

Woes and Challenges of the U.S. Resettlement Program: Dismantlement, Operation Allies Welcome and United for Ukraine¹

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Abstract

The United States has welcomed 117,000 Afghans and approximately 270,000 Ukrainians since the early 2020s. Comparing the Afghans' resettlement program Operation Allies Welcome, and the program in support of Ukrainians' settlement United for Ukraine, the author focuses on the recent history of refugee resettlement policy in the U.S. During the Trump administration (2016-2020) the federal resettlement program was largely dismantled. The Biden administration (2021-2025) infused the program with cash and increased the refugee ceiling from initially 15,000 to 125,000 annually but also emphasized a strong preference for private sponsorship programs. In this time period, immigrants became a signifier for what is wrong with the country and especially with the U.S. federal government. Applying Arlie Hochschild's framework to the broader public deciphers the deeper meaning behind the rising wave of xenophobia in the country. The swelling anti-immigrant sentiments, in connection with an increasing NGO-ization and dramatic privatization of refugee resettlement, has led to a racialized preference embedded in the U.S. immigration system that favored Ukrainians over Afghans. This article's methodology is based on a critical analysis comparing the Biden and Trump administrations' refugee and asylum policies. The article itself stresses the existing racial hierarchies as evidenced in U.S. refugee resettlement policies and concludes with a number of recommendations for reforms.

Key Words:

Resettlement; Operation Allies Welcome; United for Ukraine; Ukraine; Aghanistan; U.S.A.

1 Introduction

This paper focuses on two individual U.S. resettlement programs: Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) – the 2021-22 resettlement program for Afghans in the United States – and United For Ukraine (U4U) – a program designed to aid Ukrainians who fled the Russia-Ukraine war to come to the United States. The former was implemented in October 2021, about 10 months after the Biden administration had taken over a Refugee Resettlement Program (RRP) that had been largely demolished by the first Trump administration. In order to successfully run two large resettlement schemes at the same time, drastic structural changes would have needed to be implemented. The Biden administration missed the opportunity to do so.

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Overall, it appears that the Biden administration ramped up the annual numbers of refugees accepted for resettlement and opened a number of other short-term venues, especially humanitarian parole, without engaging in any major structural changes and adjustments that would allow for a successful government-led resettlement process.³ Instead, the heaviest burden for the resettlement within the public-private RRP was transferred from the federal government and the ten key service providers to churches, local NGOs and individuals – the private component of the partnership. Much of the financial, psychological and social responsibilities for refugees' adjustments has always relied on the work of NGOs and private individuals. This paper, however, shows that under Biden this responsibility shifted almost completely onto the shoulders of private groups and individuals. In addition, this paper demonstrates how differently the two programs – OAW and U4U – dealt with Afghan and Ukrainian refugees, respectively. The final part of the paper demonstrates, through a comparison of these two refugee cohorts' experiences, the racialized preferences embedded in the U.S. immigration system that favored Ukrainians over Afghans. This underlying racial basis explains both the nature and speed of the U.S. response.

2 The Numbers and Methodology

The United States has welcomed 117,000 Afghans since its hasty troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in August of 2021 (DoS, 2023). Many more Afghan citizens have attempted to come to the U.S. but have been unsuccessful. Since the commencement of U4U in 2022, about 270,000 Ukrainians have arrived in the US.⁴

This paper is based on a literature review of three kinds of sources: 1) the most recent writings on the structural changes of U.S. refugee resettlement and their aftermath, especially by Daniel Beers, Tazreena Sajjad, Julian Montalvo, Jeanne Batalova, Alex Nowrasteh, Stan Veuger, Kristina Campbell, and Tara Watson; 2) studies published by the Office of Inspector General, Center for Migration Studies of New York and Refugee Council USA; and 3) a broad review of the news published about the two resettlement schemes and their ramification for Afghan and Ukrainian refugees under various U.S. protections. Furthermore, a comprehensive review was conducted of policy statements pertaining to OAW and U4U by the departments and agencies involved with these programs, such as the Congressional Research Center (CRC), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Department of State (DoS), and Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The nascent theoretical contribution of this article – in brief, that there is a significant new development in the neoliberal state toward total privatization of federal services – builds upon the well-known critical literature about the NGO-ization of federal assistance, especially the works of William Davis, Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor and Arundhati Roy. This paper is part of a

³ I include under the term resettlement not only the formal resettlement policy but all other policies dealing with other residence categories of Afghans and Ukrainians, including P-2, humanitarian parole, and TPS.

⁴The NGO *People in Need* (2024) summarizes the resettlement process in the following way: "Approximately 270,000 Ukrainians who fled to the U.S. have been granted either Temporary Protected Status or (for those who arrived after April 1, 2022) a special humanitarian visa granted under the Uniting For Ukraine (U4U) program. The basic principle of the U4U visa, which is valid for a period of two years, is to unite individuals with families already legally residing in the U.S. This sponsorship role can be taken on by relatives or friends of applicants, as well as volunteers from the general public."

larger project about NGO work in refugee assistance in the greater New York and New Jersey area, based on participatory observation and interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022 with volunteers and Board Members of six local NGOs. However, the focus of this article is on two small non-religious neighborhood NGOs in New Jersey: Refugee Assistance Partners (RAP) in Scotch Plains, and One World One Love in Summit. Two qualitative semi-structured but open-ended interviews, conducted via Zoom, are cited extensively in this article. All interviews focused specifically on the organizations' projects and other work done for and with the Afghan refugee cohort in the region and the handicaps and difficulties that this group faced in the first year of OAW.

This article embraces feminist research methods because, as a methodology, feminism engenders the researcher to take sides. Feminists reject the notion that a researcher can be neutral or that research can ever be embarked upon for a politically neutral motive. Instead, feminists raise critical questions concerning the problems of reproducing power relations in fieldwork and the inevitability of the researcher's subjectivity. They, therefore, automatically are "taking sides". As Diane Wolf puts it, "any truly feminist research must involve some kind of change through activism and consciousness-raising" (Wolf, 1996, p. 5). Feminist methodology also demands that research not be undertaken for its own sake but rather to counter oppression (Barrett, 1996) and to actively improve life circumstances of exploited and underprivileged cohorts. My own position clearly is on the side of treating refugees with compassion and support, regardless of the color of their skin or their countries of origin.

3 The Trump Effect

The two resettlement efforts have had particular challenges, one of which is that America's established RRP had been all but dismantled by the Trump administration. Setting the stage for this, the first Trump administration engaged in fear-mongering. Trump himself claimed, for example, that Somali refugees were "joining ISIS and spreading their extremist views all over our country" (Jacobs & Yuhas, 2016), that "terrorist groups have sought to infiltrate several nations through refugee programs", (Executive Order 13780, cited in Beers, 2020), and that immigrants were "invading" white America (Campbell, 2019). In addition, the administration appointed refugee skeptics at the highest levels of government as political advisors and agency directors, e.g., the architect of the "zero tolerance" policy and the "Muslim ban", Stephen Miller, became a senior presidential advisor, and Kiersten Nielsen, who implemented the forcible family separation at the border policy, became the head of the DHS. The Trump government also sharply reduced the flow of refugees to the U.S. until, with the implementation of Title 42 during the pandemic, refugee resettlement and asylum came to a complete halt.

