



# Uprooting and Borders: The Digital Architecture of the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis

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RESEARCH



## ABSTRACT

This essay situates the Ukrainian refugee crisis within the politics of the border, and particularly its digital architecture. Increasingly, we illustrate here, decisions about the right to protection are managed digitally. From data, drones, and AI technologies that are mobilised to control territories and to only selectively allow safe passage, to media representations that symbolically regulate public conversation by making certain refugees visible and others invisible, digital technologies have become fundamental to the politics and policies of refuge. Taking the growing role of communication technologies in managing and representing forced migration and the right to protection, this analysis calls for closer attention to the digital architecture of the border. By doing so, we can better understand how technologies that enable Ukrainian refugees to seek safety, as well as to have their flight represented in the media, become crucial components of their refugee rights' realisation and their welcome in receiving countries.

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not only devastated the country, but has uprooted enormous numbers of people. More than eight million Ukrainians, almost a fifth of the country's population, have been forced to seek refuge in Europe [1]. But recording these inconceivable numbers of displaced people only offers a partial glimpse into the vast scale of the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. The first months of the invasion saw over 19 million people forced to leave their homes. They sought respite in western Ukraine and in neighbouring countries. Although almost half of this population has returned, many still have no safe home to return to. The ongoing ordeal facing Ukrainian refugees is the result of war. Yet, the ways it is understood and managed is a matter of communication and the technologies that enable the circulation of information but also of safe passage.

The story of Ukrainian refugees is one of humanitarian disaster. It is also a national crisis within a global refugee crisis. Ukrainians' displacement reflects one of the most brutal faces of war, but it also represents a striking reminder of what makes (or unmakes) refugees. Not only a violent uprooting, but also decisions made about the border – who can cross and who cannot – shape what we now understand as refugee crises across the world. In fact, if we observe how national and regional policies unequally, and often conditionally, distribute the right to seek and find protection, we can see how some among those fleeing war can cross borders into safety, while many others are denied this right.

This essay situates the Ukrainian refugee crisis within the politics of the border, and particularly its digital architecture. Increasingly, we illustrate here, decisions about the right to protection are managed digitally. From data, drones, and AI technologies that are mobilised to control territories and to only selectively allow safe passage, to media representations that symbolically regulate public conversation by making certain refugees visible and others invisible, digital technologies have become fundamental to the politics and policies of refuge. Taking the growing role of communication technologies in managing and representing migration and the right to refuge, this analysis argues for the need to pay closer attention to the digital architecture of the border. By doing so, we can better understand how technologies that enable Ukrainian refugees to seek safety, as well as to have their flight represented in the media, become crucial components of their refugee rights' realisation and their welcome in receiving countries.

As every refugee knows, the right to cross territories and to find protection is not to be taken for granted. While the Refugee Convention recognises the universality of this right, policies across many western countries are currently introduced to reduce this precise universality. The essay examines how Ukrainian refugees, once uprooted, have been able to find safety, dignity, and prospective settlement in arrival countries and how their experience relates to wider systems of communication and technological control of transnational mobility. We examine this issue by identifying how the technologies of the border shape policies and public perceptions of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, but also of refugee crises more globally. Specifically, we examine the relationship between forced migration and the technologies that, on the one hand, regulate the border territorially (databases, AI technologies, drones, which aim to control who crosses across nation-states), and on the other, the technologies that regulate the border symbolically (social media and online news media that regulate refugees' access to western publics through fair representations, or denies them that access through hostile representations). As we will show, the territorial and symbolic dimensions of the border are entangled as each plays its role in regulating, respectively, bodies and perceptions on migration.

The essay is organised in two main parts. The first part focusses on the transnational and national entanglement of policymaking and of media. Together, we show that policies and particular media representations circulated across western news media and social media enable opportunities for Ukrainian refugees' protection; however, we see that these are often exceptional and contingent opportunities. This section draws on research conducted between 2015 and 2022 across Europe and discusses media narratives and technologies of cross-border mobility control [2, 3, 4]. The essay's second part moves from macro-scale processes to the micro-scale of Ukrainian refugee reception on a regional and a local level. Understanding the condition and recognition of refugees, we argue, requires the analysis of the relationship between media narratives and decision-making, as well of the experience of refugees themselves on the ground. This section draws on fieldwork that we conducted across

the borders of Ukraine and Poland in spring 2022. The essay concludes by interrogating western responses to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, emphasising the need for refugee recognition beyond discriminatory and ephemeral acts of protection.

