

CONFERENCE REVIEWS

Will the Welcome ever Run Dry?: Interrogating the Hierarchy of Human Categories - The Case of Ukrainian Refugees in Europe¹

*Ndangwa Noyoo²; Tanja Kleibl³, Melinda Madew⁴, Minenhle Matela⁵,
Ronald Lutz⁶, and Marcin Boryczko⁷*

1. Introduction

This review summarises and chronicles inputs from several speakers who attended a conference titled: *Will the Welcome ever Run Dry?: Interrogating the Hierarchy of Human Categories – The Case of Ukrainian Refugees in Europe*. The conference interrogated the refugee crisis which had been precipitated by Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine. It was organised by Tanja Kleibl, Melinda Madew, Minenhle Matela, Ronald Lutz and Ndangwa Noyoo and held at the University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt on 17 March 2022. The conference participants were social work academics, practitioners, students and activists, and it was delivered in a blended mode. Crucially, it was meant to be a call to action to the social work profession around the world, especially in Europe. Also, the organisers wanted to cast a sharp light on the refugee crisis from a social work perspective and highlight the discrimination which was associated with this phenomenon. Indeed, media reports and other accounts had identified this disturbing trend, whereby African and non-European students from developing countries, who were equally fleeing the war zone with Ukrainians, were ill-treated and discriminated against by Ukrainian and Polish security forces. These officials allegedly allowed only Ukrainians and European-looking people to cross the border (Chebil, 2022; Pronczuk et al., 2022).

2. The War in the Ukraine and Double Standards related to the Displaced

The conference was opened by two of the organisers, Tanja Kleibl and Melinda Madew. In her remarks, Kleibl noted that earlier she had participated in the drafting of a position

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² Dr. Ndangwa Noyoo is a professor at the Department of Social Development of the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

³ Dr. Tanja Kleibl is a professor for Social Work, Migration, and Diversity at the Faculty Applied Social Sciences of the University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt, Germany.

⁴ Dr. Melinda Madew is a professor for International Social Work at the Protestant University Ludwigsburg, Germany.

⁵ Minenhle Matela is a student in the Master's Degree Program Management in Governance: Development and Economics at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

⁶ Dr. Roland Lutz is Professor for Sociology in Special Life Circumstances at the Faculty Applied Social Sciences of the University of Applied Sciences Erfurt, Germany.

⁷ Dr. Marcin Boryczko is assistant professor at the Institute fo Pedagogy of the University of Gdansk, Poland.

paper titled “No war in Ukraine!” as a member of an Expert Group of International Social Work for the German Association of Social Work (DGSA, 2022), together with members from the Expert Group for Flight, Migration, Critique of Racism and Anti-Semitism within the German Association of Social Work (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziale Arbeit – DGSA). Kleibl noted that social work academics and practitioners needed to be cognisant of the fact that they were already part of this conflict because of its ramifications on global human security. Hence, there was no “neutral” way of meeting the needs of those fleeing the war. She pointed out that social workers needed to take a stance on various issues that affected the poor and vulnerable people of the world. While amplifying the statements of the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) of 24 February 2022 and of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) of 26 February 2022, the organisers of the conference agreed to stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine and condemn the unjust and unprovoked attack on Ukraine by the Russian military forces (IASSW, 2022). It can be noted that all the conference participants were not only concerned about this perilous situation but they were equally horrified by the Russians’ bombardment of civilian buildings, schools and hospitals and the extremely dangerous attack on the Chernobyl nuclear complex. Furthermore, they all condemned any form of imperialism, proxy wars and national populism, which were working against the peaceful cohabitation of all people in a diverse and globalised world. Kleibl drove her point home by asserting that Putin’s justification of the war in Ukraine, ironically, subverted a language of “the responsibility to protect” that had become some kind of an exclusive property of the West (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty [ICISS], 2001). However, the West, in reality, had lost some of its “protection status” through its ever-increasing participation in the international arms trade (Rose, 2019) and not at least as well, through violent pushbacks against refugees (Oxfam et. al., 2017) seeking asylum within the Europe Union (EU), Kleibl concluded.

Interestingly enough, Kleibl observed that many States in the Global South had abstained from voting on the first United Nations resolution on the war in the Ukraine (United Nations, 2022). She speculated that the reason some of them abstained from the vote is partly that they felt “it was not their war” and it may even have been based on a residual sense of loyalty for support received from the former Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – USSR) during the struggle for freedom and after independence. Thus, this could also be some kind of “afterlife” of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) and a call for a way out of the “Big Power” political bullying and for a new focus on a consistent application of the international rule of law (Stubbs, 2020). Kleibl stated that she personally found the reference to the NAM particularly relevant, although in Europe, countries seemed far removed from a non-aligned position or what may also be referred to as “third way” – which in the past had advocated for a non-aligned “third world”, that is, a world not dominated by the East or the West (Stubbs, 2020). According to Kleibl, Putin’s current aggression might be partly traced back to the loss of an empire and the erosion of Russia’s post-Soviet role as a global power in the shadow of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s (NATO’s) expansion (and expansionist motives) (Liik, 2022).

