

# Don't Mind the Hypocrisy: A Commentary on Differentiated Treatment in Refugee Reception

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**Abstract.** The current conflict in Ukraine has forcibly displaced a large number of people and has put migration issues at the center of attention once again. A small, but growing, body of literature has revealed that Ukrainian refugees are being treated differently vis-à-vis other refugee groups – this is a clear concern for the social work profession, which is supposed to safeguard all minorities' rights equally. In this commentary, I briefly review and focus on one aspect of why Ukrainian refugees are seemingly being treated 'better' – culture. Cultural proximity has been argued to be a major factor in how the Western response to the current conflict has been shaped, where Ukrainians, but not other refugee groups, are conceived of as culturally compatible with Western countries. The commentary conceptualizes this treatment within the framework of 'promising victimhood' and suggests that further research should focus on how victimhood is constructed *within* the social work profession in relation to the current crisis.

**Keywords:** Ukraine; integration; migrants; deservingness; promising victimhood

## „Nekreipkite dėmesio į veidmainystę“: komentaras apie skirtingą požiūrį į pabėgėlių priėmimą

**Santrauka.** Rusijos karas Ukrainoje, priverstą daugybę žmonių palikti savo namus, nulėmė, kad migracijos klausimai vėl atsidūrė mokslininkų ir visuomenės dėmesio centre. Šia tema atliekama vis daugiau tyrimų, ir nors kol kas jų nėra itin daug, galima pastebėti, kad su ukrainiečių pabėgėliais elgiamasi kitaip nei su kitomis pabėgėlių grupėmis, ir ši tendencija lemia didelį socialinio darbo profesijos, siekiančios vienodai ginti visų mažumų teises, susirūpinimą. Komentare trumpai bus panagrinėtas vienas iš aspektų, nulėmusių, kad su ukrainiečiais, regis, yra elgiamasi „geriau“: kultūra. Teigiama, kad kultūrinis artumas (angl. cultural proximity) yra pagrindinis veiksnys, lemiantis Vakarų atsaką į dabartinį konfliktą, nes ukrainiečiai, kitaip nei kai kurios kitos pabėgėlių grupės, suvokiami kaip kultūriškai panašūs į Vakarų šalis. Komentare toks elgesys konceptualizuojamas remiantis „perspektyvios viktimizacijos“ (angl. promising victimhood) koncepcija ir tolesniuose tyrimuose siūloma tirti, kaip dabartinės krizės kontekste socialinio darbo profesijoje konstruojama viktimizacija.

**Raktažodžiai:** Ukraina, integracija, migrantai, nusipelnymas, perspektyvi viktimizacija

## Introduction

This short commentary focuses on the current humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, and the devastating consequences and numbers of people the conflict has displaced, but with the

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primary aim to further discuss and critique what has been termed a double standard in refugee reception (Bajaj & Stanford, 2022; De Coninck, 2022; McCloskey, 2022). So far, a number of authors have observed, and critiqued, the Western response to the events in Ukraine with the main argument that other refugee groups have not, and are not being, treated equally as well as Ukrainian refugees.

Building onto previous commentaries, and recent empirical research, this commentary seeks to briefly discuss and illustrate why this differentiated treatment occurs, specifically centering on the notion of *culture*. To this end, the commentary situates Ukrainian refugees within the theoretical framework of ‘promising victimhood’, to understand how reception practices are affected by ideas of cultural proximity and ‘alignment’ with that of the receiving society. The commentary finishes by discussing implications for social work and the challenges that may come about with the current events in Ukraine. Finally, as also noted by others (Sambaraju & Shrikant, 2023), it is imperative to emphasize this: the commentary is not intended to take away anything from the hardships that Ukrainian refugees are facing, but to illuminate, theorize and further stay vigilant of other refugee groups’ experiences and needs.

### **Promising victimhood**

The notion of ‘promising victimhood’ emerged from the works of Chauvin and colleagues in the context of migrants and illegality studies (Chauvin et al., 2013; Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014). In short, the framework is predicated on the notion that migrants are constructed as more or less ‘deserving’ based on several factors, including ethnicity, culture, class, gender, and legal status, to mention a few. The framework has since then been advanced by Welfens (2022), who explored the theory in the context of authorities’ assessment of refugee groups. Welfens (2022) proposed three ‘tensions’ by which authorities derive at decisions and construct different refugees as in different need of the welfare state and, generally, the host nation’s protections and benefits. These tensions are how ‘vulnerable’ the refugee is perceived to be, vis-à-vis the refugee’s perceived ability to 1) contribute to host society financially, 2) how culturally ‘close’ the refugee is to the host nation’s population and 3) how ‘dangerous’ the refugee might be. By effectively leveraging these different constructions, authorities do not only base their decision-making on stereotypes, but they may also be in a position, or at least attempt, to (re)negotiate different groups’ identities, such as the case in Arendt’s (1994) chapter on the accommodation of Jews after WWII.

