

The Reasons behind Europe's Double Standard Attitude toward Refugees from Mena and Ukraine

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Abstract. In the face of the European refugee crisis in 2015 and the Ukraine conflict in 2022, Europe has shown opposite attitudes towards two types of refugees. Europe seems to be more welcoming to Ukrainian refugees than it is to some MENA refugees. This study explores the reasons behind such “double standards” through religion, language, stereotypes of MENA, and Eurocentrism. The study results show that the double standard attitude of Europe towards MENA refugees and Ukrainian refugees is mainly reflected in the reports of the news media and the policies issued for refugees. The study points out that the relatively negative attitude towards MENA refugees in Europe stems from the contradiction between Islam and Christianity, the fundamental ethnic and linguistic connection between MENA and Ukrainians and Europeans, and the social construction of European perceptions of MENA. Ultimately, Eurocentrism allowed Europe to help its countrymen, the Ukrainian refugees. This study compared the differences between MENA refugees and Ukrainian refugees, laying a foundation for future research on refugee issues. Moreover, this study advocates equal humanitarian assistance to refugees from the perspective of a community of shared futures for mankind.

Keywords: European Refugee Crisis, Ukrainian Refugees, European double standard.

1. introduction

Refugee Crises have been of great interest to both academics and practitioners in the past decades. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who would be persecuted in their country because of their ethnicity, religion, or political views and does not want to be granted asylum in their country. Besides, this definition had been expanded by Oded Stark, who suggested poverty in their countries is also one of the reasons that spurred people to become refugees and pour into other countries in groups [1].

The European Refugee Crisis is the surge of refugees in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) at the end of 2010 after the outbreak of the Arab spring, which led to numerous people moving to Europe to seek residence. Most European countries are developed countries with stable politics, so the influx of refugees from developing countries has become one of the biggest challenges since the establishment of the EU [2].

With the outbreak of conflict between Russia and Ukraine, many Ukrainians fled their country as refugees after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Large numbers of Ukrainian refugees have poured into Europe seeking asylum.

However, in the face of appeals from two kinds of refugees, Europe has shown contrasting attitudes: welcoming refugees from Ukraine but rejecting those from the MENA. This study examines the reasons behind their “double-standard attitude” by reviewing literature and news. This study attempts to analyze possible factors causing this phenomenon are integrated to pave the way for subsequent refugee research.

2. The Embodiment Of A Double Standard Attitude

In multiple news reports, Ukrainians are defined as “Europeans”, and Europe tacitly recognizes them as its countrymen. Clearly, Ukrainian refugees and Syrian refugees are separated in terms of their status and are being treated differently in Europe. After the conflict in Ukraine broke out, Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) reporter Charlie D’Agata compared the war in Ukraine to the

wars in the MENA. He viewed the war in Ukraine as a more civilized clash than the latter and said Ukraine is a “relatively civilized, relatively European” city. So, war is neither expected nor typical in Ukraine nor European countries.

Similarly, in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a former deputy prosecutor general of Ukraine was told that he was saddened by the fact that blue-eyed and blond Europeans were killed every day. Meanwhile, in the Business FM (BFM) report, journalist Phillipe Corbé distinguished between Ukrainian and Syrian refugees. He said the issue here was not Syrians fleeing the Syrian regime backed by Vladimir Putin but Europeans fleeing to save their lives [3].

In addition, these reports have the opposite attitude towards Syrian refugees; with Ukraine as a comparison, Syria is regarded as a relatively “barbaric” country, and frequent war is typical and expected.

The two attitudes in Europe are reflected in the language of news reports and in many interviews and in objective data. Figure 1 [4] below shows how many refugees European countries accepted from the MENA in 2017 and Ukraine in 2022. Figure 2 shows the proportion of European countries accepting more refugees from Ukraine and more refugees from the MENA. Of the 30 European countries, 19 have accepted more refugees from Ukraine, while 11 have accepted more refugees from the MENA.

