Night and Day: An Investigation of the Difference in International Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis vs. the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis Through the Theoretical Lens of Constructivism

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Abstract

The world is currently facing the largest refugee crisis in the post-war era. Since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, millions of Syrians have been forced to leave their homes and seek safety in other states. A few years after the major influx of Syrian refugees, Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted a Ukrainian refugee crisis. Close to a quarter of Ukraine's population had to seek refuge in Europe, North America, and beyond. Although these crises were similar in nature, the international response toward each of them differed greatly. Constructivism is a dominant theory in the field of communications & media studies and international relations that examines how social construction frames the way that individuals interpret the world around them. This paper examines some of the main tenets of constructivism and then utilizes constructivism to help understand the global response to the Syrian refugee crisis compared to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Through employing a constructivist lens, this paper finds that both the social ideas around the identity of each group of refugees and the nature of each conflict played a large role in shaping the distinct response toward the Syrian refugee crisis compared to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of constructivism and some potential further areas of research that this analysis may be applicable. With a better understanding of inequities that exist in dealing with refugee crises, global leaders and citizens are better equipped to deal with future humanitarian crises.

Keywords

Syria, Ukraine, social constructivism, international relations, framing, refugee crisis

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has triggered one of the world's largest refugee crises. Over 8 million Ukrainians (approximately 19% of the country's population) have sought refuge in Europe, North America, and beyond (UNHCR, 2023). Although this situation has widely been referred to by officials as the largest humanitarian crisis the continent has faced in the modern era (Global Detention Project, 2022) - it must be noted that only a few years prior, many of the same states and institutions were challenged with the Syrian refugee crisis. Since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, more than 6.7 million Syrians (approximately 31% of the country's population) have been forced to flee their homes and seek safety as refugees in other states (UNHCR, 2022). While these two events may have been similar in nature, the policies instituted by states and international institutions, the services provided to the refugees, and the public opinion of each situation were vastly different. This paper aims to answer the question – how does constructivism help to understand the difference in the global response toward the Syrian refugee crisis vs. the Ukrainian refugee crisis? Constructivism can demonstrate how the dominant social ideas regarding the identity of refugees and the nature of conflict shaped the distinct response toward the Syrian refugee crisis compared to the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

This paper will begin by highlighting the core tenets of constructivism and analyzing the difference in the global response to the two crises. It will then examine these differences through the theoretical lens of constructivism. Constructivism is particularly useful in this specific analysis as it combines the disciplines of international relations and media studies to demonstrate how certain values and social perceptions can become institutionalized, then impact behaviour and policy.

Article 3 of the 1951 Refugee Convention declares that all member states, "shall apply the provisions of this Convention of refugees without discrimination as to race, religion, or country of origin" (UNHCR, 2023). It is important to note that while progress has been made toward this mandate, prejudice still exists. This paper seeks to reveal some of the underlying bias that prevails among individual states, intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and the media. A greater understanding of these global structural inequities and a clear example of how they have revealed themselves through refugee crises will better equip academics, scholars, world political leaders, and individual citizens to advocate for a more just international order.

Methodology: Core Tenets of the Constructivist Lens

Constructivism draws upon the fields of sociology, psychology, and history to perceive the world as socially constituted (Baylis et al., 2020; McCourt, 2022). For constructivists, human interaction and political practices stem from ideational factors rather than material ones (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). In this sense, knowledge, legitimacy, symbols, concepts, and categories are key in shaping how individuals interpret the world around them. Thus, constructivism has often been referred to as more of an approach than a theory that directs individuals to examine the processes and relationships that underpin political and social life (Adler, 2005). Nicholas Onuf (1989) was one of the first to introduce the term constructivism to international relations (IR) when he asserted that individuals exist not in a world given by nature, but rather in a "world of our making." Another original, acclaimed constructivist, Alexander Wendt (1992), famously wrote "Anarchy is what states make of it" (p. 395). In other words, with the absence of an international governing body, it is in the hands of states to characterize IR as either conflictual or cooperative (McCourt, 2022; Weber, 2013). Wendt claimed that IR was not only restricted to the fixed interests of rational actors responding to physical forces. His thought diverged from the prominent ideas of mainstream realism and liberalism because these theories did not allow for the "redefinitions of identity and interest" which are constructed by social practice (Wendt, 1992).