The case of Ukrainian refugees is a prime illustration of how these tensions come about, not only in the context of authorities’ assessment of refugees, but in how Ukrainians, compared to other refugee populations, are framed in media, and in legislation; how they are perceived by the public and authorities, and importantly – how they are treated and perceived by institutions within social work that are ultimately in place to protect minorities’ rights. In this paper, I am, as already mentioned, primarily concerned with the cultural aspect.

## **Culture (similarity) as a catalyst for different treatments through different levels**

Although culture is a fluid, and partially contested, concept, a basic definition of culture is that it may be conceived of as a macro-level phenomenon, governing traditions, norms, and value systems for particular (sub)groups of individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). With the emergence of concepts such as transnationalism, and ‘super-diversity’ (Vertovec, 2007), we also know that ‘culture’ is not static but (re)negotiable and complex. Culture has so far been frequently cited as a major factor as to why Ukrainian refugees may be more welcomed than other refugee groups. In this section, I discuss and reference the (small) body of empirical and conceptual research that has emerged during the current events.

At the outset, it is also important to briefly describe how culture has worked against other groups. It has been researched to some extent how culture is constructed as more or less problematic within (professional) social work. For example, Eliassi (2013, 2015, 2017) has consistently shown that social workers attribute Muslim families different less desirable attributes and view them through the lenses of certain binaries such as, for example, considering gender hierarchies and Muslim families as deviating from a normative Western family in this sense. How these families, culturally, deviate from a normative idea of a (Western) family is at the core of Welfens (2022) idea of cultural proximity, where refugees are assessed based on how well they ‘fit’ within a particular society’s traditions and norms.

At the onset of the current crisis, and the subsequent influx of Ukrainian refugees, reports on how cultural aspects impacted refugee reception emerged rapidly. For instance, the way how culture, ethnicity, and race play out within this treatment quickly became highlighted through the case of international students who attempt to flee Ukraine, where culturally ‘Others’ have systematically reported how they have been pushed out of buses or discriminated against in lines when attempting to exit Ukraine, and much more (Bajaj & Stanford, 2022; Cénat et al., 2022). Being one of the first to voice the matter of culture as a strong predictor of differentiated treatment, De Coninck (2022) specifically contrasted this aspect vis-à-vis the emerging xenophobia and Islamophobia that has grown stronger in Europe during recent years, which might be traced to some parts of what Eliassi (2013) calls an ‘Orientalist social work’.

De Coninck’s observations on how culture and other factors impinge, and construct different refugees as differently deserving, aged well as it is evident in recent empirical research. Some of the first findings appeared in the context of media studies (Rosstalnyj, 2022; Zawadzka-Palucktau, 2022). Ukrainian refugees have consistently been framed as more ‘like us’ (Rosstalnyj, 2022), and have only been discussed in terms of cultural facets, such as religious affiliations, in a positive sense (McCloskey, 2022). Specifically, a range of political authorities and media outlets have noted that Ukrainians are Christians, like themselves (McCloskey, 2022), and that the war is an ongoing crisis in Europe – and not elsewhere. This does not only suggest geographical proximity, although this is

relevant too (De Coninck, 2022), but how Ukrainians are discursively framed within the *European* landscape, thus suggesting a cultural lens through which Ukrainians are looked at.

Some of the most telling examples exist in countries where anti-migrant sentiment has been very strong, such as Poland (Narkowicz, 2018), and Hungary. Pepinsky et al. (2022, p. 3) found "...a dramatic change in Hungarian public opinion towards refugees following the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis" in a series of survey experiments, specifically attributing these changes to the fact that many Ukrainians are "...white European Christians..." (p. 1), and thus share culturally proximal facets to that of Hungarians. In Lithuania, Brazinskaite and Goldsmith (2022) concluded that, whereas Ukrainian refugees rapidly received free primary and emergency care, other refugee groups had struggled to obtain the minimum standard of mental and physical care, and that 'culturally relevant care' needed to be pursued in order to not discriminate against other refugee groups. Similar findings have been detected in the Canadian context, where other refugee groups have had to wait for months for basic healthcare (Cukier & Vogel, 2022).

Ukrainians have also been welcomed into Swedish civil society organizations, such as sports clubs, because of conceived similar experiences of sports, whereas other refugee groups have been problematized as difficult to integrate since they 'lack' the understanding of Swedish sports in general (Blomqvist Mickelsson 2023; Mickelsson, 2023), despite the fact that sports policy in Sweden postulates that sport should strive to be as inclusive as possible. In short, this can be conceived of as a transfer of cultural capital, but it is also an important and problematic structural issue that prevents people without this capital from partaking on equal conditions. In Sweden, sports have been conceptualized as part of a 'community (social) work' (Mickelsson, 2022), contributing to vulnerable individuals' mental, social, and physical health – however, it has become clear that these benefits are not readily available to everyone. For instance, while other refugee groups were constructed as lazy and welfare-dependent, "...Ukrainian refugees are conceived of as willing to 'getting their hands dirty'; a fitting analog to typical Swedish values which emphasises work ethic and diligence..." (Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2023, p. 9). As Welfens (2022) notes, economic and cultural performance often go hand-in-hand, which is characteristic of the above quote as well, where economic capability is intertwined into cultural values of 'work ethic' and 'diligence'. The same has been found within studies of social movements and volunteer aid shaped by these attitudes, where Ukrainian refugees are conceived of as possessing a value system that will contribute to the receiving nation (Denmark in this case), and where other refugees have not (Bang Carlsen et al., 2023; Carlsen & Toubøl, 2023).