Starting in January 2017, in addition to halting refugee arrivals, the Trump administration downwardly adjusted the 2017 refugee admissions ceiling from 110,000 to a then-historic low of 50,000 (Executive Order 13769). The number of refugees admitted fell further in the following years. These and other refugee numbers that are usually cited indicate the ceilings for various fiscal years, not the number of people who are actually resettled. The ceilings are usually higher than the actual number of people who are resettled; for example, in the fiscal year (FY) 2021, the U.S. dropped its admission number to 18,000, but only 11,000 refugees were actually admitted. Led by people like Stephen Miller in the Trump administration, this decline was a result of a concerted policy effort to eradicate refugee admission.

This was not conceived as a temporary measure but rather as the beginning of the dismantling of the program at large. In addition to drastically slashing the numbers of refugees accepted for resettlement, the first Trump administration did everything in its power to disrupt the resettlement infrastructure, such as: adding layers of bureaucracy by issuing executive orders (which were challenged in court but frequently stayed through preliminary injunctions (Allyn, 2020); allowing states and smaller localities to veto resettlement (Executive Order 13888); and blatantly disregarding the legislative mandate to confer with congressional leaders ahead of issuing a new presidential determination on arrivals (Office of Sen. Dick Durbin, 2020). Consequentially and due to the subsequent low arrival numbers (DoS, 2021), local resettlement NGOs faced major setbacks and closures, disrupting their ability to provide services for the resettled population and even further handicapping their ability to accept new refugees.

A number of procedural steps were taken by the Trump administration that caused additional disruption to the work being done by institutions, such as RRP actors, that were tasked with managing the resettlement of refugees (Beers, 2020). For example, vacancies were not refilled; this led to staffing shortages which was then followed by budget cuts. Other measures, such as “extreme vetting” of refugees, resulted in much longer wait times for refugee applicants and an ever-increasing backlog at federal agencies. The government’s antagonistic pressure toward non-profit NGOs affiliated with the resettlement process resulted in resignations and the reallocation of resources. Three years into Trump’s first four-year term, many positions – nearly 75% of the vacancies at the State Department and Health and Human Services, 50% of those at the Justice Department, and two-thirds of the Senate-confirmed posts at the DHS – were not filled (Beers, 2020). Bob Carey, who had been director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement under President Obama, claimed that the system was being managed to fail (Hoffmann, 2018).

Internal staffing shortfalls at various departments severely reduced agencies’ abilities to conduct their services. Only a skeletal staff remained at USCIS, DHS’s division that screened and adjudicated asylum and refugee applications, by 2018 (Aziza, 2018). As a result, worldwide visits by the Refugee Affairs Division in order to evaluate refugee cases were drastically reduced in frequency and duration (Hoffman, 2018). Thus, by 2020, the backlog of cases faced by the agency grew, with more than 200,000 refugees awaiting interviews with officers of the USCIS, and the delays resulting in the expiration of time-sensitive components such as medical exams (Beers 2020, pp. 28-29). Adam Clark, director of World Relief, Durham, observed: “When there aren’t enough people abroad to interview and process the cases, there is no way to keep the stream of vetted refugees coming [...] The pipeline has dried up” (Aziza, 2018).

As the number of admitted refugees dropped, the Trump administration’s budget cuts touched “nearly every facet of refugee assistance – from overseas emergency relief, to refugee screening and processing, to social service assistance for newly arrived refugees” (Beers 2020, p. 30). Essential social service programs upon which new refugees relied, in areas such as healthcare and housing, were cut by the White House in the fiscal year 2019 (Parrott et al., 2018). The administration consolidated foreign aid in the fiscal year 2020, decreasing refugee and humanitarian assistance from \$9.6 billion to \$6 billion, a drop of nearly 40% (Beers, 2020, CRS, 2020), and reduced the budget by 90% for the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, which directly manages the United States

Refugee Assistance Program (USRAP) and is a major funder for refugee assistance around the world (Oswald, 2019). Of course, the effects of these cuts were felt by non-profit NGOs that fund refugee support services and provide financial support to local resettlement offices.

3.1 Xenophobic Language Signifies Anti-government and Anti-establishment Sentiments

3.1.1 Fear-mongering

The administration used fear-mongering in many public statements, e.g., in a Tweet in 2015 Trump stated: “Refugees from Syria are now pouring into our great country. Who knows who they are – some could be ISIS. Is our president insane?” (Trump, 2015). Later Trump would call migrants “animals” and “not human.”⁵ In his 2024 re-election campaign, he claimed that Haitian refugees were eating their neighbors’ cats and dogs, and that he would initiate a massive deportation campaign once elected (Blake, 2024). To be sure, this xenophobic rhetoric not only encouraged public scapegoating and racism but also increased the levels of anti-immigrant sentiments substantially in the wider American public (as shown by e.g., Campbell, 2014 and Goodfellow, 2020). Trump’s rhetoric closely follows Orban’s multiple years-long public anti-immigrant campaigns in Hungary (Bíró-Nagy, 2022). This is even more disturbing because America has historically been a rather open and tolerant pro-immigrant country.

3.1.2 Public Perceptions and Misperceptions: Unfairness and Public Grievances

Anti-immigrant language represents more than just a rise of xenophobia in public sentiment. Xenophobic language is part of a deeper ideological and cultural script that expresses massive distrust of the federal government and American elites. In *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016), Arlie Russell Hochschild analyzes the perplexing political paradox expressed by residents in the heart of “cancer alley” around Lake Charles, Louisiana: They understand that the chemical and oil companies have destroyed their environment and sometimes their lives, but they continue to be avid defenders of free market capitalism while at the same time expressing extreme hostility against specifically regulating big industries and the federal government in general. Hochschild’s study focuses on the emotional and ideological roots of conservative, right-wing political views, particularly as she analyses government distrust, environmental degradation, and economic inequality. Through interviews and observations, she paints a portrait of a group of people who feel alienated from the larger political system and left behind by societal changes despite their hard work and sense of personal responsibility. Hochschild calls the emotional and ideological logic underlying the residents’ explanations that rest on apparent contradictions – e.g., citizens’ resentment of environmental regulations that threaten the oil and gas industries despite the fact that chemical and oil factories have destroyed their health and lives – the “deep story” of the people she studies: a metaphorical narrative that explains their sense of injustice and frustration. In this deep story, people feel they have been unfairly left behind, as others – particularly immigrants, minorities and elites – have been granted special advantages, such as government benefits or wealth, while they themselves struggle in a system that seems rigged against them.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcTMV4KHnuo>

Immigration plays a central role in shaping the worldview of Hochschild's interviewees, despite the fact that the region of study in Louisiana, does not host many migrants. Hochschild's study emphasizes that the citizens' attitudes toward immigrants are intertwined with broader themes of race, economic insecurity, cultural identity, and, most significantly, a sense of fairness and justice. Citizens view the arrival of immigrants – especially those from Latin America and other non-European countries – as a threat to their sense of social and economic order.