Adler (2005) argues that constructivism is a middle ground between mainstream IR theories and critical IR theories because it "is interested in understanding how the material, subjective, and intersubjective worlds interact in the social construction of reality" (p. 320). Another important facet of constructivism is its emphasis on the importance of non-state actors. It highlights that even the most permanent structures were once ideas conceived by individuals and then widely diffused until they were taken for granted (Karkalanov, 2016). Drawing on these constructivist principles, Benedict Anderson (2006) introduced the concept of the 'imagined community' which asserts that nations are created through a sense of belonging to a particular community. The norms, ethnicity, language, and other values of that community remain imagined because the majority of the people within the nation will never encounter one another (Anderson, 2006).

In his book, *The New Constructivism in International Relations*, McCourt (2022) notes that while constructivism explores the impact of norms on world politics, constructivism also needs to examine the creation of those norms in the first place. Constructivism tends to focus on qualitative rather than numerical methods of analysis (Bertucci et al., 2018). While some have argued that constructivism rejects scientific measurement and objectivity, a more nuanced investigation of the approach finds that it utilizes a precise form of interpretation to understand a particular situation, rather than merely explain it (Hollis & Smith, 1990).

Like many other IR theories, there are significant disagreements within constructivism itself. Andrew Abbott (2001) labels the social pattern that constructivists have fallen into as fractionation, where scholars have been sorted into fractal distinctions according to given criteria. For example, the United States (US) IR field tends to claim that constructivism is not scientific enough, while the United Kingdom (UK) field tends to claim that it is not critical enough (McDavid, 2022). Despite these criticisms and divisions, constructivism remains a useful approach to understanding why contemporary global political actors do what they do, as well as what motivates and justifies their behaviour (Karkalanov, 2016).

Review: Issue Analysis

This analysis will first outline the differences in treatment toward Syrian and Ukrainian refugees primarily by European states and intergovernmental organizations before employing constructivism to explain these differences. In 2014 and 2015, as Muslim Syrian refugees set foot into the continent – the European Union's (EU) Dublin Convention required the country that first registered an asylum seeker to administer the application and provide housing. This left refugees in continuous fear of being repatriated (De Witte, 2022). As EU countries disagreed about how to share the responsibilities of Syrian refugees and there was significant pushback from many Central European countries, governments across the continent tightened their migration policies (CBC, 2022). Among other policy changes, in 2016, the UK halted their child refugee program, Italy's chief of police called for the deportation of migrants, and Slovenia closed its border to all asylum seekers (Vonberg, 2017). Other studies found that in France and Switzerland, Muslim applicants were less likely to receive citizenship status than Christian applicants (Emeriau, 2022; Valentino et al., 2017). Only several hundred Syrians in France have

been able to receive citizenship over the last decade (Nafakh, 2022). Another major issue facing Syrian refugees in Europe is restrictive family reunification policies which often create feelings of uncertainty (UNHCR, 2021).

In contrast, when the Ukrainian refugee crisis began in 2022, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive. This provides Ukrainians fleeing the country and their immediate family with residence, health care, and the right to work and study in host EU countries for up to three years (Ghadakpour, 2022; De Witte, 2022). Syrian refugees never received this type of treatment and were not permitted to work until their asylum applications were approved. According to the Stanford Immigration Policy Lab, waiting one additional year for asylum decisions was shown to lower the probability of being employed by about 4.9% due to 'skills atrophy' (Esposito, 2022). During the first year of the Syrian refugee crisis, dealing with one million refugees was depicted as unprecedented and impossible, but in 2022, over two million refugees arrived in Europe within the course of two weeks, revealing the falsity of the claim that Europe could not handle that many refugees within months (Khalid, 2022). Furthermore, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported that Ukrainian refugees' immediate access to employment combined with their educational profile and existing social networks generally facilitated smooth integration into EU countries (OECD, 2022). Some other accommodations that have been provided include 'welcoming classes' in Germany that are assisted by Ukrainian refugee teachers, employment programs that match the skills of Ukrainian refugees to jobs in Poland, and mobile intercultural teams to provide Ukrainian refugees with social-emotional support in Austria (Karasapan, 2022).