A final interesting feature of cultural 'alignment' is that of 'pet politics' – a number of authors have noted how humanitarian movements that rescue animals, and embrace Ukrainians with their pets, have emerged (e.g., Kateryna et al., 2023; Sandvik, 2022). As Sandvik (2022) notes, the emergence, and acceptance, of these movements cannot be disentangled from the otherwise different treatment of Ukrainian refugees but shows another facet of value systems that are perceived to align between Western receiving

societies and that of Ukraine – the attitude towards animals. Again, this system of values is perhaps easiest to illustrate vis-à-vis the previous groups of refugees who entered Europe in large scale, who were mainly young men with Muslim beliefs, where ‘pets’ do not have the same social standing as in Western countries. That is, pets are often thought of as family members in the Western context (Sandvik, 2022), and great compassion has been shown towards Ukrainians and their pets within the current circumstances.

## Discussion and implications for social work

The aim of this brief commentary has been to situate Ukrainian refugees within the current theoretical scholarship on ‘promising victimhood’, with a specific focus on cultural aspects. This is not to say that culture is *the* explanatory factor, nor the only one. A range of factors beyond culture affect the reception practices, such as, for example, the demographic composition of Ukrainian refugees vis-à-vis when compared to other historical events of so-called ‘refugee crises’. The current conflict poses the most recent question on how social work is supposed to tackle modern social issues; the previous issue being COVID-19. COVID-19 forced social workers worldwide to adapt innovative ways to overcome the barriers it presented (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2022) and showed that social work need to be vigilant of global crises in different formats. In the context of crises, Nissen (2020) proposed that social work apply ‘foresight’ lenses as conceptual and methodological frameworks, including attempting to ‘spot’ trends. Within this commentary’s context, this has partially been done (Elinder et al., 2022), but wherein a more critical aspect has been lacking.

Proceeding forward, there is, perhaps, firstly a dire need to explore more precisely within established social work institutions how this differentiated treatment is talked about, and importantly, how it is enacted upon and made visible before applying ‘foresight’ lenses (Nissen, 2020). As known from previous works (e.g., Eliassi 2013, 2015, 2017), ‘othering’ (cultural) processes take place within social work at different levels, and the case of Ukrainian refugees might be a watershed moment where these treatments come about as vividly different. As suggested elsewhere (Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2023), institutions and organizations that in some sense provide a welfare function now need to incorporate anti-racist information and education to properly combat these ‘hierarchies of victims’ and the different treatment these hierarchies create. This is, of course, imperative within the profession and discipline of social work which has one of its core functions to protect and preserve minorities’ rights.

One critical way of doing so is to properly conceptualize and theorize on the current phenomenon. In the intersection of migration and social work studies, ideas on ‘deservingness’ have been used to some extent. Further developments of such frameworks, such as Welfens’ (2022) three ‘tensions’ (although only one is described in this commentary), provide fertile and pedagogical grounds for practitioners to understand how these constructions come about. Making visible the cultural aspect also sits well with social work education that emphasizes reflexivity and understanding one’s own position on delicate

matters, such as class, culture, and sex. As for the latter, it is also imperative to go beyond the idea of how 'deserving' one is conceived to be, and also take stock of the neoliberal forces (Rottenberg, 2017) that shape Ukrainian, mostly, women's situation in terms of work, family, and adaptation to a new host society.

Finally, it is worthwhile to mention that this commentary is only focused on the notion of culture and the implications it has for the reception of Ukrainian refugees. Culture constitutes only one factor relevant to the subject matter, and it is important to state that other factors are at play too. For the countries surrounding Ukraine, which have also been the main recipients of Ukrainians, there is a need to think about a shared history emanating from the Soviet era. According to Dolea (2023, p. 244), the emerging solidarity discourse in Romania is partially founded on the shared experiences of "...post-soviet trauma..." and the "...trauma of Soviet occupation...", and Dolea (2023) argues that one way to have a deeper understanding of the current situation, and to fully appreciate what a Russian invasion entails, is to have experienced it itself. Similar remarks are made by Pawlak (2022) and Ruszczyk et al. (2022), outlining how intergenerational trauma and fear of a Russian aggressor are at play in the Polish context. These are clearly important matters that shape the affectional responses to the current situation within these regions.

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