisms.[19] They may also serve the secondary purpose of juxtaposing these humanizing qualities to the collective, inhumane, Russian invaders.

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12) Gilroy, *After Empire*, 97–120.

13) Narkowicz, "'Refugees Not Welcome Here'," 357–73.

14) Balogun, "Race, Blood, and Nation," 2478–485.

15) Balogun and Ohia-Nowak, "Geographies of Race in Poland," 221–40.

16) Helms, "Race in Place," 472–97.

17) Balogun, "Refugees Separated by the Global Color Line," 1564–580.

18) Ibid.

19) Al-Jazeera English, "Western Coverage of Ukraine War Criticized."

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Weber and the Ideal Type

I introduce the "ideal refugee" as a Weberian ideal type: a construct that specifies and accentuates certain empirical characteristics to form an imagined ideal, rather than anything that exists in reality.[20] Methodologically, this is a useful conceptual tool because it allows us to more easily identify inevitable deviations.[21]

Here, the ideal refugee is not a description of any actual displaced person, normative standard for what refugees ought to be, nor a statistical composite of what refugees typically are. It is an analytical abstraction accentuating the behavioral, affective, cultural, and political characteristics that refugee governance institutions, receiving publics, and media representations consistently reward with recognition, protection, and welcome. Together, these characteristics produce a coherent figure: passive, grateful, legible, and productive, against which actual refugees are silently measured and found more or less adequate.

The Weberian framing clarifies what is at stake in my central claim about the ideal type's impossibility because reality always falls short, diverges, or contradicts, but in the case of the ideal refugee, this gap is not merely an epistemological limitation but a political instrument. The impossibility of fully conforming to the ideal type is precisely what makes it an effective mechanism of governance: there is always a gap through which doubt can be inserted, through which the claim to protection can be questioned, through which the refugee can be found deficient. Refugee governance deploys this tool as a technology of inclusion and exclusion.

The ideal refugee is a migrant of sorts, but they differ in two important ways from migrants: 1) refugees are not voluntary, and 2) as a result, there is no self-selection in who becomes a refugee.[22] These are both related in terms of the difficulty of being "ideal." One could argue that many economic migrants are technically not voluntary because they may essentially be forced to leave their countries in order to make money; however, if they are leaving, they do so under their own volition and agency.

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20) Weber, "The 'Objectivity' of Knowledge in Social Science," 90.

21) Ibid., 90; Weber, *Economy and Society*, 6–19.

22) Chin and Cortes, "The Refugee/Asylum Seeker," 585–658.

This leads directly to the second point, which is that migrants are often some of the best, brightest, and most driven people in their home countries. They often use their social and cultural capital to exploit network connections to find transportation, housing, education, and work in foreign countries. They are, on average, younger, healthier, more risk-tolerant, and more able to work.[23] Conversely, refugees are more likely to include a broad range of people from young babies and children to the very elderly, the infirmed, the unskilled and uneducated, and, across all ages and levels of health, they are far more likely to have experienced a great deal of physical and psychological trauma. They are far less likely to be economically desirable to a host country. In terms of public opinion toward immigration at large, these economic concerns are top of mind.[24]

Isin and the Act of Citizenship

Engin Isin's project in *Being Political* is to reframe citizenship not as a bundle of rights attached to nationality but as a field of contestation produced through political acts. For Isin, the citizen is always already defined against the stranger, the outsider, the barbarian; the encounter with these figures constitutes political subjectivity.[25] The refugee does not simply lack citizenship but his or her presence activates the boundary-work through which citizenship secures its meaning.[26]

In *Acts of Citizenship*, Isin and Nielsen distinguish between "active" subjects who follow normative scripts and "activist" subjects who rupture them.[27] In these terms, the ideal refugee is an "active" subject: one who performs a pre-written role of apolitical need. What the Polish comparison reveals is that the pre-written role is not merely behavioral but ontological: it is not enough to perform passivity; one must also arrive in a body that is already recognizable as the appropriate bearer of that passivity.

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23) Borjas, "Immigration and Self-Selection," 29–76; Borjas, "Self-Selection and the Earnings of Immigrants," 531–53.

24) Hainmueller and Hopkins, "Public Attitudes Toward Immigration," 225–49.

25) Isin, *Being Political*, 1–29.

26) Ibid., 29–40.

27) Isin and Nielsen, *Acts of Citizenship*, 38–40.

Nyers and Abject Cosmopolitanism

Peter Nyers' *Rethinking Refugees* engages directly with what it means for refugees to speak, and why such speech is routinely disavowed. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's account of the stateless person as someone deprived of the right to have rights,[28] Nyers argues that refugees are constituted as humanitarian objects rather than political subjects. His concept of "abject cosmopolitanism" names the political practice conducted from within and against a position of radical abjection: when refugees organize, they do not enter an existing political arena but instead expose its exclusions.[29]

The Polish case reveals an important asymmetry in the operation of abject cosmopolitanism. Syrian refugees who organized, spoke to journalists, documented pushbacks, and connected with Polish civil society organizations were met with state efforts to criminalize their advocacy.[30] Ukrainian refugees who organized in similar ways were received as understandably assertive people responding to an extraordinary crisis. Their political speech was legible as civic participation rather than deviance.