Notwithstanding the war in Ukraine, it is also important to note that there are still some disastrous proxy wars which have not been overtly protested or loudly mobilised within Europe. Such wars have also not resulted in refugees from such conflict areas being granted asylum seamlessly (Hartung, 2022). It is within this refreshed Cold War scenario, that Germany announced a special budget of 100 billion Euro to strengthen its military

forces (Hansen, 2022). Kleibl doubted if this would de-escalate or even end the conflict. In the same vein, she observed that while political rhetoric and ideologies clashed, it was doubtful if all refugees would be treated equally in Europe. And this was precisely the topic that the conference chose to tackle. Indeed, in the recent past, some refugees were welcomed with open arms while others were harassed. Some even froze to death or drowned at the borders of “Fortress Europe”, in Polish forests (Neumeyer, 2021). Hence, the Russian military aggression against Ukraine has revealed a double standard and misplaced solidarity from European societies.

Concretely, racism and various forms of discrimination were exemplified in the following manner:

- *At the borders*: People of colour – most of them from the Global South – as well as Sinti and Roma, were threatened by right-wing groups and the military at the Ukrainian-Polish border (e.g., at Przemyśl and Lublin). Some of them were barred from entering the EU (Yakutenko, 2021; Jakil, 2022).
- *During refugees’ movements* – Fleeing students from the Global South, for example, were excluded from the free trains to Germany provided by the German Railways. In the same period, fleeing African students faced further discrimination in Germany (Walker, 2022; Jakil, 2022).
- *In the context of receiving refugees* – Kleibl observed that while in the recent past Ukrainians had often been exploited in Germany as labourers in the meat and agriculture industry, as well as care work, they were now getting a lot of help from the citizens. While this positive change was welcomed, refugees from the Global South, however, had to stay in closed camps on the Greek islands (International Rescue Committee [IRC], 2022).

In concluding her opening remarks, Kleibl noted that many media outlets were further pushing the abovementioned issues and exclusionary patterns (“othering”) by labelling and categorising people on the move in their news reports and television debates (Noyoo et al., 2022). Thus, in the conference, social work lecturers, researchers and practitioners were confronted with this critical question: Was there any guarantee that the overwhelming open and welcoming attitude in Western Europe towards Ukrainians would not one day run dry due to the aforementioned hierarchy of human categories?

3. The Unfolding Debate: Perspectives from Poland, and South Africa

In order to further contextualise the conference’s debate, Marcin Boryczko (Marcin Boritschko), from the University of Gdansk in Poland proffered a brief situational report and analysis of how things unfolded on the Polish side. After that, South African based scholars, namely, Minenhle Matela, a master’s student at the School of Governance at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), and Ndangwa Noyoo, professor at the University of Cape Town (UCT), and at that time a guest professor at the Catholic University of Applied Sciences in Munich, presented an African perspective on the Ukraine crisis. This was followed by a debate with the audience and with conclusions drawn by Ronald Lutz, a retired professor from the University of Applied Sciences at Erfurt and lecturer at the University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt.

3.1 The situation in Poland

The presentation by Boryczko proffered a summary of the situation in Poland. He noted that there were over 5.9 million people who had crossed into Poland from Ukraine since 24 February 2022 (Sas, 2022). In the said period, Poland's parliament had passed a law to assist refugees. However, non-Ukrainians (e.g., Africans) who were residents in Ukraine before the war and had fled to Poland were excluded from State and non-State support (Wądołowska, 2022), as only Ukrainian citizens benefitted from the former (Bior et al., 2022). Boryczko concluded his presentation by warning that civil society in Poland would not solely cope with the refugee crisis. It may not be able to manage the process without systemic support and funding.

3.2 Perspectives from South Africa

In her presentation, Matela argued that from various international media accounts, it was discernible that there was an openness and willingness from European countries such as Poland, Moldova, and Hungary to accept and assist Ukrainian refugees fleeing their homeland. In addition, Ukrainian refugees were issued solidarity tickets and provided transport to exit the war zone, while their applications for asylum were fast-tracked (Carroll, 2022). According to the European Commission (EC) the European Union (EU) was even contemplating a three-year temporary residency permit for Ukrainian refugees to find work, and access benefits in EU countries (von der Leyen, 2022). Matela further noted that the EU Member States had publicly declared their willingness to accommodate as many Ukrainian refugees as possible (Buras et al. 2022). The Polish Member of the EU Commission had even offered to host a refugee family in his home. While these gestures of kindness, generosity and solidarity were extremely heart-warming, Matela found it hard to ignore the salient discrimination against other groups of refugees.