## **MAKING AND UNMAKING REFUGEE CRISES: NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL DIGITAL ENTANGLEMENTS**

The Ukrainian refugee crisis is devastating on a local and a global scale. The Ukrainians' displacement needs to be understood in the context of the war but also within the global realities of forced migration. Currently, human displacement has reached an unprecedented scale in post-war times, with more than 117 million people forced to leave their homes because of war, disaster and destitution in 2022 [1]. Among them, 29.3 million have crossed an international border and are recognised refugees, while another 5.6 million are recorded as asylum seekers [1]. Others are displaced within their country of origin (61.2 million). Many, however, receive no status at all, denied recognition as refugees or even as asylum seekers. These people still need and deserve protection, though evidence shows that many fleeing extreme violence in Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar, but also Syria and Afghanistan, are now pushed back when trying to reach Europe [5]. We are living at a time of extraordinary displacement, exacerbated by extraordinarily unequal access to protection.

The flight of Ukrainian refugees, unlike those of many other states, generated a swift response across the West. Immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and for the first time in its history, the European Union activated the Temporary Protection Directive [6], while the UK established its Home for Ukrainians scheme [7]. Both schemes, which resembled many enacted across the West, aimed to ease the migration of Ukrainians as well as to address the significant scale of Ukrainian suffering. For instance, EU measures relaxed the restrictions of the Dublin Treaty, which require those seeking asylum to do so at first point of entry – a treaty that has generated unevenness on the scale of responsibility for migrants seeking settlement across EU states. In the case of Ukrainian refugees, prioritising values of shared responsibility meant that countries in the EU, and in other western states, opened their doors to almost 19 million people. At least temporarily, those arriving from Ukraine after the start from the war benefitted from the suspension of the otherwise highly controlled territorial border and its technologies that usually deter potential migrants from crossing into the EU.

The stringent territorial border policies have been largely suspended for Ukrainian refugees. No passports are necessary for Ukrainians fleeing to leave their home country and enter a neighbouring country. But this does not mean the suspension has been unconditional or with a view to the long-term. Even during the early days of the war, EU countries receiving Ukrainian refugees refused to fully suspend their surveillance technologies of cross points. The consequence of this was that thousands had to wait in freezing temperatures while authorities turned to transnational databases, passport and biometric records, to identify them as rightful or not claimants of protection [8]. Polish authorities, for example, insisted on the need to keep thorough data profiles of those crossing, arguably to avoid irregular migration. The stringent and temporary suspension of the rigid border included more expectations: Ukrainians leaving their countries even days before the war started had no rights to the protection enabled by the EU Temporary Protection Directive, while others born in the country but without legal documentation (e.g. stateless Roma people) were also excluded. Such measures revealed 'Europe's double standards for refugees' [9] expressed in racial profiling of people seeking to cross. There was significant discrimination against non-white people uprooted from Ukraine, including African students [10]. Opening the territorial border was also a decision that stood in stark contradiction to the reinforcement of military and digital surveillance that sought to deter non-Ukrainian refugees at all cost from crossing into the EU [11]. 'In the midst of conflict, racism has once again emerged as pervasive and pernicious, exacerbating Ukraine's humanitarian crisis', Bajaj and Cody Stanford have noted [12]. To sum up, it is clear that the Ukrainians' experience of being a refugee is strikingly unique. Against this exception, western governments' primary focus remains on deterring those seeking to cross from entering their territories, and increasingly do so by mobilising digital technologies, including drones and AI technologies that aim to surveil and predict people's movement and stop them even before approaching their borders. For example, the UK spent almost a billion pounds buying high-tech drone technologies to deter those who try to cross the English Channel [13].

Deterring refugees, in part through rigidly enforcing the border now reflects a core element of migration governance across the world. The Transnational Institute reveals how ‘the border industry’ [14] has grown globally in recent years, promising targeted responses to what it considers as migration induced threats. Resisting widely imposed cuts in public spending across the west, Transnational Institute notes, the ‘border industry’ is predicted to grow annually by 7.2–8.6%, with the estimated \$65 billion spending primarily directed to AI (artificial intelligence) and biometrics technologies. Such substantial investments into technological control of migration emerge as an almost inevitable response to two converging beliefs in current policy and media narratives across the west – that migration is a threat, and that technology has an answer to the problem.