Many express frustrations that immigrants seem to be receiving preferential treatment through government programs, such as welfare or healthcare, which they believe should be reserved for “Americans” or people who have paid into the system through taxes.⁶ In addition to “abusing the system”, many of the white working-class conservatives with whom Hochschild spoke were especially concerned that migrants from Latin America are “taking jobs” from white Americans. Thus, immigration is frequently tied to both welfarism and racial stereotypes about Mexicans and other Central Americans. In today's U.S., migrants have become the symbolic signifier for people who are seen as exploiting the welfare system and, at the same time, stealing jobs. Therefore, many of Hochschild's interviewees are staunch supporters of conservative, anti-immigration policies, such as stronger border enforcement, deportation of undocumented immigrants, and the construction of a border wall between the U.S. and Mexico.⁷

The idea of “unfairness” is central to their grievances. Many of these Americans feel that they have worked hard and followed the rules but that migrants are being given benefits that they, in their view, have not earned. This contributes to a sense of being “left behind” or “cheated”, especially when it comes to government programs that immigrants are perceived to take advantage of, without contributing in the same way. This frustration is also connected to broader feelings of being overlooked by the government and political elites, who are believed to prioritize the needs of immigrants (and others, including African-Americans, LGBTQ individuals, trans-people, feminists, etc.) over their own. Thus, as Hochschild has shown, many conservative, working-class white Americans feel that the government has turned away from the country's citizens and instead encourages immigrants and other minorities to jump the line.

This explains why, for many of the people described in *Strangers in Their Own Land* and the majority of Trump voters, a rigid anti-immigrants' stance has become a major signifier in their political ideology. To be sure, the right-wing establishment used xenophobia as a tool to consolidate the conservative sentiment by striking fears about the loss of American identity, values, and sovereignty. During the 2024 presidential race, the Trump campaign successfully framed this issue not just as a policy but as an existential question about the future of the country.

3.2 Enforcement over Judicial Process

Regardless of which administration was in power, the major emphasis has always been on enforcement of immigration rules at the borders and elsewhere. Since the creation of DHS in 2003, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) spending has nearly tripled

⁶ There is no difference in the American imagination between immigrants and refugee.

⁷ These views are often amplified by political elites, media figures, and organizations that frame immigration as a threat to national security and economic stability.

from \$3.3 billion to \$9.6 billion in FY 2024 (American Immigration Council, 2024). Much of this funding has gone to increasing the agency's ability to hold immigrants in detention around the country, to electronically monitor noncitizens on "alternatives to detention", and to carry out deportations. Since 2003, the budget of Customs and Border Patrol, which includes both the Border Patrol and operations at ports of entry, has also more than tripled, rising from \$5.9 billion in FY 2003 to a high of \$19.6 billion in FY 2024 (American Immigration Council, 2024). Adjusted for inflation, this is an increase of 144%. While pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into immigration enforcement over the last two decades, Congress has often failed to provide similar funding infusions to the immigration court system. Taken together, from FY 2003 through 2024, Congress has spent \$24 on ICE and Border Patrol for every \$1 spent on the immigration court system. Over that 22-year period, Congress spent \$11.65 billion on the immigration courts – \$3.5 billion less than the Trump administration spent on border walls alone (ibid).

The Trump administration tried to get rid of refugee resettlement NGO offices, based on the rationale that the number of refugees was decreasing. Upon the slashing in 2018 of refugee admissions and associated funding, the State Department revoked federal authorization for NGO offices expected to resettle fewer than 100 refugees annually (Rosenberg, 2018). In subsequent years, as the number of accepted refugees continued to drop dramatically, there was further forced downsizing. By the summer of 2019, budgetary constraints associated with the plummeting number of refugee arrivals had already caused the permanent closure or indefinite suspension of operations of nearly a third – more than 100 out of 325 – of the country's local resettlement offices across the nation (RCUSA, 2019). Overall, the organizational capacity of refugee resettlement agencies had decreased by an estimated 50-80%, depending on region (RCUSA, 2019). This loss of institutional memory, expert knowledge, and institutional capacity had dramatic consequences, and forced many agencies to reinvent the wheel in 2020.

This was the situation when the Biden administration took office. During the four years prior to the election of President Joe Biden, the RRP had been largely dismantled and become barely functional. The Biden government, however, made few real proactive federal efforts to restore the RRP. Among the most important ones was Biden's executive order revoking the Trump rule that had permitted states to opt out of the resettlement program. The Biden administration also encouraged expedited refugee processing without sacrificing security and increased the number of trips by the DHS ("circuit rides") to interview refugees around the world who were seeking to resettle in the U.S., resulting in the DHS conducting 91,000 interviews in FY 2023, more than twice the number done in FY 2022 (Appleby, 2024). However, the Biden administration neither actively sought to increase federal refugee resettlement agencies' funding, nor to increase federal funding for individual refugees during their resettlement.

In order to restore the USRAP, the Center for Migration Studies and the Refugee Council USA (2021) conducted a study in 2020 that recommended necessary improvements: the provision of sufficient funding to the refugee resettlement agencies to restore their infrastructure and rebuild their capacity; raising the ceiling on refugee admissions each year, with the capacity of the agencies; and increasing public involvement in welcoming refugees to the United States. The Biden administration indeed increased the funding for refugee resettlement agencies from Trump's \$300 million to \$1 billion, according to annual budgetary reports by the Congressional Research Services (2020, 2022). Biden

also swiftly increased the annual ceiling for resettlement to 125,000 cases. This number, however, had symbolic value rather than actual implications because ceilings were never reached. In order to address the need for new alternative programs to prepare and expand system capacity to handle the expected significant increase in the inflow of refugees, the Biden administration implemented programs that rested almost exclusively on private sponsors. With a lack of federal initiative, the Biden administration encouraged further the NGO-ization of these basic government functions. It also provided a policy setting that boosted volunteerism and private sponsorship and, with that, encouraged public selectivity in supporting specific categories of refugees. These developments increased the number of major challenges for the 117,000 Afghan refugees who had begun entering the country late in 2021.⁸

4 NGO-ization of the Refugee Resettlement: A Theoretical Perspective

Refugee resettlement in the U.S. has always been a public-private enterprise. Since its inception in 1980, the refugee resettlement program has been co-sponsored and supported by private entities such as churches and other, often non-religious, NGOs. One of the ten principal refugee resettlement agencies, for example, Church World Service, provides the initial transportation and relocation services to refugees once they arrive in the U.S.; prior to their basic dismantlement under Trump, these organizations were the logistical hubs for resettlement in the country. Funded by both individual donors and the federal government, these national agencies outsource much of the day-to-day work, e.g., the furnishing of apartments to local affiliates, which are often small NGOs and churches.

Thus, historically, these organizations should be considered non-governmental, but they were never clearly juxtaposed to the government. Instead, historically, the resettlement system has consisted of a complex interwoven structure of private and public, religious and non-religious, and federal and local agencies and players. Theorists (Roy, 2011, Korolczuk, 2016, Choudry & Kapoor, 2013) emphasize that most NGOs have historically been agents of and for change. They often were considered critical of governments, holding them to account and calling out bad behavior. However, in recent times, NGOs have moved away from activist roles and increasingly are taking on roles that had previously been performed by the government, e.g., they are becoming service providers for segments of the population. In order to remain afloat, NGOs increasingly do work that had traditionally been seen as the government's responsibility. They also get into longer-term relationships with government agencies at various levels. Choudry and Kapoor (2013) have shown that this fosters not only a steady stream of income to NGOs, but also a change in their ideological orientation. Once their employees get paid by the government, they become less critical of said government and, instead, become a functional arm of the government. This so-called third sector is "less a space within which organizations begin life and then die than a space through which they pass" (Hildebrandt, 2024). Like any other organization, NGOs must adapt to survive, and many survived quite nicely. For example, Horace Campbell (2024) argues:

"During the nineties military journals such as *Parameters* honed the discussion of the planning for the increased engagement of international NGO's and by the end of the 20th century the big international NGO's [like] Care, Catholic Relief Services, Save The Children, World Vision, and

⁸ I refer to all Afghans who entered and sought to enter the U.S. as refugees, despite the fact that they held different visa and residence status.

Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF) were acting like major international corporations doing subcontracting work for the US military.”

Focusing on post-colonialism, Arundhati Roy (2014) explains that NGOs frequently “give the impression” that they are filling the vacuum created by a retreating nation-state. She emphasizes that “they are [doing so], but in a materially inconsequential way.” Instead, Roy continues:

“Their real contribution is that they defuse political anger and dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right. They alter the public psyche. They turn people into dependent victims and blunt the edges of political resistance. NGOs form a sort of buffer between the sarkar and public. Between Empire and its subjects. They have become the arbitrators, the interpreters, the facilitators.”

Recently, Hoare (2024) has argued that the NGO-ization of society described by Roy as a feature of empire and colonialism, has come home to the West. In the West, it has begun to replace citizens’ traditional party-affiliation with their affiliation with NGOs. As outlined above, rather than representing government-critical powers, these NGOs are now run by a professional managerial class dependent on government pay. While constructed as an explicitly “participatory” feature of modern society, Hoare (2024) argues that the term “participation” has been emptied of any meaningful content. He argues that, with NGO-ization, “political decision-making [...] is evoked, but stage-managed in such a way that any binding decision-making remains absent.” Similar to online activism, much individual NGO involvement in today’s U.S. has become a farce, distorting and poorly imitating real political activism and participation in the streets and at the ballot boxes.

David Harvey (2005, p. 177) contends that “the rise of advocacy groups and NGOs has [...] accompanied the neoliberal turn and increased spectacularly since 1980 or so.” NGOs have become key features of the society’s welfare structure, in which neoliberal programs force the state away from providing economic aid to the poor and other such public assistance programs. As Harvey puts it, “this amounts to privatization by NGO” (2005, p. 177). Thus, these critical authors claim that NGOs function as the “Trojan Horses of neoliberalism”.

For very small grass-roots NGOs such as those discussed in this paper, however, this is rarely the case. Organizations such as RAP and One Love rely exclusively on fundraising to finance their operations. Their allegiance is to the local community rather than the state or federal government. It is exceptionally rare that one of these organizations slides into a contractor role; this would only happen if the NGO received a major grant or substantial federal or state funding. None of the grassroots NGOs that are the focus of this paper receive major federal grants or other such funding.

These small local NGOs are by no means unique: In northern New Jersey, dozens of similar organizations work with refugees. So, although it is true, as outlined above, that many NGOs have taken over state functions, which results in privatization of these functions, it is not true that all NGOs are the neoliberal state’s “favoured institutional form”, as claimed by Kamat (2013), or that sooner or later all NGOs turn into the state’s contractors. However, Ismail & Kamat (2018) have shown that, by simply doing their job and aiding those most marginalized and in need, the structural position of NGOs aids in the neutralization of opposition and disagreement: the very function of NGOs plays into the survival of the neoliberal nation-state.

As Klees (1998: 50) has argued:

“[...] The strength of NGOs is their ability to work closely with local communities and to develop innovative programs that fit with local needs and context. Most NGO staff I know recognize that it is government that must bring such programs to large-scale. Many NGOs have also recognized that governments, especially during the last three decades, have not been bringing such programs to scale. As a result, some NGOs have begun a new activity: lobbying the State for large-scale social change.”

Other NGOs, however, have expanded into fundraising in order to support their programs autonomously without governmental funds. Already quite inadequate social services have been further reduced under neoliberalism, which leaves no remaining room for a greater (meaningful) participation in governance processes that is essential to challenge inequalities (Klees, 1998, p. 51). With more people than ever joining the ranks of the excluded and exploited, small NGOs seek to adjust to new worsening circumstances. For example, Welcome Home in Jersey City, initially focused exclusively on refugee resettlement, but opened its doors for homeless individuals and others in need during the Covid pandemic.

Perhaps because of the peculiar situation in which they find themselves, small local NGOs “consistently run the most interesting, innovative social programs with a commitment to grassroots participation and social justice, to which some of the most committed social activists volunteer” (Klees, 1998, p. 49).

As RAP and One World show, at their best, NGOs act as progressive elements in a neoliberal world empowering individuals and communities to “face, resist, and transform” (ibid, p. 49) the existing unequal relations.

5 Biden’s Legacy-Consequences of U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

In July 2021, the Biden administration announced that after twenty years, the United States’ military mission in Afghanistan would conclude in August of that year. This announcement was in line with the Trump administration’s Afghanistan policies. It was the first Trump administration that had negotiated the U.S. troop withdrawal with the Taliban. As part of the United States–Taliban deal, the Trump administration had agreed to reduce U.S. forces from 13,000 to 8,600 troops by July 2020, followed by a complete withdrawal by May 1, 2021 (DoS, 2020a).

The U.S. evacuation of Afghan refugees in 2021 was the largest U.S. evacuation effort since the 1975 Operation New Life, when approximately 130,000 Vietnamese refugees were evacuated to Guam after the fall of Saigon (Bankston & Zhou, 2021). Yet, the chaotic withdrawal and evacuation left behind more than 78,000 special immigrant visa (SIV) applicants who had served with the U.S. military and who were left behind in Taliban-run Afghanistan while waiting for their visas to be processed (Staffieri et al., 2022). During the final days of U.S. military presence, the Taliban rapidly gained control of large parts of the country, killing civilians in their path and forcing many people to flee their homes for safety. As the U.S. military departed the country, some Afghans managed to get to the U.S. but many more were left behind in danger and had to seek entry to the U.S. via other means.

5.1 The Afghan Placement and Assistance Program

The Afghan Placement and Assistance Program (APA) is the name of the overall program designed to regulate Afghan entry to U.S. territory. It includes a number of visa venues for Afghans, including the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) and humanitarian parole.

5.1.1 *Special Immigrant Visa*

The most well-known program in APA is the SIV: It grants residence to those Afghans who

“took significant risks to support American military and civilian personnel in Afghanistan employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government in Afghanistan or our coalition forces, or are a family member of someone who did” (DHS, 2024).

Afghans were eligible for an SIV if they worked for the U.S. government or military for at least 12 months. These SIV recipients had to undergo rigorous screening and vetting processes abroad before receiving the visa and moving to the U.S. Roughly 40,000 of the Afghans who entered the country within OAW hold SIV status.

5.1.2 *Priority-2*

The second option in APA was Priority 2 program (P-2) refugee admission, intended initially for the thousands of Afghans stranded in their country and increasingly at risk from persecution by the Taliban. This category technically included lawyers, journalists, NGO workers, graduates from the American University of Afghanistan, women and human rights activists, ethnic minorities, those who worked with the former Afghan administration and its military, and those who have families in the United States and therefore qualify for immigration to the United States (Adib & Efron 2021, Banville, 2021, BBC World News 2021, Kumar 2022, Siddique, 2022, Staancati & Donati, 2021). The P-2 program thus was intended for those Afghans who did not meet the SIV’s 12-month service requirement. Thousands of these individuals have remained stranded in Afghanistan, increasingly at risk of persecution by the Taliban. They include lawyers, journalists, NGO workers, women and human rights activists. Many of these individuals would technically qualify for the P-2 designated status (DoS, 2021).

