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Author(s): Pirkkalainen, Päivi; Toivanen, Mari; Bauvois, Gwenaëlle; Eskelinen, Viivi

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Special issue: War in Ukraine and perspectives on forced migration

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Writers: [Päivi Pirkkalainen](#), [Mari Toivanen](#), [Gwenaëlle Bauvois](#) & [Viivi Eskelinen](#)

Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24th. As a result of this conflict, the number of refugees crossing the borders of Ukraine has now grown to more than six million (situation on 23.5.2022, [UNHCR](#)).

Our editorial team began putting together this thematic issue on the war in Ukraine and forced migration shortly after the invasion. With this issue, we seek on the one hand to better understand the forced migration movements caused by the war in Ukraine and, on the other hand, to look at these movements in light of previous research on the theme. Our goal is to bring together varied perspectives from different scholars specialising in migration and forced migration. Before publishing seven texts, three in English and four in Finnish, in this introduction we will briefly consider the reactions to the war in Ukraine and the politics of borders.

The war in Ukraine has in many ways led to large-scale societal mobilisations

As soon as the war broke out, political reactions across the political spectrum ranged from shock to strong condemnation of the attack. Political reactions from state leaders to MPs in the EU countries have been fairly consistent. The European Union rapidly decided to activate the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time since it was adopted in 2001. The EU member countries unanimously agreed on giving the right to temporary protection to those who flee the war in Ukraine. By May 24th, more than 21,500 Ukrainians have received temporary protection status in Finland ([Finnish Immigration Service, 2022](#)).

The civil society and citizens of the EU countries have also mobilised to a large extent for the support of Ukraine and welcoming Ukrainian refugees. The Ukrainian diaspora community in different countries has also been mobilised in many different ways, through fundraising, rallies and demonstrations. NGOs in various countries have raised substantial sums for humanitarian aid and refugee support. Aid organisations operating in Finland have raised for the help of Ukraine more than 53 million euros by Easter ([Finnish Broadcasting Company, 2022](#)).

The war in Ukraine has also received a lot of media coverage. During the past months, it has been undeniably the number one news item after two years of Covid-19 saturated headlines. The media has also covered issues relating to war on information, on both sides, and the current conflict has been termed as the first 'TikTok war'.

Forced migration caused by the war in Ukraine will undeniably be researched in the coming years. Future research will provide rich insights into the social movements in Europe brought about by the forced migration caused by the war in Ukraine. Research topics are likely to include, as in this issue, the reactions of Ukrainian refugees, the action of the diaspora community against the war, the management of European migration, and the mobilisation of the civil society and citizens.

Border politics

Previous research has shown how forced migration makes different geographical, political, symbolic, and legal boundaries visible. Border politics are present in the war in Ukraine. The geographical demarcation is reflected in Russia's invasion of Eastern Ukraine, and political borders are being re-established through NATO's expansion into Northern Europe. The border policy is also reflected in the granting of temporary protection status to refugees from Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine has created a huge surge of solidarity, for which it is difficult to find a point of comparison in recent history. However, concerns have been raised in the public debate as to whether the refugee reception system will be split into two, so that Ukrainians are protected and able to start a new life in the EU whereas people fleeing conflicts outside Europe are in much more vulnerable and precarious situations in their attempts to seek asylum in Europe.

On the other hand, news images from the Polish border after the beginning of the war, where third-country nationals fleeing Ukraine are segregated under stricter border controls, also shows inequalities in terms of border policy and of whom is considered to have the (privileged) right to seek asylum ([BBC, 2022](#)).

Discourses on the "real" and deserving Ukrainian refugees and the "living migrants" as not "real" refugees"" from outside Europe, maintained by for example by the Finns party leader, tends to create a perception that refugee rights and solidarity are a zero-sum game ([Helsingin Sanomat, 2022](#)).

All these above mentioned issues raise questions about equality and racism. For this reason, we would like to present in this special issue broader reflections on the refugee issue on both societal mobilisation and the related border politics.

Presentation of the special issue

The fleeing of Ukrainian refugees, their arrival in Finland and the related political decisions are such recent phenomena that there are hardly any scientific publications on the subject yet. Although only one of the texts in this special issue is based on empirical data among Ukrainian refugees, we aim to reflect on the current situation on the basis of previous research data. The researchers who wrote the texts to this special issue have years, even decades, of experience researching migration issues, which can be reflected vis-à-vis the current situation.

The texts of the special issue highlight, on the one hand, the universal nature of the refugee experience, and on the other hand, illustrate how the reception of refugees from all over the world and the border politics differ depending on where people come from and what kind of conflict they are fleeing. In addition to research based facts, we also try to highlight the feelings evoked by the war in Ukraine.

The thematic issue begins with a text by a researcher from Ukraine, in which she presents her own experiences and reflects on the mobilisation of the Ukrainian community in Sweden immediately after the Russian attack. In this text, *New forms of solidarity with Ukraine across diasporas in Sweden* Ukrainian-born researcher Sofiya Voytiv, who lives in Sweden, shares her personal experience since the beginning of the war.

In the second text of the issue, *Hundreds of hollow eyes of destroyed apartment buildings stare at us*, Karina Horsti, a researcher specializing in media and immigration, describes how images of bombed apartment buildings in the early media coverage convey a sense of destruction of normal life and homes.

In the third text of our thematic issue, *Ukraine is fleeing the war – who is not being talked about and who is excluded from temporary protection?* Eveliina Lyytinen, who has studied refugees in different contexts and countries, discusses the diversity of people fleeing war in Ukraine and ponders on how inequalities are associated with migration.

In the fourth text of the thematic issue, *Two “Refugee Crises” and the Boundaries of Protection* Erna Bodström, who has previously examined decision making processes in asylum cases and pro-asylum activism, analyses two refugee crises that Europe has faced in 2000s, and reflects the differences in reactions to them in terms of physical, administrative, cultural and linguistic borders.

In the fifth text, *The indispensable role of civil society in the reception of refugees* Päivi Pirkkalainen, a researcher specialising in citizen participation and immigration activism, reflects on the role of Finnish civil society in receiving asylum seekers in the current situation after the 2015 “refugee crisis”.

In the sixth text *(Ukrainian) diaspora can play an important role during and after the conflict*, researchers Elise Feron and Mari Toivanen, who specialise in diaspora-homeland relations and their impact on post-conflict reconstruction, discuss the role of the diaspora during both conflict and domestic reconstruction.

We conclude our special issue with *(Good) Refugees Welcome! European far-right response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis*, in which Gwenaëlle Bauvois, a researcher on the far right, right-wing populism and anti-immigration rhetoric, explores the changes in the discourse of far-right politicians towards refugees when the war broke out.

Reception and solidarity with the refugees from Ukraine is of great importance. With this issue, we want to show solidarity with Ukraine and all the people fleeing the country, but also with all the people fleeing wars and conflicts in the world. For us, solidarity is not a zero-sum game. We, therefore, hope that in the future, instead of confrontation, the solidarity we witnessed towards Ukrainian refugees will extend to all those facing forced migration.

References

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