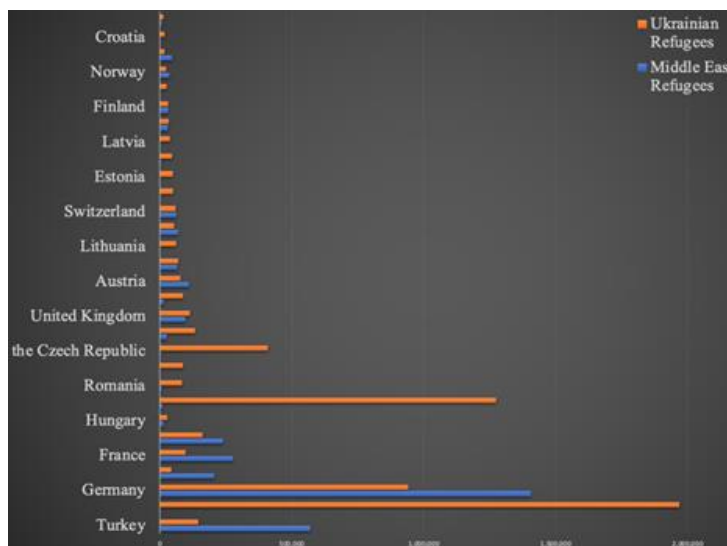


Figure 1 Refugees received by European Countries (Photo credit: Original)

■ The number of European Countries that received Ukrainian Refugees More than Middle East Refugees
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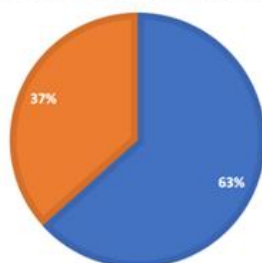


Figure 2 The Comparison of two genres of refugees received by European Countries (Photo credit: Original)

In a word, most European countries have been more welcoming and helpful to refugees from Ukraine than those from the MENA. Such double standards are also reflected in the policies of the host country.

A Danish immigration spokesman Rasmus Stoklund said in the newspaper Ekstra Bladet that Ukrainians fleeing the conflict did not have to comply with the jewelry law because they were from

“the immediate area”. However, in 2016, refugees entering Denmark will only be able to keep assets worth 10,000 Danish kroner (about \$1,468), with additional assets confiscated by Denmark to pay for their stay. In an interview with Arab News, the associate director of Human Rights Watch’s Europe and Central Asia Division, Judith Sunderland, said she believes the 2016 Danish law is symbolic and sends an unwelcome signal to refugees. Moreover, now Denmark welcomed Ukraine [5]. Many countries, like Denmark, treat MENA refugees utterly differently than Ukrainian refugees. Such double standards also appear in the host country’s financial support, visa number, and other aspects.

3. Reasons For Ukrainians Are More “Like” Europeans

Much of Europe’s response to the discrepancy between the numbers of refugees accepted by European countries is that Ukrainians are more “like” Europeans. What exactly is this resemblance? This study explored three reasons: religion, language, and fear of the MENA refugees.

3.1 Conflicts About Religions

Islam is the main religion in MENA, while Ukrainian and Europeans are primarily Christian. Religious conflict between Islam and Christianity is one of the reasons for the rejection of the MENA refugees. The conflict between Islam and Christianity is sophisticated and age-long. The opposition between the two religions usually starts from ideological contradictions with political connotations.

The exclusionary idea of Christianity and Islam makes them intolerant of other religions. In the 13th century, Pope Boniface VIII declared that there was only one Catholic Church in the world, and there was no salvation or absolution except for this one religion. Islam is also exclusive. The Quran, the classic of Islam, states that the true religion with God is Islam and that God will not accept anyone who believes in a religion other than Islam. Although the Quran acknowledges that the Christian and Islamic gods are the same God, it condemns the Christian belief in the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. Nevertheless, both religions firmly believe that they are the truth and send the right message on behalf of God [6]. Both religions’ claims to their “uniqueness” and their rejection of the existence of other religions make them incompatible.

From the historical perspective, many Islam states produced a new ideology contrary to Western society’s development after the Cold War. Salawu published his study result in the European Journal of Social Sciences on the causes of religious conflict in Nigeria, a country of more than 400 ethnic groups. The study points out that the new ideology of Muslims after the end of the Cold War in 1980 made Muslims, especially those in the MENA, dissatisfied with the post-Cold War world. They resented the economic poverty and psychological alienation caused by failed modernization and over-westernization. Such ideology indirectly led to the division of the East and the West and the different social forms.