In this climate, the suspension of territorial border restrictions could not have been possible without the suspension of the symbolic border [4]. The symbolic border is constituted through narratives that circulate across news platforms and social media. These narratives often activate reductive formulas of incompatible binaries, presenting the needs or demands of the refugee population as being at odds with the interests of the citizens of the country where refuge is sought [4]. These narratives include the wide and persistent construction of migration through binaries that emphasise the incompatibility of categories of ‘us’ (citizens) and ‘them’ (racialised migrants), or of ‘deserving refugees’ versus ‘undeserving migrants’.

In the case of Ukrainian refugees, we have often seen the suspension of the symbolic, as well as of the territorial border. Against binary norms of reporting migration, we have seen complex narratives, with western media recognising newcomers’ right to protection as well as their humanity. These narratives, temporarily at least, replaced established media tropes that often express suspicion or hostility towards refugees and migrants. Visual and textual narratives often represent migrants as silent and strange ‘others’, fundamentally different to national subjects. [15, 16] These same narratives also produced a discursive category of Ukrainian newcomers as exceptional refugees: referred to in the media as ‘people like us’, ‘civilised’ and ‘blue-eyed’ [17], even if the neighbouring nations share a complicated history [18].

Media narratives matter because they are important resources of information and knowledge about migration, but also because they shape public and political perceptions on migration more generally, as well as of specific migrant and refugee groups, more particularly. In fact, research shows that media are often entangled in the production of policy narratives and decision-making on migration, partly influencing and partly amplifying policy priorities [19, 20]. In the context of migration reporting, media coverage in Poland as in other European countries has repeatedly reproduced narratives of suspicion towards newcomers in recent years. Rightwing press primarily but also liberal media have repeatedly reported the disadvantages of accepting refugees [21].

Through the regular reproduction of narratives of migration as a problem, media frame public conversations around a distinction between ‘legitimate refugees’ and ‘undeserving migrants’ [22].

The Ukrainian refugee crisis has thus far been an exception to the rule in terms of the broader structures of the border and the contemporary global refugee crisis. This is a case that, in fact, narratively reflects an ethics of welcome and politically, decision-making driven by a commitment to shared responsibility, when humanity is affected by war. Symbolically, a politics of protection towards Ukrainian refugees has systematically been prioritised in media and policy narratives of care and respect widely circulated across digital spaces. Territorially, this politics and ethics have been expressed in openings (though not without digital controls) of the border for Ukrainians. The Ukrainian refugee story thus far is one of promise and learning: it reveals that human rights can effectively drive policy and media responses to forced migration, even when the numbers of those seeking protection are significant. Of course, the overall effective policies of protection extended to Ukrainian refugees need to continue being read in the context of exceptionality and in relation to the selective compassion towards a particular group of refugees against racialised others, as a result of a perceived similarity between those arriving and those receiving them, as well as a result of geopolitical interests driving such western responses. This is a story that is only at its early days. It is also a story, as discussed in the next section, that is not fully determined through macro-scale processes but also situated in micro-scale practices of reception. The making and unmaking of refugees involves many actors, spaces and temporalities.

## RECEIVED AS REFUGEES BUT RECOGNISED AS HUMANS? DIGITAL BORDER ENTANGLEMENTS ON THE GROUND

Fieldwork we conducted across the Polish/Ukrainian border in March 2022 revealed that national and transnational policies on migration trickle down into distinct locales. Migration regulation and governance, we saw, are enacted by the agents of the border, most notably border guards, the police and local authorities, but of course implicate refugees themselves who are not only on the receiving side of political decision-making but they themselves develop their own responses to those decisions. Whether or not refugees are humanised or dehumanised, or made or unmade, cannot be fully understood if we do not examine how they are treated locally – a dimension of refugee lives and fates that is rarely considered when broader refugee policy is analysed.

The first striking, but also perhaps unsurprising, observation at the territories that separate but also connect a country at war, Ukraine, and its neighbour, Poland, is that not all crossing the border are doing so because of war. This initial observation revealed that those received as refugees are not all people fleeing war. Some are selectively and conditionally recognised in their humanity, while others are not. Following the routes that many refugees take once they escape immediate danger, we travelled from the Ukrainian border town of Yavoriv (Яворів) through the Polish crossing points of Medyka and Budomierz, and into the border city of Przemyśl and regional capital of Lublin. We then followed the pathways that bring so many into Warsaw's train stations, and eventually into peripheral Polish towns and villages, such as those of Wieliszew. As we followed the refugee routes into EU territories, what became apparent is that media representations and communication networks that expand across news media but also social media shape fundamental dimensions of policy enactment and practices of refugee reception.