Fassin and the Moral Economy of Humanitarianism

Didier Fassin's concept of the moral economy of humanitarianism illuminates the affective dimension of the differential response.[31] For Fassin, humanitarian governance is structured by an asymmetric exchange in which donors provide protection and recipients provide testimony to their suffering: a testimony that must conform to the emotional templates available to the donor.[32] What this means is that when refugees refuse the script by complaining, protesting, or asserting their rights, rather than expressing thanks, they delegitimize humanitarian governance.

The Ukrainian case extends and complicates Fassin's account because their generous welcome was not simply the product of a moral economy of pity; it was also the product of Polish solidarity through shared elements: historical-cultural identity,

28) Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, 44–50.

29) Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism," 1075–1080.

30) Amnesty International, "Poland/Belarus."

31) Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 1–22.

32) Ibid., 3–4.

mutual threat, and civilizational project. This definition of proximate humanitarianism is solidarity that is generous precisely because it does not require the extension of moral imagination across lines of radical difference and because it supports an abstract, collective moral economy beneficial to the provider.[33]

CONSTRUCTING THE IDEAL REFUGEE: FOUR AXES OF DISCIPLINE

As a methodological tool, the ideal type allows us to imagine the perfect scenario and then make obvious the ways in which those components are absent, finessed, or over-abundant. For the purposes of the ideal refugee, we have to contextualize here within Poland and compare the empirical cases of Ukrainians and Syrians, however, we can still draw important generalizable principles for all ideal refugees. Here, I propose four main axes that include passivity, gratitude, cultural similarity, and the promise to be economically productive.

Axis One: Managed Passivity

The most foundational demand placed on the refugee by the humanitarian order is that of passivity. The ideal refugee waits, queues, cooperates, and endures. This managed passivity is reproduced through institutional structures: the camp spatially enforces immobility and legibility,[34] and the asylum system produces dependent subjects whose access to support is conditional on compliance. As Darling demonstrates in the British context, refugees are positioned as guests: temporary, dependent, and obligated to show quiet gratitude regardless of the material conditions of their reception or stay.[35]

The disciplinary logic of managed passivity is circular and self-sealing: those who are passive are recognized as genuine refugees, while those who assert themselves are rendered suspect. Deviation from the passive script becomes evidence they are ungrateful or undeserving rather than evidence that the script is unjust. What the

33) This abstract level of moral economy is not to be confused with the individual level volunteers who may well exhaust themselves physically, emotionally, and even financially trying to help in desperate situations.

34) Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries," 380–82.

35) Darling, "Asylum and the Post-Political," 72–91.

Syrian and Ukrainian comparison in Poland reveals is that this circularity operates differently across racialized bodies: Ukrainian assertiveness is absorbed into the script as civic virtue, while Syrian assertiveness ruptures it as deviance.[36]

Axis Two: Performed Gratitude

The ideal refugee is expressively, demonstrably, and enduringly thankful to the receiving society. Gratitude functions as an affective tax on access to protection. The requirement of gratitude is closely connected to Fassin's moral economy: the refugee's gratitude confirms the value of the intervention and the moral authority of the giver.[37] Research on media representations of refugees shows that the expectation of performed gratitude is most heavily imposed on refugees from non-European contexts and, in particular, on Muslim men.[38]

In both of these first two axes, there is a challenge inherent in being a male refugee because passivity and gratitude are both feminized behaviors that show subordination and even weakness in the male context. There is also the cultural challenge of understanding what passivity and gratitude looks like in a receiving country vs. the refugee's country or culture of origin.

Axis Three: Cultural Legibility

The ideal refugee is legible: they come from a recognizable kind of crisis and present a narrative of suffering that maps onto dominant frameworks of what counts as persecution. The 1951 Convention's definition already encodes a particular politics of legibility forged in the Cold War context, oriented toward Soviet bloc dissidents rather than colonial and postcolonial displacements.[39] At the level of the individual asylum claim, cultural legibility requires refugees to narrate their persecution in forms recognizable to adjudicators shaped by northern, liberal, and secular assumptions.[40]

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36) Ibid., 80–83.

37) Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 3–4.

38) Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, and Nicholson, "The Visual Dehumanization of Refugees," 398–416.

39) El-Enany, *(B)ordering Britain*, 162–70.

40) Jubany, "Constructing Truths in a Culture of Disbelief," 74–94.

Again in this instance, the Syrian refugees were at a significant disadvantage in Poland relative to Ukrainians. Not only did the Ukrainians have a shared historical enemy in Russia as well as a horror story to tell in being invaded not once but twice, but the Ukrainian situation strikes fear in the heart of Poles themselves as they inevitably see Ukraine as a buffer state between themselves and Russia, as does the rest of Europe. Syrian refugees were less clearly sympathetically aligned with Poles in their escape from violence. Not only were they more culturally foreign and their conflict more amorphous and distant, there was less clarity about the story of their persecution and of course, why Poles should in particular play any role in helping them. Part of cultural legibility is more than just being able to physically identify refugees and instead having a clear understanding of why they deserve help based on familiar host society principles.