The link between government and religion differs between Islam and Christianity. In many Islam countries, people are dissatisfied with the status of Christianity in society because it does not accept that religion represents authority to control society. For Muslims, Christianity is a “secular nationalist religion”. Conclusive evidence of this is the frequent use of the term “Christian government” by European social parties. Therefore, in Iran’s Islamic revolution, the essential goal of Muslims is to return Iran to Islamic civilization and get rid of the Western or Christian way of thinking--secular nationalism. In the eyes of many Muslims, imposing Western ideas on people is also a form of colonization. According to Bernard Lewis, Islam considers the concept of secular jurisdiction and authority to be inherently impious and a betrayal of Islam. Moreover, the Islamic revolutionaries exist to right that wrong [7].

Moreover, in research done by Wike, Stokes, and Simmons [8], as shown in Figure 3 [8], most people in the ten European countries surveyed by the researchers agreed that being Christian is one of the critical points of integration for foreigners. The MENA refugees certainly violated that “requirement”.

Greeks say being Christian is very important to being considered truly Greek

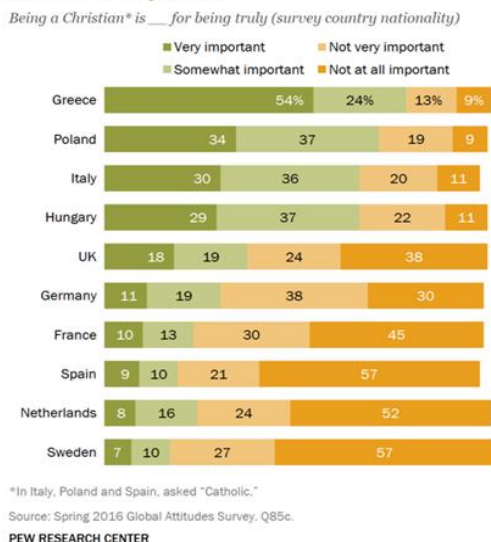


Figure 3. Greeks say being Christian is very important to being considered truly Greek

In brief, the differences in views of Islam and Christianity on the “uniqueness of religion” and the differences in the relationship between the government and religion have led to massive conflicts between the two religions and led various religious revolutions. The incompatibility of the two religions also creates a fundamental ideological difference between Europe and the MENA.

3.2 Language

Five main languages are used in MENA: Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, Turkish, and Kurdish; Ukrainian and Russian are the primary language spoken in Ukraine.

Among the languages in MENA, Arabic and Hebrew are the Semitic languages; Turkish is the Turkic language; only Persian and Kurdish are the Indo-European language. However, Ukrainian and Russian are Slavic languages that belong to the Indo-European language.

Most of the European languages are Indo-European. At the 2018 statistics, 94% of Europeans spoke Indo-European languages, of which 90% spoke Romance, Germanic, and Slavic [9]. In research done by Wike, Stokes, and Simmons [8], as shown in Figure 4 [8], more than 90% of people in the European countries surveyed believe that proper integration into their country requires speaking their language.

Ability to speak the national language viewed as very important across Europe

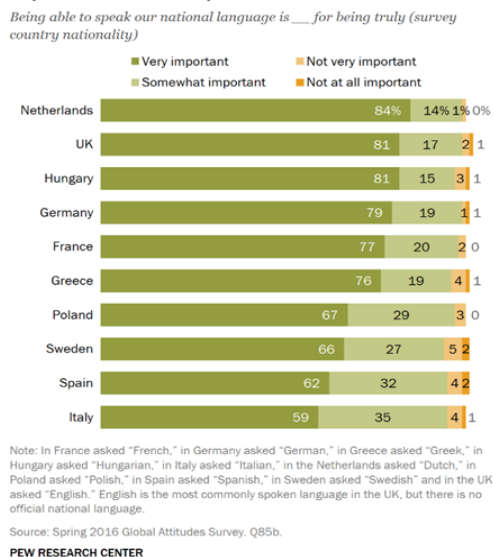


Figure 4. Ability to speak the national language viewed as very important across Europe

All in all, Ukrainian refugees have a stronger linguistic connection to most Europeans than MENA refugees. This language difference may be one of the barriers to the integration of MENA refugees into European society.