However, because the U.S. does not have diplomatic representation in Afghanistan today, all individuals who believe they could receive SIV or P-2 visas have to travel to a third country to contact a U.S. embassy, U.S.-based NGO, or U.S.-based media organization, and initiate processing (PRM, 2022). Processing is currently not feasible in Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea, Syria, and Yemen. Given the costs of travel, the border closures, and the many logistical challenges of refugee management facing neighboring countries, acquiring a P-2 visa remains an impossibility for most. SIV and P-2 holders are eligible for employment authorization, certain public benefits and permanent legal status in the U.S., but SIV applicants needed to prove that they had demonstrated “faithful and valuable service to the U.S. government” (DoD, no date).

Once in the U.S. both SIV and P-2 recipients benefitted from those national resettlement program features, which provided families and individuals initial relocation services for 30 to 90 days after their arrival to the U.S. (PRM, 2022a). Small NGOs, such as Hearts & Homes for Refugees and Neighbors for Refugees, often located in suburban areas, frequently sought out SIV recipients in order to help them and their families resettle in often wealthier communities, e.g., in Morris County or the Hudson Valley.

5.1.3 *Benefits of SIV and P2 Programs*

Small regional NGOs usually rent and furnish apartments for refugee families, provide refugee families with groceries, and aid with transportation to health care appointments, schools, and so forth. A one-time per capita payment of \$2,275 is provided to the regional resettlement agency with which the NGO works (PRM, 2022a), of which \$1,225 is available to fund critical direct assistance needs such as basic necessities, including rent, food, clothing, and furniture, during this initial adjustment period in the new communities. The services provided include assistance with enrollment in English language classes and schools, cultural orientation, job placement, and referral to other social, medical, and employment services for which the refugee is eligible. The total amount of \$2,275 minus \$1,225 agency costs means each refugee receives \$1,050 (Alex, 2022).

The SIV recipients are the cohort of Afghans best known by the public. In general, of all Afghans who arrived in the U.S., SIV recipients have received the most generous public and private support, not the least, because many have personal connections to American military personnel (Myers, 2024). Again, those Afghans who received SIV and P-2 status were admitted as lawful permanent residents to the USA with a clear pathway to a green card and citizenship.

The third status available for Afghans with urgent humanitarian needs was humanitarian parole. While this status is purported to provide a faster application process, it is a temporary status and does not offer some of the benefits provided by the SIV and P-2, including a path to permanent legal status.

5.1.4 *Afghans' Humanitarian Parole*

As a matter of fact, most Afghan nationals who arrived as part of the evacuation effort were paroled into the U.S. on a case-by-case basis for humanitarian reasons. Parole is best understood as a "non-status" (Refugees International, 2022): When parole is issued, there is none of the official vetting of the parolee and subsequent admission for entry that US law requires. "Parole" in this case means only that the decision about her legal status will be delayed until a future date.

Unlike the other two residence permits, parolees do not have a pathway to obtain a green card and the permission for them to be in the U.S. is only temporary (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024). In spite of repeated attempts, Congress has again and again declined to pass legislation that would allow Afghan parolees to apply for permanent legal status. Instead, the DHS has expanded the two-year residence rights if the parolee reapplied for re-parole. The uncertainty surrounding the insecure status of the parolee and her family members – not unlike what Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients experience – is extreme in the sense that, although it shields the parolee from deportation at least temporarily, it does not provide a pathway forward, e.g., through visas, in-state college tuition, etc., and instead keeps the parolee in a state of permanent limbo.

5.1.5 *Applying for Humanitarian Parole from Abroad*

Still, being paroled into the country and receiving a (temporary two-year) residence permit is not the worst possible situation in which an Afghan can find herself. In contrast to many other immigrants and refugees, e.g., from Haiti, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) did parole into the country those Afghans who managed to reach American ports of entry prior to October 1, 2022, when OAW was terminated. Thousands of other Afghans who

could not reach United States territory were forced to apply for humanitarian parole through the traditional way of submitting applications with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) from abroad (American Immigration Council, 2023). The vast majority of these applications submitted from abroad were denied.

5.2 Afghans in Morris County, NJ: One World One Love and RAP

Within OAW, One World One Love (One World) has worked closely with other regional NGOs, such as RAP, Welcome Home Jersey City, Hearts & Homes for Refugees, and the NJ Coalition for Afghans, and refugee resettlement agencies, such as the IRC, in order to facilitate the Afghan refugee resettlement in the region. The organization's flexibility and choice of projects is typical for a small local NGO.

Initially, organizations such as One World did a large number of supply drives to Fort Dix in South Jersey where a large number of Afghans were housed for the first months after their arrival. Among other things that they urgently needed were winter clothes, boots and toys for children. Hearts & Homes organized a makeup drive for Afghan women refugees stuck in the military installation, and One World contributed substantially to this drive. In addition, Cynthia Thek, a member of the board of One World, emphasizes that in the spring of 2022, the NGO's apartment set-up team went into overdrive – furnishing, cleaning, and equipping about 50 apartments especially in Union, Essex, Bergen, and Hudson counties.⁹ Thus, in New Jersey the Afghan resettlement process relied largely on volunteer work and the creativity of individual NGOs such as the makeup drive.

Thek explained that a number of Afghan families became impatient with life on the base and departed from the military facilities without the support of a refugee resettlement agency. These, and a number of other Afghans who decided to move to New Jersey in order to connect with friends and family who live there, became part of One World's client base. These families in particular, Thek states, seemed to have more problems adjusting than did those who remained within the government/NGO resettlement framework.

Thek stresses that the workload for the volunteers at One World was extremely high in the initial six months, which resulted in some refugee families simply taking "their check [and] doing it on their own." That means that these Afghans decided that they did not want to wait in lines in the refugee resettlement agency and instead took the allocated money and looked for housing and work on their own. Eventually, many of those who initially stayed without NGO support, did seek help at One World and other local NGOs. In addition, certain federal agencies, such as the Department of Agriculture, were slow in servicing the Afghans, which resulted in long delays for food stamps. Thek explains that in her experience, she found that the New Jersey state government and county governments' programs reacted faster than did the federal government.

Humanitarian NGOs like RAP and One World aid in the resettlement process of refugees who have been placed by resettlement agencies in the central and northern New Jersey region. In the initial six months of Afghan refugee resettlement RAP, for example, worked with eight Afghan families, consisting of a total of 40 individuals. Because of secondary migration of families from other U.S. regions to New Jersey, RAP's total client base in this time period was about 20 families.¹⁰ At that time RAP's volunteer base consisted of 50 to

⁹ Zoom interview June 22, 2022.

¹⁰ Zoom Interview with Jill Segulin, June 30, 2022.

55 people total, many of whom volunteered their time to work in fundraising, editing, grant writing, advocacy work, and direct support work. Twenty volunteers worked in the field as family advocacy teams. These teams represented the direct contact point of the refugees and their families to the NGO. The team members provided crucial adjustment help through tutoring in English language and practical skills, job searches, and in-person aid, e.g., grocery shopping. Despite the width of services provided, Jill Segulin, a member of the Board of Directors of RAP, explained that, for her as a volunteer, the most heartwarming experience was to see individual Afghans and entire families overcome their trauma and connect with Americans.