Axis Four: Productive Futurity

The ideal refugee is oriented toward a productive future: they learn the language, acquire qualifications, take up employment, and contribute fiscally and socially to the receiving society. Policy frameworks increasingly frame integration as a condition of continued protection.[41] The productive futurity axis is gendered: the idealized economically productive refugee is implicitly male, working-age, and educated.[42] As mentioned above, this is a particularly difficult metric to live up to for refugees who have experienced trauma, and who, as a broader population, potentially include the very young, very old, the sick and infirmed, the uneducated, and the unskilled. Although being productive looks different for each person, there is unusual pressure for the refugees as outsiders to prove they deserve sympathy or assistance despite their difficult circumstances.

The Polish response to Ukrainian refugees reveals how productive futurity can function as an accelerant rather than a barrier when other axes of the ideal refugee figure are already satisfied. The rapid granting of labor market access to Ukrainians was presented as humanitarian generosity, but, it was also consistent with

41) Phillimore, "Implementing Integration in the UK," 525–45.

42) Anderson, *Us and Them?*, 2–10.

pre-existing Polish labor shortages. Syrian refugees, by contrast, faced systematic barriers to employment, language acquisition support, and credential recognition[43] though there was a similar labor shortage in Poland.

PROXIMATE HUMANITARIANISM: POLAND'S SYRIAN AND UKRAINIAN REFUGEES COMPARED

A Natural Experiment in the Architecture of Welcome

Poland's differential response to Syrian and Ukrainian refugees constitutes a loose natural experiment: a case in which the same state, governed in both periods by the same party (Law and Justice, PiS), responded to two large-scale refugee crises in ways that were not merely different in degree but opposite in kind. What remains, after institutional and political explanations are exhausted, is the normative figure of the ideal refugee and the racial, religious, gendered, and geopolitical structures through which it operates.

Legibility of the Body

The most immediate dimension of the differential response was ethnoracial. Ukrainian refugees are predominantly light-skinned Slavs and phenotypically legible as "European" within the visual economy of Polish and broader European culture. An urban Ukrainian refugee walking through Warsaw is, in ordinary circumstances, indistinguishable from a Polish citizen. They can move through urban space without attracting the surveillance that marks the racially identifiable foreigner. The ideal refugee, this axis reveals, is in some measure the invisible refugee: the one whose presence does not register as a disruption to the visual order of the nation.

The Syrian refugee, by contrast, is more racially visible. Polish media coverage of the Belarusian border crisis in 2021 repeatedly deployed the racialized figure of the threatening male migrant as the face of the Syrian and Afghan claimant.[44] The Syrian body could not pass; it could only be managed, contained, or expelled.

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43) Balogun, "Race, Blood, and Nation," 2478–485.

44) Narkowicz, "Refugees Not Welcome Here," 362–65.

Religious Legibility: Christianity, Islam, and the Civilizational Border

Poland is one of the most intensely Catholic-identified nations in Europe, and religious difference is a central axis of the ideal refugee's construction in the Polish context. The Law and Justice government explicitly mobilized religious difference as a justification for refusing Syrian refugees, framing Muslim migration as a threat to Polish Christian identity and civilization.[45] Interestingly, Ukraine is largely Orthodox Christian rather than Catholic, and in the past the large parts of Ukraine's population were not only Russian Orthodox but also largely Russian language speakers. Polish Catholic and Greek Catholic churches opened their doors as reception centers for Ukrainian refugees. Recent scholarship on race and religion in the Polish and Central and East European context confirms that the religious axis of refugee selection, in this instance being Christian, is not incidental but structurally embedded in the region's racial formation.[46]

Gendered Bodies: The Mother, the Fighter, and the Threatening Man

Ukrainian men of military age were (and still are) required to remain in Ukraine under martial law implemented immediately after the second Russian invasion, meaning the Ukrainian refugee population in Poland was overwhelmingly composed of women, children, and elderly people. Syrian refugees, particularly those who arrived in Europe between 2015 and 2021, were disproportionately male and frequently travelling without family units. The Ukrainian mother with children is the archetype of the deserving refugee: visually pitiable, non-threatening, and carrying the most sympathetic possible index of need.[47] Ukrainians comprised over 98.4% of all temporary protection beneficiaries in the EU; adult women made up 43.5%, minors 30.2%, and adult men 26.3%.[48]

There is a conflict between economic productivity (which prefers male, working-age refugees) and the more sympathetic but economically dependent

45) Pędziwiatr, "The Catholic Church in Poland on Muslims and Islam," 461–78.

46) Balogun and Ohia-Nowak, "Geographies of Race in Poland," 221–40.

47) Bleiker et al., "The Visual Dehumanization of Refugees," 398–416.