Theoretical Analysis:

Identity of Refugees

Constructivism helps to understand how the difference in the dominant social perceptions between the Syrian refugees compared to the Ukrainian refugees shaped the global response toward them. Although the material conditions of both groups were similar – they were both humans facing violent atrocities in need of security and safety – distinct ideas were created about their identity. Following 9/11, the false 'all brown people and Muslims are terrorists' narrative spread across the Western world as a result of the tendency of the news to link Muslims with

terrorists, the responses to terrorism that disproportionately targeted Muslims, and the limited positive depiction of Muslims in media (Corbin, 2017; Khalid 2022). Yet, recent research has shown that the most significant terrorist threat in Europe and North America is likely to come from white supremacists (Jones et al., 2020) proving that this 'brown, Muslim terrorist' narrative is primarily socially constituted. As constructivism explains, this socially constituted narrative has led to certain political practices, particularly in response to Muslim Syrian refugees.

During the height of the Syrian refugee crisis, the Pew Research Centre study found that in eight of the ten European nations surveyed, half or more respondents believed that incoming refugees increased the likelihood of terrorism in their country (Wike et al., 2016). In comparison, a Migration Policy Centre study at the height of the Ukrainian refugee crisis found that 93% of survey respondents in eight European countries were supportive of accepting Ukrainian refugees (Drazanova & Geddes, 2022). Similar sentiments exist in Canada where an online Angus Reid Institute study found that four in five Canadians supported the government's plan to allow an unlimited number of Ukrainian refugees into the country, compared to only 39% of Canadians who supported the government's plan to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees in Canada in 2015 (Sachdeva, 2022). In addition to race and religion, the social construct of gender also plays a role in attitudes toward refugees. The Syrian refugee group consisted of more men than the Ukrainian refugee group, as men aged 18-60 were prohibited from leaving Ukraine to defend their country (Karasapan, 2022). Male refugees tend to be depicted as more prone to crime, violence, and radicalization (Strickland, 2016). As a result, several Syrian refugee programs including Canada's, excluded single males (Barton, 2015).

This difference in societal attitudes toward Syrian and Ukrainian refugees has also been observed in the public rhetoric of politicians and world leaders. For example, in February 2022, when referring to Ukrainian refugees, Bulgarian Prime Minister, Kiril Petkov told journalists, "These people are intelligent. They are educated…This is not the refugee wave we have been used to…people with unclear pasts who could have been terrorists" (CBC, 2022). Likewise, in 2015, Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban described Syrian refugees as "poison" (Pearson, 2018) and then in 2022, went on to exclaim that Ukrainian refugees should be "welcomed by friends in Hungary" (Global Detention Project, 2022). All of this goes to show that the social construction of race, religion, and gender has led Europeans and North Americans to feel more

affinity with Ukrainian compared to Syrian refugees (Koning, 2022). This social construction of identity is one factor that has contributed to the material state and intergovernmental policies that have been more positive toward Ukrainian compared to Syrian refugees.

