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Solidarity for all? Europe's unequal treatment of refugees

Comparative research shows that solidarity with refugees in Europe is particularly strong when host societies perceive them as "similar" to themselves. This practice, however, contradicts the universalist principles at the core of European identity which are based on the recognition of equal dignity among all human beings. Measures are necessary

- to counteract the unequal treatment of refugees and interrogate imaginaries of similarity.
- to improve the practical application of universalist principles by, for example, systematically identifying gaps in care, and by establishing the right to work for all refugees.

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The willingness of European states and societies to welcome refugees varies, and not only due to differences between the host countries. Developments since the Spring 2022 escalation of the war in Ukraine reveal that the origin of refugees also influences what kind of help they can expect to receive. In liberal societies, solidarities that are guided by perceived similarity are in need of corrective measures. This is the only way to fulfil the universalist claim of refugee law, which applies to everyone affected by war and persecution.

EU DIRECTIVE EASES THE ARRIVAL OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

In March 2022, the Council of the European Union activated, for the first time, its so-called "mass influx directive" for refugees with Ukrainian citizenship. Instead of restricting refugee movements into European countries, these were now enabled and facilitated. The directive stipulates that asylum applications need not be submitted. The residence permit automatically includes a work permit, and the place of residence can be freely chosen. Mass accommodation centres are only a last resort for those who find no place elsewhere. Moreover, Ukrainian refugees are entitled to social benefits, and some non-EU member states in Europe have enacted similar regulations as well.

The willingness of governments to offer support has been strengthened by civic engagement. In addition to large humanitarian organisations, countless private initiatives became active in national as well as international aid and relief. They provided assistance in finding housing, for example, or organised the transport of supplies, goods and people.

"SOLIDARITY THROUGH SIMILARITY CONTRADICTS UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES."

SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY OR DISCRIMINATION?

For Ukrainian refugees, arrival in Europe was therefore much easier than for those coming from Syria, Afghanistan and other war-affected countries. They were better positioned legally and faced fewer obstacles in everyday societal life. This reality, however, contradicts the universalist claim of refugee law, which understands protection from persecution as a human right, equally applicable to everyone. Moreover, it contradicts a European cultural identity in which universalist principles provide the foundation of a liberal and open society.[1]

In politics, these differences in welcoming refugees were justified by highlighting a particular responsibility towards Ukraine. Human rights organisations, by contrast, perceived them as racist discrimination rooted in Europe's colonial history. Empirical sociological research in everyday life contexts shows, however, that both arguments fall short.

READINESS TO TAKE IN REFUGEES AND PERCEPTIONS OF SIMILARITY

Perceptions and imaginaries of similarity are decisive for the differing treatment of refugees. Who exactly is considered similar, however, is not determined on the basis of supposedly objective criteria such as religion or physical appearance. Instead, social practices and societal entanglements play a pivotal role. In particu-

lar, when the everyday lives and living conditions of refugees appear familiar, the state of war and emergency becomes more tangible in the eyes of (potential) helpers. To the social majority, professional and family life in Kharkiv seems less foreign than that of Herat or Idlib. As a result, imaginaries about the consequences of war are more concrete, and ideas of shared history reinforce this effect. Perceived similarities therefore influence everyday social, political and administrative action.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS AS ENGINES OF SOLIDARITY

An important engine for humanitarian aid and solidarity with refugees from Ukraine are imaginaries of neighbourhood and neighbourliness. These are fed not only by shared histories, but also by shared experiences and often by the perception of similar geopolitical threats. They create a sense of closeness and connectedness, encouraging people to imagine being in the refugees' place.

This sense of familiarity and the solidarity it facilitates is further enhanced by pre-existing familial and professional ties between the host country and the country of the refugees' origin. Many people from Ukraine found accommodation with relatives and friends who had emigrated, or they received offers of help via online platforms on which they were active. Global connectedness and experiences of migration in one's social environment thus facilitate care after arrival. In host societies, the effects of war were felt in family or business relations, when, for example, family visits became impossible or supply chains were interrupted. In this way, war and the disruption of everyday life also became tangible outside the theatres of war.

"SIMILARITY-BASED SOLIDARITY IN LIBERAL SOCIETIES NEEDS CORRECTIVE MEASURES."

EXCLUSION AND SOLIDARITY BEYOND STATE INSTITUTIONS

Research also shows that even powerful imaginaries of similarity do not prevent the exclusion of certain groups, however. Not all refugees from Ukraine were received with equal enthusiasm. People of colour (PoC), members of the LGBTQI+ community, and Sinti and Roma in particular were often confronted with additional formal and informal hurdles upon their arrival. PoC fleeing Ukraine, for example, were subject to harsher controls when crossing the border. Unlike many other refugees from Ukraine who were accommodated in private flats or hotels, Sinti and Roma were predominantly housed in mass accommodations.

Only a few private initiatives joined forces across countries and showed solidarity towards these groups. Again, they functioned according to the principle of similarity and were supported by diaspora organisations or local NGOs. Movements of support for PoC or LGBTQI+ individuals fleeing Ukraine emerged especially in contexts where well-organised initiatives and networks of these groups already existed. These practices of group-specific solidarity were able to compensate for weak official support and ensure basic care. However, these networks could not fill all the gaps. In particular, the transnationally less well-connected were left out. This included older people and impoverished populations without familial or other connections to the country of arrival, as well as Sinti and Roma.

SOLIDARITY BASED ON SIMILARITY: IN CONTRADICTION WITH DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

As refugees from Ukraine arrived in Europe, imaginaries of similarity and familiarity mobilised support at the political level and within civil society. Especially in times of crisis, these imaginaries are an important source of solidarity. However, a commitment with this kind of foundation always runs the risk of undermining universalist principles because it favours that which appears similar over that which appears different.

In liberal societies, which are founded on a commitment to shared humanity, the momentum of similarity-based solidarity cannot be left unchecked. If it remains uncorrected, the core of these societies' liberal identity will be at risk. European solidarity with refugees that is implicitly based on principles of similarity not only endangers the lives of those who are considered different, it also belies the principles of liberal society. Dedication to democratic futures requires strengthening the practical application of universalist commitments – especially in the field of refugee protection.

ENDNOTES

1 See also: Heins, Volker/Wolff, Frank (2023): Hinter Mauern: geschlossene Grenzen als Gefahr für die offene Gesellschaft, Berlin: Suhrkamp.

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