48) Eurostat, "Temporary Protection for 4.40 Million in February 2026."

mother with children. Again, on the level of abstract moral economy, helping the mother and her children or the elderly are both symbolically and emotionally powerful as humanitarian actions, even though these parties are more likely to be economically burdensome. The burden itself is even symbolically powerful as these are subpopulations who socially deserve to be taken care of. Men, on the other hand, face the opposite response not only with a lack of sympathy but even feeling accused of being unmanly for not actively fighting.[49] The intersectionality of refugee identities (gender, nationality, religion, class, sexuality, etc.) is important in the distinction of who is or is not an ideal refugee, and the flexibility of when one identity is more desirable than another demonstrates the point that what is "ideal" one day may not be the next.

Language and Accent Proximity: The Sound of Belonging

Polish and Ukrainian are both Slavic languages and are mutually intelligible to a significant degree. Many Ukrainians who arrived in Poland in 2022 had prior exposure to Polish through pre-war economic migration. Polish hosts could communicate with Ukrainian guests imperfectly, but recognizably, without interpreters. Arabic, by contrast, belongs to an entirely different language family and carries, in the Polish cultural imagination, specific associations with Otherness and Islam. Language becomes a proxy for belonging, and the inability to communicate even partially reinforces the sense of unbridgeable difference.

Shared Understandings: The Geopolitics of Solidarity

The final and perhaps most distinctive axis of the Ukrainian welcome was geopolitical and civilizational: the sense, deeply rooted in Polish historical memory, that Ukrainians and Poles share a level of common heritage and a substantial common

49) One young Ukrainian man I interviewed in Krakow in September 2024 was in Poland as a student but had his military service requirement waived because of medical issues with his lungs. He reported feeling guilty and thinking people around him were looking at him and judging him as if he were a coward. Another Ukrainian refugee father of four staying with his family in Sopot reported similar feelings, again, despite legitimate waiver due to family commitments.

enemy. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was received in Poland not as a distant geopolitical event but as a confirmation of a threat that Polish political culture had long insisted was real and imminent. At the same time, there is a temporal element to this solidarity between Poland and Ukraine, because there is a long and rocky history between the two countries. In this scenario, Poland also benefits geopolitically through its generosity to Ukraine, though it would be unfair to say that is in any way the primary cause for its support.

Research on xenophobia and national identity in the post-Soviet region demonstrates that common historical-cultural self-understanding of one's ethnic identification is associated with target-specific patterns of solidarity and hostility: the same identity content that generates openness toward some groups generates heightened hostility toward those perceived as civilizationally and ethnically distant.[50] The Syrian case had no equivalent geopolitical solidarity structure available. There was no narrative of shared threat, no shared imagined or real history, and no self-evident geopolitical stake that would motivate Polish solidarity with Syrian claimants. As Peluritis argues in this journal, it is precisely the framing of Russia as the enemy "beyond Europe" that has structured Eastern European cultural identity since at least the early twentieth century,[51] a framing in which the Ukrainian refugee arrives as a legible victim of a culturally intelligible aggressor, while the Syrian refugee arrives from a geopolitical context in which no such shared enemy can be identified.[52] The category of "Eastern Europe" has boundaries that are philosophically contested and temporal in nature.[53] It is fundamentally juxtaposed to what is fancied the "true" Europe of the West and, on the other side, whatever history imagines Russia to be. Bursztyka argues with more nuance that there is a solidarity which arises from shared experience (in part of the common Russian/Soviet enemy) but also an ethical solidarity from a shared way of living and understanding the world.[54] Here, I largely focus on the state position and argue that Polish civilizational solidarity with Ukraine is not "natural" but

50) Herrera and Kraus, "Pride versus Prejudice," 293–315; Herrera and Kraus, "National Identity and Xenophobia in Russia," 102–19.

51) Peluritis, "The Idea of 'Eastern Europe,'" 29–52.

52) Ibid.

53) Bursztyka, "Reconceptualizing Eastern Europe," 67–102.

54) Ibid.

an active ideological construction that is produced and reproduced by the state. This empirical comparison is less a focus on the specific nature of the solidarity and more of a comparison of how the state manufactures or does not manufacture sympathy and support for select refugees.

Proximate Humanitarianism

The five axes analyzed above can be synthesized into the concept of *proximate humanitarianism*: a mode of humanitarian response structured by the degree of perceived proximity (racial, religious, gendered, linguistic, and geopolitical) between the receiving society and the refugee population. Proximate humanitarianism differs from conventional accounts of humanitarian response in three respects.

First, it is constitutively relational: the generosity of the welcome is not a function of the severity of the need but of the recognizability of the needy. Second, proximate humanitarianism generates a specific affective structure: the combination of pity and comfort. The ideal proximate refugee is pitiable but also comfortable because they do not disrupt the visual, linguistic, religious, or cultural order of the receiving society. Third, proximate humanitarianism is simultaneously a form of recognition and a form of exclusion. The extraordinary generosity of the Polish response to Ukrainians did not interrupt the architecture of exclusion built to manage Syrian claimants but reinforced it, by demonstrating that Polish society was perfectly capable of large-scale refugee reception when the refugees were sufficiently proximate.