Portrayal of Conflict

Furthermore, how the Syrian civil war and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have been portrayed have influenced the treatment of refugees in both crises. The conflict in Syria has not received the same international media coverage as the invasion of Ukraine (Pietromachi, 2022). Since October 2021, US and UK governments have used intelligence to report daily on the build-up of Russian arms surrounding Ukraine (Mezzofiore, 2022). This attention, combined with the hundreds of international journalists who travelled to Ukraine in the months before the start of the war, along with the foreign correspondents who were forced to leave Russia due to press restrictions, allowed a strong, pro-Ukrainian narrative to build up across the Western world (Aslund, 2022). Yet, as the Syrian civil war gained momentum from 2011 to 2015, the Western world did not have the same understanding of the situation because no predominant international narrative of the conflict arose (CBC, 2022). Several journalists from Al-Jazeera, CBS News, NBC News, France's BFM TV, and Daily Telegraph have also been criticized for their description of Ukrainian refugees as civilized unlike their earlier stigmatization of Syrian refugees (Acu, 2022). For example, in his reporting about the Ukrainian crisis, NBC foreign news correspondent, Charlie D'Agata made a discriminatory comment when he stated "This isn't a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan…This is a relatively civilized, relatively European - I have to choose those words carefully too- city, where you wouldn't expect that or hope that is going to happen" (Rahman, 2022). Furthermore, France's BFM TV reporter, Philippe Corbe also took an orientalist approach when he asserted "We're not talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Putin. We're talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives" (Harding, 2022). In this way, the media created a narrative that people should care about Ukrainian refugees simply because their lives were similar to Europeans.

Moreover, the majority of traditional media channels have illustrated Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an apparent right vs. wrong situation. Especially in Europe, it is increasingly clear-cut

that Putin is the common enemy ruling an authoritarian, repressive society while Ukraine, the democratic, free society, is obviously the innocent victim (Aslund, 2022; Koning, 2022). In contrast, it has become politically risky for states or intergovernmental organizations to commit to choosing a side in the Syrian war. One must choose between supporting the corrupt, inhumane, dictatorial government of Bashar Al-Assad or the extremist, jihadist, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – not to mention the countless other ethnic, religious, and foreign parties who are also involved in and have complicated the conflict (Esposito, 2022). The shortage of coverage of the Syrian civil conflict and the fact that it has not been framed to fit into the same distinct black-and-white boxes as the attacks on Ukraine has led to the lack of coherent, universal, humanitarian policies toward Syrian refugees.

Conclusion

The theory of constructivism can be used to explain how social constructions and resulting discourse have shaped the difference in the international response toward the Syrian compared to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. First, the way in which the identity of both groups of refugees was perceived created more international sympathy toward white, Christian, and Ukrainian refugees compared to racialized, Muslim, and Syrian refugees. Second, the dominant, explicit coverage of the Ukrainian conflict compared to the limited, ambiguous coverage of the Syrian conflict led to international policies that more favourably treated Ukrainian refugees. While constructivism is useful in understanding this situation, it does not account for a number of material factors. Some of the other material factors that another IR theory may consider include the proximity of Syria and Ukraine to the countries that were taking in refugees and the expected length of time that the refugees would remain in the host country. Constructivism also does not consider that the Ukrainian refugee crisis occurred several years following the Syrian refugee crisis, so the international system may have been able to learn from some of its mistakes.

While this paper examined the international response to refugees - perhaps some findings could also be extrapolated to investigate how international institutions have responded to other humanitarian crises in Global North vs. Global South countries in the modern era. It is also important to note that while Western and European policies generally favoured Ukrainian over Syrian refugees, many Ukrainian refugees (especially those of colour) also faced discrimination

(Mezler & Wolf, 2022). There are countless stories of the struggles faced by non-white students and migrant workers who did not fit the 'typical Ukrainian' image being stranded at borders, beaten by sticks, and denied access to accommodation and transportation (Luquerna, 2022). Although this paper generally examined the treatment of Syrian versus Ukrainian refugees, future research could also be conducted on the differences in treatment between refugees within the same crisis. With the recognition of these international biases, perhaps the international community can better reflect on how to use the response to the Ukrainian refugees as a model for future refugee responses, regardless of the social construction of the refugees and conflict.

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