Matela noted that it seemed that such generosity and solidarity was only extended to a certain group of people, namely, Europeans. Incidentally, it had been not so long ago, when another humanitarian crisis unfolded which elicited an opposite response in Europe. In 2015, Syrian and North African refugees seeking asylum were rejected by Poland and Hungary because of so-called lack of "space" (Ekblom, 2019). The non-European refugees were sent from "pillar to post" while the Hungarian and Polish police forces were even instructed to shoot anyone who had tried to cross the border with rubber bullets (NEWS WIRES, 2015). In fact, Hungary went as far as to erect a four-metre-high razor fence (Associated Press, 2015) to keep out refugees from the country. Unsurprisingly, in 2022, in current affairs, the world is again witnessing discriminatory acts in a crisis that affects people of every race in the same way. However, it is very hard to ignore the discrimination pointed out earlier and the obvious "othering" of African and Indian students at the Ukrainian border (Bior, et al., 2022). This situation raises this question: Should the term "refugee" be applied in reference to skin pigmentation? On the contrary, this should not be the case. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), "[r]efugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country" (UNHCR, n. d). This can be any person, of any race, religion, or culture. Quite the opposite, the Bulgarian Prime Minister went so far as to express the following view: "These are not the refugees we are used to [...] these people are Europeans. These people are intelligent, they are educated people" (Brito, 2022).

While these incidences were unfolding, Africans responded with dismay. In fact, some African leaders expressed dissatisfaction with the discrimination of Africans at the

Ukrainian border, noted Matela. For instance, the Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari made the following observation: “*All who flee a conflict situation have the same right to safe passage under the UN [United Nations] convention, and the colour of their passport or their skin should make no difference*” (Akinwotu et al., 2022). Many African students condemned the racist acts they had been subjected to while trying to escape the conflict in Ukraine. Nigerian, South African and Kenyan students had conveyed their frustration regarding the discrimination at the Ukraine-Poland border. For example, Korrine Sky, a medical student from Zimbabwe, stated that trying to leave Ukraine was like “*Squid Games*” with Ukrainians and Europeans at the top of the hierarchy, while people from India and the Middle East were in the middle, and Africans at the bottom (Ray, 2022). It must be stated nonetheless that most of these racist incidences transpired on the Ukrainian side of the border.

Noyoo concluded this section by pointing out that this was not the first time that this part of the world had seen African students. Being part of the old USSR, there were many Africans who were trained in Ukraine and other countries in the former Eastern Bloc, from the 1950s to present times. In fact, during the Cold War, more than 50,000 African students attended tertiary education in the Soviet Union, and tens of thousands studied in other Eastern Bloc countries (Katsakioris, 2021). Noyoo further argued that it was important not to conflate the situation of the African students in Ukraine today with that of Africans migrating to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea as it complicates the former’s position in Europe. This is because, new political developments and social discourses fed by media hysteria, based on half-truths and stereotypes of African migrants, had emerged in many parts of Europe prior to the Ukraine crisis. In many European countries where African migrants arrived, the authorities and local populace were reluctant to receive and look after them (Noyoo et al., 2022; Kleibl et al., 2022). In some countries, such as Italy and Greece, Africans arriving via the Mediterranean Sea had been turned back and told to return to their countries (Kingsley et al., 2020). The rise in migration across the Mediterranean Sea had given birth to a particular narrative in the political and media arenas of European nations which had led to the tightening of immigration regulations and stringent border restrictions (Kozera et al., 2019; Noyoo et al., 2022, p. 208).

Noyoo further observed that it was important to contextualise the reluctance by some African countries to outrightly condemn Russia. This was mainly because when they were fighting for freedom against colonial regimes, which were always supported by Western powers, the USSR had provided moral, financial and military support to the African liberation movements, especially those in southern Africa. For instance, the ambivalent approach by South Africa in condemning Russia should be understood against this backdrop. Many *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) combatants of the African National Congress (ANC) and other liberation movements of South Africa that fought against the apartheid regime were trained in the USSR, when Western countries were not willing to do so (Nolutshungu, 1975; Simpson, 2016).

4. Conclusion

The conference concluded with participants declaring that there was need for more concerted efforts to highlight the injustices wrought by the war and condemn them. This is even more important for social work because the profession is informed by social justice, which is one of its six main values (Reamer, 2006).

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