The concept of proximate humanitarianism thus extends and specifies the existing literatures on racialized humanitarianism,[55] the moral economy of humanitarian reason,[56] and the citizenship-adjacency of certain migrant populations.[57] It names the specific mechanism through which racial, religious, gendered, linguistic, and geopolitical proximity are translated into institutional generosity, and through which their absence is translated into institutional parsimony.

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55) El-Enany, *(B)ordering Britain*, 162–70.

56) Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 85–92.

57) Isin, *Citizens Without Frontiers*, 110–20.

THE INSTABILITY OF WELCOME: WHEN PROXIMITY BECOMES A PROBLEM

The argument developed in the preceding sections might appear to suggest that proximate humanitarianism delivers a stable and durable welcome to those who qualify for it. The Ukrainian case in Poland reveals that this inference is mistaken. The very characteristics that made Ukrainian refugees legible as welcome, their cultural assertiveness, their economic agency, their mobility within the EU, their presence in Polish social space, have become, over time, sources of friction, resentment, and political backlash. The ideal refugee is not merely difficult to achieve; it is impossible to sustain.

It is critical to note here that there is a long and tumultuous history between the lands that became Ukraine and Poland. Without going into excessive historical detail here, the most essential point for the purpose of this article is that Ukraine has repeatedly found itself under various yokes, whether Polish, Russian, Ottoman, or otherwise. In particular, this starts with the Union of Lublin in 1569 when Ukraine finds itself under Polish control, but even before that, there was an ongoing struggle as Polish-Lithuanian rule undermined the Orthodox elite from Rus.[58] The author Plokhy points out in his work that it was around the 1580s–90s that the word Ukraine begins to be used on maps, demonstrating that it was not an ancient state but a product of the late sixteenth century by Orthodox intellectual elites who sought to create and define a history for the region.[59] The struggle for control of Ukraine also became a struggle against the Ottomans and Islamization, yet even more so, there was a continual struggle between the Orthodox and the only royally-recognized, Uniate church, with the former outlawed for thirty years.[60] Plokhy argues that the religious crisis addressed by the Union of Brest in 1596 ultimately made Ruthenians across the religious divide more self-conscious, which in turn led to more pluralistic political and religious culture.[61] It was during the struggles of the mid-1600s that the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648–1657) ultimately led to Crimean Tatars and Cossacks pushing out the Polish

58) Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe,* ch. 7–8.

59) Ibid.

60) Ibid., ch.9.

61) Ibid.

army and leading to mass Ukrainian uprisings across the countryside; Polish nobles, Catholic priests, and Uniates were killed or driven across Right-Bank Ukraine and between 14–20,000 Jews were killed. Plokhy argues this violence was the product of both religious and economic tensions. The historical moment often now alluded to by Russian nationalists,[62] invading Ukraine came as another result of this uprising as Khmelnytsky reached out for allies to Muscovy, but it is worth noting that he did the same with Ottomans, a dynastic marriage in Moldavia, and even, after problems with Muscovy began almost immediately, with the Swedes.[63] After Khmelnytsky's death, Muscovy and Poland partitioned Cossack Ukraine at the Truce of Andrusovo in 1667, which then began a time so terrible in Ukraine's history it is simply referred to as the Ruin. The author concludes by pointing out the essential point of this historical review for this paper: the Cossacks reached out to every possible ally including Tatars, Ottomans, Swedes, Muscovites, and Poles *but none led to an independent Ukraine*. Andrusovo put Left Bank Ukraine under Muscovy and Right Bank Ukraine under Poland, and the Ottomans only left Podolia in 1699. The weakened Cossack state only remained in Left Bank Ukraine. This dramatic history had even more dramatic chapters later, when Ukraine and her people were a target of nearly all possible colonial strategies from cultural to brutally physical (e.g., Holodomor). One of the most essential chapters of modern history, particularly for this essay, were ethnically driven clashes between Ukrainians and Poles during WWII (specifically 1943–1945), which took the form of the ethnic cleansing with, on the Ukrainian side, a genocidal component. We can add to this all Soviet propagandist efforts to foment enmity among Poles and Ukrainians in the whole postwar period[64] and romantic forms of regaining at least imaginative control over the lost Ukrainian lands ("Borderlands") represented by some Polish circles in the postwar period.[65] The rocky and complex picture appears as a true Gordian knot. This history of the colonization of Ukraine partly explains, but does not excuse, the paternalism that comes from both the Polish and Russian sides,

62) This has been an historical moment referred to by Russian President Putin and those who justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an ongoing and ridiculous impetus for their "fulfillment" of the request these hundreds of years ago. (Putin, Interview by Tucker Carlson. February 8, 2024.)

63) Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*, ch. 10.

64) See Bursztyka, "Reconceptualizing Eastern Europe."

65) See, for example, Bakuła, "Aspects of Polish Borderlands Studies."

though it is nonsense to falsely equate the two. In consideration of the ideal refugee, having been a former colonial subject would typically mean conveniently shared language and culture but also a shared understanding of the hierarchy of subordination and even potentially an acceptance of a kind of second-class citizenship and necessary performance of gratitude.