Specifically, our research recorded three contradictory and competing dimensions of the border's digital architecture, that is, the technologies implicated in shaping restrictions, in granting permission for crossing borders and in finding safety. These technologies, as discussed below, include digitised systems of cross point controls (e.g., passport biometrics and transnational databases); social media networks that connect different actors of the border and coordinate reception; and social media and news media representations of refugees' flight that enable publics in receiving countries to understand (or misunderstand) refugees' lives and needs. The specific realisation of the border's digital architecture, as we observed it, is outlined below under three themes: control and exceptionalism, philanthropy and post-humanitarianism, but also, solidarity and resistance.

### CONTROL AND EXCEPTIONALISM

At times of a humanitarian emergency, the complexity of border control becomes more apparent. On the one hand, national boundaries' porosity increased, with refugees and humanitarians crossing between Ukraine and Poland all the time. On the other hand, the digital systems of control and exceptionalism became yet more rigid. Specifically, when we crossed between the two countries as part of a humanitarian mission, we were reminded that, crisis or not, the border is now a digital border of inflexible passport checks and use of transnational databases that decide who can cross and who can't. Humanitarian medics' experience is one of daily scrutiny as their data profiles are constantly checked when they cross everyday between Poland and Ukraine, especially when returning to EU territories. Inflexible border governance has become most ordinary across the West, especially as it is increasingly digitally controlled, with 'firewall bordering' [22] activated through drones, thermal cameras, and transnational databases [4]. Humanitarian practice and displaced people's protection and care remain subjected to the surveilled, rigid restrictions of the border. Even at times of war and when millions of people were desperately seeking access to safety, while facing the most adverse weather conditions.

The control that states impose on the territorial border is nothing new, but there is a particularity in this case that brings racial exceptionalism and conditional hospitality together. In fact, the most striking element of the wartime border we witnessed in Poland was its exceptionalism. As previous research shows, the dominant rationale for belonging in Polish society was ethno-cultural [23].

While the Polish government has been welcoming Ukrainian refugees, it has continued to use its military and intelligence power to deter victims of other wars, such as those from Syria

and Afghanistan, who remain trapped at the Belarus-Polish border [24]. From imposing no-go zones around that 'other' border so that media and activists have no access to information, to aggressive campaigns on state media that present those seeking refuge there as merely male, non-white, and threatening migrants [25], the Polish government fundamentally divides those seeking refuge into 'good refugees' and 'bad migrants'; yet even this distinction is not a simple or consistent one. Nationalist concerns are still imposed on refugees, with the Polish Minister of Education requiring Ukrainian children in Polish schools to write their school exams in Polish as the government has no intention to introduce 'privileges' [26].

## PHILANTHROPY AND POST-HUMANITARIANISM

The scale of citizen-generated humanitarian support for those arriving in Poland has been unimaginable: an incredible scale and level of fast response from the ground up supported refugees when the state was unable, or, according to some, unwilling, to help. Formal structures of reception were miniscule during the first few weeks of the war and Polish citizens were acting as first point of response, trying to manage incredible levels of need. In many cases they still do. Even now, numerous volunteer-organised warehouses across villages, towns and cities receive and distribute vast humanitarian supplies of all kinds both in Poland and in Ukraine. Citizens' effective on-the-ground humanitarianism is largely organised on social media, where volunteers have developed incredibly effective digital skills to self-organise and mobilise others, collective huge amounts of humanitarian aid, including medication, clothing and food.

While the level of effective and digitally mediated volunteerism is impressive, it is underpinned by a mix of values and motivations. Some of the volunteers we met told us how their preconceptions of the previously suspicious neighbours have been replaced by solidarity towards those in need. Others, such as the members of a border village humanitarian campaign in Poland, told us how important it is to support Ukraine, while still telling us that Ukrainians cannot be trusted. Instead, they only trust their Polish compatriots to deliver and distribute humanitarian aid. Histories of animosity and territorial disputes around the Polish/Ukrainian border [27, 28], alongside solidarities associated with geopolitical struggles, often shape responses and conditions of refugee recognition. Many Ukrainians are often received and cared for, or not cared for, on the basis of regional histories and geopolitics, rather than on the basis of their humanity, as we have seen in the above example. Even more so, the conditionality of refugee recognition, we observed, was in many cases racially determined, even among local authorities and citizens. Some considered Ukrainians as uniquely entitled to refugee status. A Mayor of a border town told us how concerned he was to see a group of 'dark men' approaching in the early days of the war, reminding him what he saw on television screens in 2015: certain unwelcome refugees arriving at Europe's Mediterranean shores. On the micro-scale of the border, not unlike the macro-scale processes of media and policy narrative production, these examples show, who refugees are and what rights they have, remains a matter discursively and ideologically constituted.