However, for Afghan refugees, this may have been a rather rare experience. A number of volunteers I spoke with believe that Afghans were less likely than other U.S. newcomers to be proficient in English, and the Afghans had lower educational attainment and lower participation in the labor force. Years after their arrival, Afghans on humanitarian parole continue to face significant challenges in accessing housing, adequate medical care, and access to food (Niemeyer & Davis, 2021). Both small NGOs and larger regional resettlement agencies were sometimes unable to provide sufficient support due to a lack of funding and limited staff (Al-Arshani, 2022). Afghans are much more likely to live in poverty and tend to be significantly younger than either the native-born or the overall foreign-born population (Al-Arshani, 2022). In August 2024, the Afghan Adjustment Act – a bill that would provide a pathway to lawful permanent residence for Afghans currently on parole after additional vetting – was reintroduced for the second time in Congress but failed to pass for a second time.¹¹ Since the second Trump administration has entered office in January 2024, the act is dead, and Afghan parolees are in danger of being deported once their protection expires.

5.3 Ukrainians in the U.S.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the swift humanitarian response by the United States to Ukrainian refugees was exemplary.¹² Some observers (e.g., Sajjad, 2022, pp. 191-92) argue that in some respects, America's response to this crisis represented a return to the traditional Cold War geopolitics when foreign policy interests shaped U.S. refugee policy. The U.S. government expressed strong solidarity with Ukraine and its people and swiftly committed to a number of measures that dramatically opened Ukrainians' access to U.S. protections: The main programs under U4U were humanitarian parole and Temporary Protection Status (TPS). Other immediate measures included the temporary easing of U.S.-Mexico border regulations for their entry, and the creation of a multifaceted process to welcome those who were newly displaced, simultaneously using many of the humanitarian measures available to the federal government, which allowed for relatively smooth and fast access to U.S. territory for Ukrainians.

¹¹ Under the bill, Afghans who arrived in the U.S. in or after 2021 would be able to apply for permanent residency either through the expanded Special Immigrant Visa program or by directly adjusting their status within two years of arriving (Norman & Martin 2024).

¹² As in the Afghan case, I call all Ukrainians leaving their country during this time refugees.

5.3.1 Ukrainian Parolees: Exceptional Access to U.S.

The Biden administration lifted Title 42 restrictions, but for Ukrainians only. Released on March 11, 2022, a DHS memo states that Section 265 of U.S. Code Title 42 would not apply to Ukrainians seeking entry into the country (AILA, 2022). Title 42 was the emergency regulation issued on March 20, 2020, by the first Trump administration to prohibit the entry into the U.S. of individuals assessed to be potential vectors of communicable diseases, such as COVID-19 (American Immigration Council, 2021). Section 265 allowed the CBP to prohibit persons from entering U.S. territory who potentially pose a health risk to the American population. The obscure measure, initially part of the Public Health Act of 1944, practically sealed the southern border, blocked land entry for most migrants, and halted migration into the country through southern ports of entry. The measure created a large backlog of people seeking entry to the U.S. in northern Mexico (Franz, 2022a). Therefore, Title 42 and a number of other measures, such as the Remain in Mexico Program, made the region one of the most dangerous places on the continent, with thousands of people stranded for many months in sub-standard living conditions in Northern Mexico, exposed to burglars, rape, drug dealing, and other crimes. Until Biden terminated the policy, Title 42 stopped all asylum applications at that border from March 2020 until May 12, 2023, for everyone – except Ukrainians. Starting in March 2022, Ukrainians were permitted to enter the country through the southern border more than a year prior to the termination of the policy.

By October 2024, U.S. immigration officials had approved more than 236,000 cases under the U4U program, according to the DHS (CBS News, 2024). As of the end of March 2024, more than 187,000 Ukrainians had arrived in the U.S. with the U4U program and another 350,000 Ukrainian individuals have arrived in the U.S. outside of this program, mainly through temporary visas, according to DHS (CBS News, 2024). Although these numbers are largely estimates, the key point is that, whether as a student, a humanitarian parolee, or a TPS recipient, during the past two years, a Ukrainian could seek and did receive American protection.

In contrast to the OAW and most other historic refugee acceptance schemes for displaced Ukrainians, the State Department and the DHS sought to actively bolster pathways to come to the U.S. Indeed, in its *Report to Congress*, the DHS (2024, p. 3) spelled out that it actively:

“led an effort to create a novel and orderly welcome of certain Ukrainian citizens, and their Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian immediate family members, who had a United States-based supporter who agreed to provide them with financial support for the duration of the parole period.”

While the authors of the statement above may or may not have intentionally emphasized the uniqueness and newness of the swift and orderly process of welcoming refugees, U4U had already allowed for the smooth processing of more than 200,000 Ukrainians. Similarly, the program was announced on April 21, 2022, and, with unprecedented speed, the implementation began four days later, on April 25, 2022 (DHS, 2022, Federal Register, 2022).

5.3.2 U4U's and Its Neoliberal Features

U4U provides Ukrainians with the ability to request advance authorization to travel to a U.S. port of entry and seek a discretionary grant of parole for a period of up to 2 years.¹³ The program stipulates that, in order to be eligible for U4U, Ukrainians need to have a sponsor who can support them once they enter the U.S. (Ainsley & Bacalao, 2022).

Initially, the entire program rested on this sponsor feature, which in many ways exemplifies the federal government's withdrawal, in terms of financial and civic responsibility, from the refugee resettlement process. This feature illustrates in many ways the pinnacle of the neoliberal state, with its elimination of all social and financial responsibility for people in need. The program's broad public acceptance and the eagerness of individual sponsors to step up and fund Ukrainian refugees demonstrates both the citizens' acceptance of the abolition of most rudimentary American welfare programs and the humanitarian altruism of the American population, especially toward white Europeans. Indeed, in everyday modern American life, the neoliberal rationale remains deeply engrained and, as William Davis (2016) argues, reveals how austerity and social policies have become punitive in nature.

Nevertheless, American citizens and denizens reacted euphorically to the possibility of sponsoring people fleeing Ukraine. By 2023, more than 200,000 private individuals had applied to sponsor Ukrainians fleeing the war. Of those, more than 30,000 came from the New York-New Jersey-Pennsylvania area (Murray, 2023). Non-profit agencies, such as Welcome.us, linked private U.S. sponsors with Ukrainians. Welcome.us, "essentially provides an online platform in order to connect potential sponsors with Ukrainians who seek to come to the U.S." (Murray, 2023). In 2023, Welcome.us made about 1,300 pairings between U.S. sponsors and Ukrainians (Murray, 2023).

The catch for Ukrainians who wanted to relocate to the U.S. was to find a private sponsor while still in Ukraine or in Europe. Once they had a sponsor, their authorization to travel to the U.S. was given almost automatically. An interesting feature included in the initial U4U program was the immediate expulsion of those who crossed the border without this prior authorization: Ukrainians who crossed the U.S. border without prior travel authorization were not only expelled forcibly, but they also forfeited their future eligibility for humanitarian parole. The 98% decline in spontaneous Ukrainian border crossings between April and May of 2022 suggests the program succeeded by offering a more predictable and organized channel of entry (Nowrasteh, Veuger, & Watson, 2023).

Initially, Biden had promised with U4U to accept 100,000 Ukrainians; as explained above, the program initially relied in its entirety on private sponsorship (Jordan, Kanno-Youngs & Shear, 2022). For U4U recipients, being paroled into the country did not reduce their options. Instead, these parolees maintained the option to apply for asylum within the first year of residence (Beers, 2023). They could also apply for TPS if they entered U.S. territory before April 11, 2022. This does not mean that entering the U.S. was easy for them; it did include a number of hurdles for the newly arrived Ukrainians, at least during the early days of the program.