Cultural Assertiveness and the Demand for Gratitude

Ukrainian refugees in Poland have, in significant numbers, maintained their language, cultural practices, and national identity rather than assimilating into Polish cultural life. This cultural assertiveness has generated a specific friction within the logic of proximate humanitarianism. The welcome extended to Ukrainians was implicitly premised on an assimilationist horizon: the expectation that cultural proximity would translate into cultural absorption.[66] If Ukrainians were not absorbed, the acceptable alternative might have been to return to Ukraine, but that ignores the desire of some to keep moving on beyond Poland.

A significant proportion of Ukrainians who initially registered in Poland subsequently moved onward to Germany, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and other EU member states.[67] According to IOM's "Migration in Ukraine 2024: Facts and Figures," over 1.7 million Ukrainians applied for temporary protection in Poland since February 2022, but by August 2024 the number of forcibly displaced persons remaining in Poland was half of that, due to re-emigration.[68] This pattern of transit and onward movement has generated a specific form of resentment among some Poles when Ukrainians use Poland as a steppingstone rather than a destination, breaking the implicit contract of proximate humanitarianism.[69]

Ukrainians have had significantly more freedom of movement than Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghan refugees. Beginning in 2017, the EU implemented visa-free travel

66) Squire, *The Exclusionary Politics of Asylum*, 1–30.

67) Brunarska, "Poland Has Opened Its Arms."

68) International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Migration in Ukraine 2024."

69) This sentiment was expressed to me in an interview with a Polish academic researcher in Gdansk in September 2024, though there is disagreement on how widespread this feeling was among Poles.

for Ukrainians for up to 90 days.[70] While this did not include working in the EU without a visa, it likely reflected a feeling of welcome and solidarity. The Ukrainian migration picture is further complicated by the nearly 40% of Ukrainian refugees who engage in pendular migration, meaning they move back and forth between Ukraine and their host countries.[71] There are also Ukrainians who move to Western countries then return farther East to countries like Poland both because of this pendular migration and perhaps because of their own desire for greater cultural proximity to the language, food, and folkways of Poland, though it is difficult to track precise numbers.[72]

Visible Consumption, the Politics of Resentment, and the Temporality of Welcome

Polish state support for Ukrainian refugees has been substantial and largely the result of public outcry in support of refugees, but that too may be changing. Poland's Special Act of March 12, 2022 entitled Ukrainian refugees to free healthcare, family and education benefits, legal stay guaranteed for eighteen months, and included provisions facilitating employment in Poland and granting Ukrainian children the same rights to schooling, scholarships, and school allowances as Polish citizens.[73] The Polish Economic Institute estimated that in the first three months alone financial, humanitarian, and material assistance provided by Polish society reached 9–10 billion PLN, which is the equivalent of 0.34–0.38 percent of Poland's GDP, while more than half of Polish enterprises engaged in some form of relief or support by May 2022, and 70 percent of Polish households offered assistance in the first four months of the conflict.[74] Some Poles have viewed ongoing state support for refugees as a drain and source of inequality. Polish critics have focused not on abstract fiscal arguments but on visible signs of Ukrainian consumption such as Ukrainians seen shopping in expensive stores,

70) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Ukrainians Travel Visa-Free."

71) European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), "SAM Ukraine Report: Returns and Movements."

72) Ibid.

73) Herbst and Sitek, "Education in Exile," 575–94.

74) Myck, Król, and Oczkowska, "Three Years On."

driving good cars, or taking holidays.[75] Others have interpreted these things as positive economic contributions to Poland, but the interpretation is largely malleable and remains a sore point that can be exploited by anti-refugee activists.

The initial cross-party consensus on Ukrainian reception has fragmented over time. Polling has shown a steady decline in Polish public support for continued refugee reception since the high point of 2022 when 94% of Poles favored admitting Ukrainian refugees; that high continued through 2023 but then began a significant decline which now sits around 48% in favor and 46% opposed.[76] The welcome extended to Ukrainian refugees was premised on a temporary emergency. As the war has persisted and the prospect of return has receded, the temporality of the welcome has been destabilized. The ideal refugee is always implicitly a temporary refugee: their acceptance depends partly on the expectation that they will eventually leave.[77]

The Impossibility of the Ideal Refugee

Together, these tensions reveal that the conditions of even the most ideal refugees' welcome are self-undermining. No actual refugee population can sustain the performance required because there are so many inherent contradictions. A refugee must be present but invisible, economically productive but visibly needy, culturally proximate but assimilated, and temporally limited but grateful enough to stay. This demonstrates the requirement that host countries pick and choose which refugee characteristics to valorize or villainize.

RUPTURE AND RESISTANCE: WHEN REFUGEES REFUSE THE SCRIPT

If the ideal refugee is constructed through discipline, its construction is never total or uncontested. Syrian refugees who organized at the Belarusian border and connected with Polish civil society organizations such as Grupa Granica, were met with state

75) CBOS, *Stosunek Polaków do przyjmowania uchodźców z Ukrainy*, BS/34/2023.

76) Ibid.; Wike, Fetterolf, Schumacher, and Silver, "Views of Russia and the U.S."; University of Warsaw and AEH, "Polish Support for Ukrainian Refugees Declines"; and Scovil, "Poles on the War in Ukraine."