## SOLIDARITY AND RESISTANCE

Alongside acts of philanthropism and exceptional benevolence, we also witnessed activism of solidarity, which has stubbornly defied the border regime's attempts to divide 'good refugees' and 'bad migrants'. Unlike some of the acts referred to above, which exceptionally expanded welcome to people from Ukraine alone, numbers of grassroots and activist groups have persistently emphasised in their acts and communication their unconditional welcome to all refugees. In Poland, such is the case of the grassroots Homo Faber in Lublin that has over the recent years used its social media to demand long-term strategies of welcome and resettlement, including refugee housing, and that of Grupa Granica that has been campaigning, not only in the context of the war in Ukraine, for indiscriminatory welcome of all refugees, no matter where they come from. [29] Also the incredible activism of local and international networks of solidarity that supported refugees in both sides of the border was impressive. The most striking case we observed was that of Folkowisko 'Embassy of Freedom', a grassroots initiative at the border town of Cieszanów, which brings together doctors, activists, volunteers from across the world; day in day out, they generate from the ground-up actions that vary from book collections for Ukrainian refugee kids ('Books not Bombs') to humanitarian and medical support delivered to cities across Ukraine.

The most important actors of the border, of course, are refugees themselves. Since the beginning of the war, Ukrainian refugees have been appearing on social media and mass media

screens as victims of violence and uprooting. As is often the case with media representations of war, refugees appear as silent victims, or people who only speak of their suffering. During our research, we met many Ukrainian refugees that reminded us of their complex humanity. While having experienced trauma and violent uprooting, most resisted being defined either through silent suffering, or through the west's benevolent philanthropism. Among those we met, two women told us that they were eager to get a job, knowing perhaps how conditional and ephemeral Polish state's support is. A young man showed us his Instagram profile that looked like any other teenager's social media profile, reminding us how he, like so many other young people, sought ordinariness under conditions of precarity and uprooting. At least in appearance. This complex self-representations and voices of refugees are stark reminders, not only of their humanity and diverse needs but also of the urgency to further reflect on the problematic misrepresentations and stereotyping of refugees in news media headlines and imageries, those often dividing the 'good' and the 'bad', the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving'.

## CONCLUSION

The story of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, we argued, is one that emerges and takes its shape within the digital architectures of the border – the technologies that are mobilised territorially and symbolically to manage refugees' flight, but also to assort the bodies of those who have the right to cross territories and to seek protection, as well as their representations as deserving or undeserving of refuge. Listening to the people who are living the war and its consequences, and observing policies, narratives and practices of control but also of struggle, remind us how the stories of refugees and of humanitarianism often simplify the agency and the politics of the border. The border – in its visible and invisible structures and expressions – is a site of violence, of liminality, but also of resistance and agency, implicating locals, humanitarians and refugees themselves.

The story of the Ukrainian refugee crisis is also a story of humanity. If we consider the forces at play both across the macro and the micro level of reception, as we aimed to do in this essay, it becomes apparent that the welcome extended to Ukrainian refugees so far cannot be taken for granted in the future. Ukrainian refugees' right to protection more often than not is subjected to geopolitical priorities, with their humanity remaining subjected to conditional recognition. Narratives that turn Ukrainians into yet another group of 'others' are already surfacing, as seen in the words of the German opposition leader Friedrich Merz, who accused Ukrainian refugees for 'welfare tourism' [30]. As many Ukrainian refugees struggle to secure employment or housing [31, 32], their right to protection seems to be precariously dependent upon public opinion and political discourse. Without the west committing to the recognition of the universal right to refugee protection, beyond an ephemeral and selective application of this right, the risk of welcome turning to suspicion is real. This is a risk which affects the trajectories of Ukrainian refugee lives but also national and international authorities' long-term commitment to human rights. As the initial mobilization in support of Ukrainian refugees has shown, it is possible to share responsibility and to protect the rights of refugees to a life of safety and dignity, even when the scale of uprooting is enormous. Ukrainian refugees' rights in the long run cannot but be understood and secured within a framework that recognises all refugees' rights. Racial, geopolitical and popularity biases have no place in determining the human right to protection, dignity and refuge.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

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