¹³ Parole is considered on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of the Secretary of Homeland Security for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit, according to the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) sec. 212(d)(5)(A), 8 U.S.C. 1182(d)(5)(A).

Although the parolees were granted legal entry, they were not given any guarantee of further assistance. Because they did not hold an official status, they could not access public benefits such as food stamps and cash assistance (Beers, 2023). In addition, since CBP agents at the border admitted them as parolees rather than as refugees resettled through the ORR, U4U recipients at first were not eligible to receive ORR-funded assistance from refugee-serving agencies (ibid). They were entirely dependent on the benevolence and financial support of their private sponsors. However, like all parolees, Ukrainians could apply immediately for temporary work authorization. Ukrainians, like the Afghan parolees, felt themselves to be left in a precarious state of legal limbo. Unlike the Afghans, for the first couple of months, Ukrainians could not receive basic benefits, e.g., Medicaid or food stamps.

Within weeks, however, this was remedied when the Additional Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022 (AUSAA) passed. The Policy Letter 22-13 (ORR, 2022) informed the ORR that as of May 21, 2022, Ukrainian humanitarian parolees were eligible for ORR benefits and services, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Supplemental Security Income, resettlement assistance, and other benefits available to refugees.

5.3.3 *Temporary Protection*

On March 3, 2022, the DHS extended Temporary Protection to include Ukrainians who had been in the country since March 1, 2022 (CRS, 2024). Dating back to 1990, the intention of the TPS program was to protect from deportation those foreign citizens residing in the U.S. for whom conditions in their country of origin were deemed unsafe for return, typically due to war, natural disaster or political instability. As of March 31, 2024, a total of approximately 863,880 foreign nationals from 16 countries were covered by TPS (Beers, 2023). TPS provides protection, for up to 18 months at a time, to citizens from TPS-designated countries. Like humanitarian parole, it is not a legally recognized immigration status and does not provide any pathway to permanent residency. However, TPS eligibility may be renewed indefinitely when dangerous conditions persist. As of March 31, 2024, 50,205 Ukrainian citizens were covered by TPS (CRS, 2024).

TPS holders are also ineligible for public assistance and are given no guarantee for how long they can remain in the U.S. Although the DHS renewed TPS eligibility for Ukrainians for an additional 18 months, extending the program through April 19, 2025, it is not clear what will happen to the Ukrainian TPS holders after that date (USCIS, 2023). In short, TPS holders have found themselves in a similarly precarious position to those who hold humanitarian parole.

For Ukrainians, access to short term U.S. protection was easier to achieve, cheaper, and faster than it was for Afghans. However, Ukrainians experienced a similar limbo in terms of status insecurity – most of them hold temporary visas and face the same structural limitations that Afghans experience in the U.S.

6 Comparison

6.1 Access and Processing

Ukrainians arrived at the Southern U.S. border using airline flights from Europe to Mexico. Their experience remains drastically different from the routes that thousands of other

asylum-seekers, including Afghans and migrants were forced to take to reach the U.S. southern border every year. For the vast majority of people from the Global South, the routes to reach the United States include the Darien Gap – a 1.42 million-acre jungle on the border between Panama and Colombia, which is recognized as one of the most dangerous routes in the world – and the treacherous Sonoran Desert, which covers large parts of Arizona, California and northwestern Mexico (Sajjad 2022, p. 196). Along the Sonoran Desert route, those on foot frequently face the deadly consequences of U.S. policies such as “Prevention Through Deterrence,” which has weaponized the desert environment to make it even more inhospitable to migrant mobility (VoA, 2022).

The memo exempting Ukrainians from the Title 42 ban on entering U.S. territory meant that Ukrainians arriving in Mexico City or Cancún as tourists were free to travel across Mexico and cross the U.S. Southern border as soon as they arrived there. As word quickly spread on social media about the arrival of Ukrainians in Tijuana, a loose volunteer coalition, largely from Eastern European churches in the western U.S., worked closely with U.S. and Mexican officials to build an extensive and efficient system of support (Sajjad, 2021, p. 198). Erika Pinheiro, a Tijuana, Mexico-based immigrant attorney, told *Democracy Now* (2022 cited in Franz, 2022a) that Ukrainians’ flights from Europe to Mexico City or Cancún and then to Tijuana were being paid for by American citizens and church groups. These volunteers picked up the Ukrainian refugees at the airport and coordinated with CBP to permit their speedy processing and parole into the U.S. Ukrainian arrivals at the Tijuana airport were directed by volunteers to a makeshift lounge in the terminal with a sign reading, “Only for Ukrainian Refugees”, to register to enter the United States (VoA, 2022). U.S. officials assisted Ukrainians to a specific pedestrian crossing in San Diego that was temporarily closed to the public (VoA, 2022). The Tijuana government allowed Ukrainians to sleep inside a sports complex – while Central Americans and others who had arrived in Tijuana in their bid to seek asylum in the U.S. were forced to sleep outside of the compound in tents (Flores, 2022). Tijuana officials also offered Ukrainians resources for clean housing, paid for internet access, and cleared bus stations of homeless Mexicans to make room for Ukrainians (Sajjad 2021, p. 198).

Up to 1,000 Ukrainians were processed each day, most of them through San Diego’s San Ysidro Port of Entry, where border officials for years have claimed they lacked the daily capacity to process even 30 asylum seekers (Echavarri, 2022). Many other asylum seekers have been waiting for years in deplorable conditions at this port, many of them after having suffered rape, attempted kidnappings, and assaults while staying there. These people were likely in awe, watching the efficiency with which the Ukrainians were granted entry. The same rules did not apply to them (Franz, 2022a). As Erica Pinheiro (2022) explains: “If a Honduran even tries to approach border officials, they will be arrested and detained in a Mexican immigration prison for even attempting to seek safety in the United States.” In many cases, the Ukrainian refugees were escorted to meet border officials by U.S. citizens who drove them in their personal minivans and cars. There is nothing wrong with that per se, but an American citizen would likely be arrested and imprisoned for smuggling if they attempted to extend the same courtesy to Haitian asylum-seekers and drove them to the border checkpoint (Franz, 2022a). According to TRAC Immigration, by May 2022, 95% of Ukrainians without necessary paperwork were paroled into the U.S. based on discretionary authority that the border patrol is allowed to exercise. Only 92 individual Ukrainians out of a total of 20,994 arrivals were turned away (TRAC Immigration, 2022). In contrast, only 11% of non-Ukrainian arrivals, including from Haiti,

El Salvador, the Philippines, Myanmar and other conflict-impacted countries with credible fear claims and the intention to seek asylum, were granted parole (TRAC Immigration, 2022).

In an OIG report (2023) the State Department estimates that, as of April 2023, more than 840,000 principal SIV applicants and family members remained in Afghanistan. Thus, the backlog is enormous. During the period in which OAW was active, from October 2021 to October 2022, those Afghans who managed to get themselves to a U.S. port of entry were paroled into the country (CBS News, 2022). However, the vast majority of Afghans did not receive travel aid from American sources and thus was not able to make the trip and did not make it to an official point of entry. To be sure, many Ukrainians did successfully enter U.S. territory because their trips were sponsored by American churches and private individuals. In order to submit their application form online, each individual Afghan applicant had to pay \$575 (Reveal News, 2022). This means this family of six paid \$3,450 for their complete application package. Rough estimations place the average monthly income in Kabul at 30,000 Afghani, which is \$425 (408 Euros) (Timecap, 2024). Thus, this sum was a major hurdle for applying for parole in the U.S.