77) Isin, *Citizens Without Frontiers*, 114–17.

efforts to criminalize their advocacy.[78] The Polish government's 2021 declaration of a state of emergency excluded journalists and NGO workers from the border zone, making visibility itself illegal.[79]

Ukrainian refugee political activity in Poland was received much differently, as Ukrainian mutual aid organizations formed rapidly and were recognized by Polish authorities as legitimate civil society actors. Ukrainian public figures who criticized aspects of Polish policy were received as legitimate interlocutors and their claims-making was legible as civic participation.

This asymmetry illuminates a dimension of Nyers' abject cosmopolitanism that his original formulation does not fully capture.[80] The degree to which the political act of the refugee is received as legitimate or transgressive depends not only on the content of the act but on the perceived proximity of the acting body. The Ukrainian refugee who makes a political claim is, in the eyes of Polish hosts, almost a citizen acting almost-civically. The Syrian refugee who makes the same claim is an alien acting transgressively. The act is identical; the bodies are not, and it is the body that determines the reception of the act.[81]

DISCUSSION

The analysis presented in this article has implications that extend beyond Poland and beyond the specific comparison of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. The ideal refugee figure is, in the deepest sense, a liberal subject in extremis: individualized, apolitical, economically aspirational, and oriented toward integration into an existing order rather than transformation of it. Liberal humanitarian governance is structurally committed to managing displacement without questioning the conditions that produce it.[82]

What the Polish case adds to this general argument is a specification of the racial and civilizational content of the liberal humanitarian subject. The ideal refugee is not merely

78) Grupa Granica, "Periodic Report on the Situation at the Polish-Belarusian Border."

79) Amnesty International, "Poland/Belarus"; Human Rights Watch, "Polish Court Rules."

80) Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism," 1082–1089.

81) Ibid.

82) Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society*, 26–42.

apolitical and economically aspirational in the abstract, but instead share a common cultural and historical understanding, are Christian, female, and, perhaps most importantly, geopolitically aligned. The concept of proximate humanitarianism names the mechanism through which these characteristics are converted into institutional generosity and through which their absence is converted into institutional parsimony.[83]

Bystrytsky's ontological analysis of Russia's war on Ukraine as a war against a "world of culture" offers a philosophical counterpart to this sociological argument. Where the present article traces how the Ukrainian refugee's cultural proximity generates institutional generosity, Bystrytsky argues from within that cultural world that the shared Slavic-Christian-civic heritage constitutes a genuine form of ethical life whose destruction is the war's deepest aim. The proximate humanitarianism extended to Ukrainians in Poland is, on this reading, not merely a function of ethnoracial proximity but the institutional expression of a recognized solidarity with a threatened way of being. That the same institutional generosity is withheld from those whose way of being is not recognized in this way exposes the limits of a solidarity that presents itself as universal.[84]

For critical citizenship studies, the Polish comparison adds to Isin's account of acts of citizenship is a racial specification: the act of citizenship is received differently depending on the proximity of the acting body to the normative citizen-subject of the receiving polity.[85] This is not a minor qualification but a fundamental reorientation of the framework: political subjecthood is not equally available to all who claim it, even among those who are equally precarious in formal legal terms.

The implications for humanitarian advocacy are more complex. A politics that celebrates the extraordinary welcome extended to Ukrainian refugees without simultaneously attending to the extraordinary parsimony and even violence deployed against Syrians, Afghans, Chechens, and Sub-Saharan Africans is, at best, incomplete and, at worst, complicit in the construction of the hierarchy that makes both possible. The challenge for advocacy is to hold both realities together, celebrating the capacities for solidarity that the Ukrainian case reveals, while insisting that those capacities must

83) Bhambra, "Brexit, Trump, and 'Methodological Whiteness,'" S216–S220.

84) Bystrytsky, "Existential War and the Ontological Understanding of Culture," 73–93.

85) Isin, *Citizens Without Frontiers*, 110–20.

be extended across the lines of racial, religious, and cultural difference of which proximate humanitarianism currently stops short.[86]

Another critical element of this discussion is responsibility. Although the initial conception of refugee clearly came about in the context of the Cold War, in present times, it is more relevant as a population produced under conditions of political and economic interference. This begs the question: when an outside country interferes in internal politics and economics of a weaker state, should the former hold responsibility for their actions in the form of dealing with the potential refugees born of the new circumstances? Historically, evidence points resoundingly to a near- complete refutation of any responsibility (and often a lack of sympathy if not downright hostility toward or villainization of those refugees). While some former empires have felt more of an obligation to recognize the citizens of their former colonies, this varies and the general pattern of refugee distribution shows that nations taking in refugees are not doing so because they are well off. According to UNHRC, it is low and middle-income countries that host 71% of worldwide refugees, and it is specifically the least developed countries that host 1 in 4 refugees. Wealthier nations in the Global North are not hosting a proportionate share of refugees. This demonstrates the importance of structural inequality in whether and how refugees are distributed. To revisit Haddad's framework, it is the state system itself that creates the conditions for having to prove oneself worthy of help because it is statelessness itself that is the problem when rights derive from sovereign citizenship.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the "ideal refugee" is a normative construction whose coherence depends on a set of disciplinary demands that are not racially neutral: managed passivity, performed gratitude, cultural legibility, and productive futurity. Drawing on critical citizenship studies and a comparative empirical case study of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Poland, it has traced the mechanisms through which this figure is produced and the ways in which it is contested by those it seeks to discipline.