3.3 The Fear Of Mena Refugees

Europe’s host countries are fearful and worried about the potential terrorist threat posed by refugees. According to a 2016 IPSOS study of migrants and refugees in 22 countries, 61% of respondents believed that terrorists disguised refugees to enter the host country to carry out terrorist activities [10]. Similarly, after the influx of MENA refugees into Europe in 2015, as shown in Figure 5 [8], a median of 59:36 respondents in the 10 European countries surveyed said they believed refugees had caused more terrorism than they did. What is more, most people’s negative view of refugees is influenced by Muslims [8]. As shown in Figure 6 [8], in all the European countries surveyed, the percentage of people who agreed Muslims will bring negative influence to their country is greater than the percentage who think otherwise.

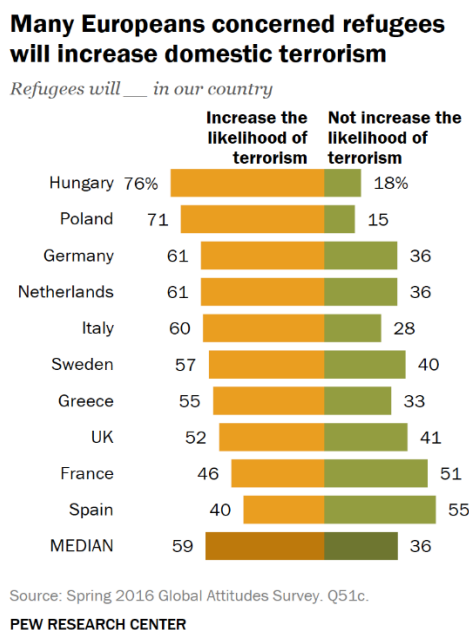


Figure 5. Many Europeans concerned refugees will increase domestic terrorism

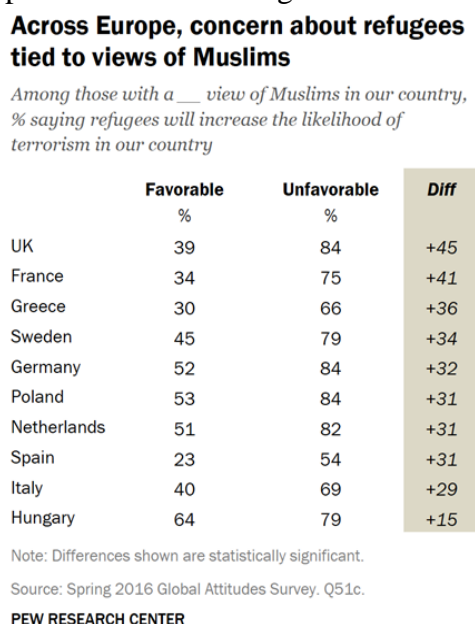


Figure 6. Across Europe, concern about refugees tied to views of Muslims

Increased terrorist attacks may explain Europeans' fear of refugees from the MENA. From 2014 to 2015, the number of attacks doubled as refugees from the MENA poured into Europe, while the number of suspects linked to Muslim terrorism increased, as did the number of arrests [11]. And because of the 2015 attacks in Paris, many Europeans agree that most terrorists are Muslims. They viewed MENA refugees as religious extremists who are more likely to become terrorists, according to the results of a quantitative study [12]. Walczak and Lampas [11] did quantitative research on the number of Muslim terrorist attacks and countries' fear of Muslim refugees; the research shows that countries with the most terrorist incidents have the lightest negative view of Muslim refugees. The countries that experienced the fewest terrorist incidents had the most negative views of Muslims. Finally, the researcher concluded that the fear of MENA refugees is a social construct.

4. Eurocentrism And The Difference Between “The Like” And “The Other”

In the European refugee crisis of 2015, the humanism expressed by Europe was centered on the West. Avraamidou [13] studied the New York Times and the Guardian and concluded that the humanitarian crisis was a Euro-centric media construct. Although many Europeans expressed their sympathy and pity for the suffering of MENA refugees in various media reports, they once again banalized the existence of the East as “the other”. The primary connotation of Eurocentrism can be summarized by Quijano [14] into three points: 1. The contrast and characteristics of a country's modern European society, capital or pre-capital, European or non-European, primitive or civilized, traditional or modern. 2. Racism. 3. Take a new position by redefining past non-Europeans.

To be more specific, words associated with Europe are “civilized,” “rich,” “correct,” and “generous.” At the same time, parts of Africa and Asia colonized by Europe are labeled “underdeveloped,” “weak,” and “destructive”. The perceived “illegality” of people entering European host countries indirectly leads to negative identification with refugees, making these groups subject to being excluded and marginalized [15].