In contrast, Ukrainians who submitted their parole application from abroad applied for free. Indeed, U.S. immigration officials approved more than 236,000 cases under the U4U program, according to the DHS. The DHS put an online application system in place in April 2022 that allowed Ukrainians to gain legal authorization to fly to U.S. airports and enter U.S. territory without paying any fees. Within one month, by the end of April, 2022, the system had granted 6,000 Ukrainians access to U.S. territory (NBC, 2022a). It functioned perfectly. Since the start of the Russian invasion, another 350,000 Ukrainians arrived in the U.S. outside of the government sponsorship process, mainly through temporary visas, according to DHS (NBC, 2022a). There does not seem to be a substantial backlog of Ukrainians seeking visas to enter the U.S.

All the while, major DHS mismanagement quickly turned the humanitarian parole program from abroad for Afghans into a deep quagmire. Najib Aminy (2022) showed that, by August 2022, the DHS had decided only five percent of the 66,000 applications submitted. Of these 123 decisions, 95% were denied (Aminy, 2022)). The DHS, however, made \$20 million with the program before it was discontinued (Wolf & Vanderlip, 2023). While making millions of dollars, the DHS turned the program into a farce, financially exploiting thousands of Afghans while, in the end, rendering no decision or a negative decision for the vast majority of applicants.

Indeed, in order to receive parole from abroad, the Afghan applicants had to show that they had experienced a threat of “individualized harm” which lawyers familiar with these provisions claim is a much more difficult criterium to prove than the harm criteria in U.S. asylum law (USCIS, 2024). Basically, the individual applicant would have to have her name published in the *New York Times* or another reputable source as being persecuted by the Taliban in order to receive status under the criterium individualized harm.

In October 2022, OAW was morphed into Operation Enduring Welcome, a program focused on traditional refugee resettlement (CBS News, 2022a). At the same time, and within six months of the beginning of the crisis in February 2022, the DHS had approved humanitarian parole for 68,000 Ukrainians whose application fees were waved (Reveal News, 2022). U4U has been suspended in accordance with the executive order

“Protecting Our Borders” signed on January 20, 2025, at the beginning of Trump’s second term in office.

Overall, the initial official response to Afghans in need of protection was burdened with administrative hurdles and mismanagement. The response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis was swift and in tandem with a groundswell of public support: American citizens held prayer services and rallies, shipped humanitarian assistance, expressed solidarity through public displays of Ukrainian flags outside their homes and on social media platforms, and stepped up to be private sponsors for Ukrainian arrivals (Sajjad, 194).

6.2 Sponsorship

On the one hand private sponsorship, especially by long-term military friends and partners of Afghans was possible, but individual sponsors rarely managed to complete the cumbersome process successfully and bring their sponsees to the U.S. On the other hand, in early June 2022, more than 45,000 Americans submitted applications to become principal private sponsors for Ukrainian individuals and families (Montoya-Galvez, 2022). Based on the number of applications by private sponsors and case approvals, the Ukrainian resettlement program quickly became one of U.S. history’s largest official private refugee sponsorship initiatives.

Initially, U4U did not provide any government assistance for the individual sponsors and families, and for the Ukrainians themselves. However, as outlined above, with the passage of the 2022 AUSAA Ukrainians in the U4U program and other Ukrainian parolees who came outside of this program became eligible for federal ORR benefits. The majority of the estimated 350,000 Ukrainians (CBS News, 2024) who arrived outside of the program lacked the resources of large relief organizations, e.g., language and job training that are typically provided by federal resettlement agencies. Instead, the process was largely driven by individuals and churches, e.g., California’s Sacramento County-based Spring of Life, a Ukrainian church that matched hundreds of Ukrainian families with American hosts (NBC News, 2022). Private volunteers took on the responsibility of aiding Ukrainians in order to get their state IDs and driver’s licenses, look for affordable housing, find ESL courses and schools for children, help with applications for work visas, and so forth (Ibid).

In contrast to the reception and sponsorship of many non-white refugees, the American public has been quite supportive of the government’s efforts to aid Ukrainians. Immigration reform is one of the key political demands in the country today based on the claim that immigration is “out of control” and that the border needs to be fixed (Nowrasteh, 2021). As public opinion polls show, this statement, however, refers mainly to non-white, non-European immigrants. In a 2022 Gallup poll, 78% of Americans expressed support for the entry of up to 100,000 Ukrainians (Saad, 2022). A YouGov poll of 1,500 Americans taken in early March 2022 showed that 54% of Americans were in favor of admitting Ukrainians. In contrast, only 42% approved of accepting Afghans (The Economist/YouGov Poll, 2022). Thus, the majority of the U.S. population seemingly wants their country to remain a white nation.

7 Conclusion

Although U.S. acceptance of refugees and asylum-seekers has historically been shaped by geopolitics, domestic advocacy for welcoming certain groups of refugees, and waves of nativism and xenophobia, the stark contrast between the Afghan and Ukrainian cases

reflects the established racialized hierarchies that determine the limits of United States', and more broadly Western, compassion, for people in crisis (Sajjad 2022, p. 192). The disintegrated refugee resettlement system that the Trump administration handed to the Biden administration, and the consequently created "cheap" fixes – largely based on private sponsorship rather than federal government aid – reinforced these hierarchies.

The success of the initial response by the U.S. to the war in Ukraine, which included creating multiple pathways for entry and the largest private sponsorship program for refugees in the country's history, was based to a large extent on the overwhelmingly warm reception of the American public. It offers a sharp contrast to the structurally unequal and often violent ways in which many Afghans and other refugees and especially asylum-seekers are regularly dealt with at the U.S. border and in the country's immigration system.

While geopolitical calculations offer one explanation as to why the U.S. has made the decision to accept large numbers of Ukrainians, domestic strong public advocacy for Ukrainians, the overall level of public support for Ukraine, as well as the free and smooth online application process, and the preferential treatment of Ukrainians at the border, demonstrate that contrasts to Afghan and other non-European refugees are not accidental. Rather, they draw attention to long-established racialized patterns of reception and rejection that have historically defined the U.S. immigration system (Sajjad, 2022, p. 200). Refugee resettlement and responsibility in the U.S. shifted almost completely from the federal government and the ten principal large resettlement agencies to private groups and individuals. It is thus not surprising that popular biases expressed in the broad public reflect upon refugee selection, reception and sponsorship.

In order to make the process more fair, a future administration could waive the application fee and adjust the requirements for Afghan P-2 and humanitarian parole applications, so that stranded Afghans facing danger from the Taliban can swiftly apply for admission to the United States. The substantial back-log for SIV (as well as P-2) applications keeps the applicants in limbo and often exposed to danger. The federal government could also accept the specific demands of the AfghanEvac coalition to support Afghan evacuees. The government could also have facilitated and simplified the reunification of Afghans with family members left behind in their Taliban-controlled country. The repeated failure to pass the Afghan Adjustment Act has a number of ripple effects for the Afghans in the country. Had the bill passed it would have given permanency and protection to many Afghans whose status are, and will continue to be, in legal limbo under the new Trump administration. The same, however, is also true for the vast majority of Ukrainians in the country who hold humanitarian parole or TPS status. The U.S. government could make the asylum system more fair and equitable, starting by ensuring access to effective legal representation and interpretation for all applicants.

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