The concept of proximate humanitarianism captures the specific mechanism through which racial, religious, gendered, linguistic, and geopolitical proximity are

86) Zetter, "More Labels, Fewer Refugees," 180–85.

translated into institutional generosity. The Ukrainian refugee in Poland is the ideal refugee not because they have performed the normative script most successfully but because they are already, structurally, almost a citizen: recognizable, legible, comfortable, and geopolitically aligned. Their presence allows the receiving society to feel generous without requiring it to encounter genuine otherness. The Syrian refugee, encountering the same state at a different border crossing, experienced the obverse of this logic: a rejection so complete that it did not require individual justification, only the collective marking of a body as alien.[87]

The ideal refugee is, in the end, hidden in plain sight. They are invisible because they look like everyone else, sound like everyone else, worship like everyone else, and because the circumstances they are fleeing feel urgent, essential, and even threatening to the host. Their refugeehood is temporary, legible, and politically useful. The non-ideal refugee, by contrast, is hypervisible in all the wrong ways: too dark, too loud, too Muslim, too male, too alien. Both figures are constructions, but only one of them receives deliverance.

Clearly, there is a desire for humanitarianism to have a universality to it, and to therefore apply to all humans regardless of whether or not they dress, speak, worship, or look anything like those who seek to help them. But, as pointed out by Bursztyka, there is a tension between this claim of universality and an understanding of local and specific circumstances.[88] The absolute outpouring of support that everyday Poles showed everyday Ukrainians was visceral, exhaustive, and fundamentally shaped by what Bursztyka calls "we-stand-together-for-them" responsive and spontaneous solidarity rather than

87) Here I want to admit that there is no perfect comparison of two groups because of complicated geopolitical relationships and manipulations. It was, as I mentioned early in the paper, evident that Russia and Belarus were manipulating the situation with Syrian and other refugee groups, essentially forcing the Polish state to look undemocratic at best, and downright cruel at worst. It was also an example of distraction which is so common in geopolitics when one state is doing something terrible and wishes to draw attention away from it with another outlandish incident. It is fair to say that no two groups can be exactly compared, but in the way of any natural experiment, we can learn through applying the theoretical construct of the ideal refugee more through its empirical application. It is also worth noting that as one editor pointed out, the same Polish political party (PiS) who refused entrance to Syrians, Afghans, and Africans was also responsible for a substantial increase in temporary labor migrants from Southeast Asia. The OECD's "International Migration Outlook 2024" shows new work permit holders in Poland from 2022 to 2023 changed a great deal, with India up 10%, the Philippines up 29%, and Nepal up a whopping 76%, collectively accounting for about a third of total temporary workers. OECD, "International Migration Outlook 2024."

88) Bursztyka, "Standing Together Is Not Enough," 117–67.

any political or institutional scale of desirability.[89] This is a critical point because it also emphasizes the distinction between what ordinary people will do to help one another (often never thinking twice or considering how they might even be hurting themselves in the long run) over what governments or supranational organizations will do with their eyes toward returns on investments, labor shortages, or geopolitical allegiances.

In this paper, while using Weber's ideal type, there is an undeniably normative tone to how one country sees a desirable (or tolerable) refugee, and that obviously affects policies toward those groups. In the case of Syrians, Iraqis, sub-Saharan Africans, Afghans, and many others, European nations simply have a distaste for the peoples of these countries and feel no responsibility toward them nor a particular solidarity with them. The recent willingness of the USA to simply shut off humanitarian aid to so many foreign nations despite the obvious harm it will cause does not feel accidently aimed most cruelly at nations American elites see as least worthy of investment.
Future research should extend this analysis comparatively across other European and non-European states. There is significant structural inequality between the states who do and do not accept refugees, and this surely shapes the relative strength of various axes of what the ideal refugee is in each context. It would be useful to investigate qualitative differences in the effects of interventions and outcomes for refugees as well; it is easy to see how refugee resettlement patterns reinforce existing global inequalities. For these specific populations, future research should involve the perspectives of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees themselves in analyzing and contesting the normative frameworks through which they are constituted. Allowing refugees agency is difficult because it acknowledges their humanity and their human rights under a framework in which humanitarian efforts often rely on the denial of both. This case also lends itself to an analysis of how refugees are treated over time; the initial motivations for hosting refugee populations may not hold over time, particularly when wars become "never-ending." The ideal refugee is not a neutral standard but a political project, thus its construction and attendant proximate humanitarianism are not static. We can learn from dissecting the nature of the ideal refugee in various contexts to avoid the pitfalls of these unrealistic demands and better understand how to help refugees without insisting their deliverance depends on anything more than their humanity.

89) Ibid.

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