

The UK's marginal action toward Ukrainian refugees shows just how solidly built its immigration bureaucracy is around suspicion



Mike Slaven points to structural factors that help explain why the UK's immigration system has been unable to welcome large numbers of Ukrainian refugees with any sense of urgency, despite government rhetoric and public opinion on the matter.

The UK government has responded to people fleeing Ukraine with a gulf between welcoming rhetoric and miserly, inflexible policy that would be laughable if it were not so urgent and so familiar. Since Russia invaded Ukraine nearly three weeks ago, [2.7 million people](#) are estimated to have fled Ukraine across international borders – a number that continues to rise and that does not include the many Ukrainians internally displaced. After pledging to be 'generous', the UK government clarified the total number to whom it had issued visas: as of 14 March, a mere [3,000 people](#). The absurdity of this disparity, and the slowness and rigidity of the state's response, is down to a lack of political leadership and an immigration bureaucracy so thoroughly fixed for decades on the suspicion and control of forced emigrants that it is now incapable of welcoming even refugees with substantial public sympathy across Europe and in the UK.

The British government has been left isolated in its response to fleeing Ukrainians as other European governments have done an about-face from their hard-line positions toward earlier refugee movements. The UK's efforts to hollow out asylum rights may be particularly notable in the context of the current [Nationality and Borders Bill](#), but it has typically not been alone transnationally in pursuing these kinds of policies. With a background of hostility to refugees, it has been remarkable the extent to which scenes of white Ukrainians fleeing westward into Europe have prompted [a U-turn across Europe](#). Poland, which had helped scuttle EU efforts to share reception responsibilities for fleeing Syrians in 2015, has already received more than a million people from Ukraine, and the EU has responded rapidly with an expansive [temporary protection directive](#): Ukrainians, who were already able to travel visa-free in the EU for 90 days, may now claim a temporary protection status that would allow them to live, work, and enjoy other rights in the EU for at least one year.

In contrast, the UK Home Office has announced [limited schemes](#) for family members of Ukrainians already living in the UK and for certain other sponsored people. To some extent, the limited scope of UK action is understandable: it is reasonable to assume that at this stage the UK would only be a preferred destination for people who already have strong social connections here, since as long as there is substantial uncertainty over how long Russia's attacks on Ukraine will last, many fleeing Ukrainians will probably prefer to stay closer to home. And before early March, few would assume that the EU would have executed such a fast volte-face on refugees.

However, the rigid bureaucracy that the UK state has aimed at Ukrainians has seemed bewilderingly out of touch with the urgency of the situation and has fallen far short of government rhetoric, with [numerous stories](#) of fleeing people coming up against an inert state machinery. But this type of response is the only one likely to emerge in the short run for an immigration bureaucracy built over decades to direct suspicion at both forced emigrants and family immigrants, as agents whose rights claims are liable to foil state control objectives. In urging Whitehall to move faster in response to the war, even Ukraine's ambassador in London noted how aiming vexatious bureaucracy toward these sorts of immigrants was a [longstanding tendency](#) for the UK. Recent announcements about government [funding for people to host sponsored Ukrainians](#) in their homes seems to do little about the basic problem of their getting speedy access into the UK.

While it may seem to make the most sense to admit Ukrainians to the UK first and follow up with relevant questions afterward, the immigration control bureaucracy has no recent experience of treating classes of forced emigrants as presumptively credible; this is an unfamiliar concept and the system is not built to facilitate this. The notion of effective control, and of separating deserving immigrants from the undeserving, has become increasingly [synonymous with the kinds of individualised checking](#) that has encumbered fleeing Ukrainians' arrival.

In understanding the contrast between the ease of Ukrainians claiming status in EU and their difficulties in the UK, it is instructive to look at the ways in which both to the UK and EU have sought to deal with Ukrainians outside of an asylum infrastructure which would confer broader rights than they are currently being offered but which is built, essentially, to cast doubt on claims. The European Union invoked, for the first time, 21-year-old rules around temporary protection to allow Ukrainians an exceptional ability to claim temporary status in the EU without applying for asylum or requiring extraordinary amounts of paperwork. The UK, on the other hand, sought to accommodate Ukrainians first through the framework of family migration policy – where the UK state has for decades sought to [tighten rules](#) and [extend scrutiny](#) to prevent fraudulent use of these routes. The notion of sponsorship in the UK system has similarly been used to expand monitoring. In this sense, the UK has moved Ukrainians from one realm (asylum) in which applicants are likely to face suspicion to others.

Given the [very long-standing](#) bureaucratic concern with family migrants' supposed abuse of immigration routes to the UK, it is sadly unsurprising that Ukrainian family visa applicants would encounter a state administration that seems so unmoved by their plight. The only thing likely to shift this default administrative posture is political leadership – but this is a tall order for a government whose current hardline asylum bill seems to reflect a political calculation that there will never be a very steep political price to pay for callousness toward desperate people trying to enter Britain.

Pressure on the treatment of fleeing Ukrainians, including from some Conservative backbenchers in Parliament, seems to be leading to some movement by the government, such as the Homes for Ukraine scheme and the concession that Ukrainians with passports [will be able to apply for visas online](#), with some checks done post-entry. But how far will this go toward in shifting a Home Office whose inertia has already claimed victims – despite widespread public support for their intended beneficiaries – in both the [stalled Afghan resettlement scheme](#) and sluggish [Windrush compensation scheme](#)?

In this sense, the UK's marginal and dilatory action toward the largest forced emigration movement within Europe in many decades shows just how solidly built today's UK immigration bureaucracy is around the presumptive suspiciousness of both forced emigrants and family immigrants. And the contrast between the European Union's action on fleeing Ukrainians, and a rigid UK lacking political leadership on the issue, underlines the isolation of this government's 'Global Britain' – which seeks global engagement only within a narrow ideological comfort zone, such that it is stuck without a compelling response to catastrophic humanitarian events on its doorstep. Indeed, we are a long way now from the UK which geopolitically [once sought leadership in Europe](#) by welcoming Eastern Europeans – and it is people fleeing war, in need of safety and support, who will predictably pay the price.

About the Author



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