Europe has set clear borders to exclude people who do not share their identities. Such distinctions reinforce the idea of Eurocentrism. Ukrainians have consistently identified with European concepts, cultures, and other aspects, so they have been accepted by Europe. However, this does not guarantee that Europe will accept other refugees. Ukraine and Europe are almost identical groups, and this is a struggle by European elites to support the Ukrainian regime over the Russian regime.

In Polish media reports, Ukrainians who fled their homes were labeled “refugees” while MENA's people were referred to as “refugees and migrants”. Such linguistic distinctions have led to different treatment of the two groups, with refugees needing more humanitarian help and migrants less [16]. Many European media described MENA refugees as “dehumanized, homogenous, passive” people and people with bad intentions pretending to be refugees [17]. Some public figures have even suggested that it is normal for MENA to flee conflict, but not for a white and civilized Europe like Ukraine. Above all, Eurocentrism lets Europe choose to help “the like” rather than “the other”.

5. Conclusion

Ukrainians were more welcome and accepted in Europe and found refuge in a short time. However, the MENA is rejected by many countries. The policies and social media rhetoric of most European countries favor the Ukrainians, even comparing the two kinds of refugees illustrates the most significant difference between them. Ukrainians are more like Europeans, their compatriots, while MENA is not. Most European people have no objection to these remarks and have adopted racial slurs in casual remarks. They sympathize with Ukrainians but see the fighting in MENA as usual. Just as it is inhuman for Europeans to be persecuted by wars, the Middle East and North Africa are already prone to armed conflict and violence, and their people fleeing war are ignored by Europeans.

For the reasons behind this double standard, this study first explores the differences between the two kinds of refugees. That is, the conflict between Christianity and Ukrainians is divided into the

contradictions of the uniqueness and exclusivity of the two religions themselves and the dissatisfaction of Islam with Christianity becoming secular nationalism. Moreover, Muslims created a new and hostile ideology to the development of the West after the Cold War.

In terms of language, the language of the Ukrainians belongs to the same family as most Europeans, the Indo-European family, while the language of the MENA belongs only partly to the Indo-European family. In the eyes of Europeans, their prejudice against the Middle East has become a social construct. Islam is widely believed to bring terror and violence to Europe. Ukrainians are seen as neighbors to ordinary Europeans.

Eurocentrism also provides reasons for double standards. They see Ukrainians as genuine refugees, while MENA includes migrants and even refugees disguised as terrorists. Eurocentrism allows Europeans to lend a helping hand to more of their compatriots, the Ukrainians, while sending unwelcome signals to the MENA.

There are too many incidents with the color of racial discrimination and religious conflicts in humanitarian aid. For future research, it is suggested to explore how to mitigate or even solve the problem of double standards of international assistance to refugees. As refugees, they are all innocent people in need of international assistance and support. Racial discrimination and religious conflicts are difficult to resolve, but as a community with a shared future for humanity, we hope that people can treat every asylum seeker far from home fairly from a humanitarian and moral perspective.

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Appendix

Table 1. The amount of MENA refugees and Ukrainian refugees received by 30 European countries [4].

European Countries	MENA Refugees	Styles Ukrainian Refugees
Turkey	569,000	145,000
the Russian Federation	828	1,968,127
Germany	1,404,550	940,000
Sweden	205,405	43,609
France	276,340	96,520
Italy	239,455	159,968
Hungary	12,615	27,861
Poland	8,590	1,274,130
Romania	4,680	83,827
Slovakia	635	87,030
the Czech Republic	3,825	409,008
Spain	25,545	133,007
United Kingdom	96,825	111,900
Bulgaria	13,960	86,489
Austria	108,670	77,301
Netherlands	65,285	68,050
Lithuania	830	61,847
Belgium	68,425	52,557
Switzerland	60,645	59,834
Portugal	1,915	49,718
Estonia	525	49,471
Ireland	4,015	44,365
Latvia	790	36,161
Denmark	29,585	32,689
Finland	30,890	30,372
Georgia	Less than 3,000	25,771
Norway	35,485	22,688
Greece	45,605	18,045
Croatia	945	16,829
Cyprus	6,490	13,113