

Why were Bosniaks treated more favourably than today's Muslim refugees? On differing narratives of identity, religion and security

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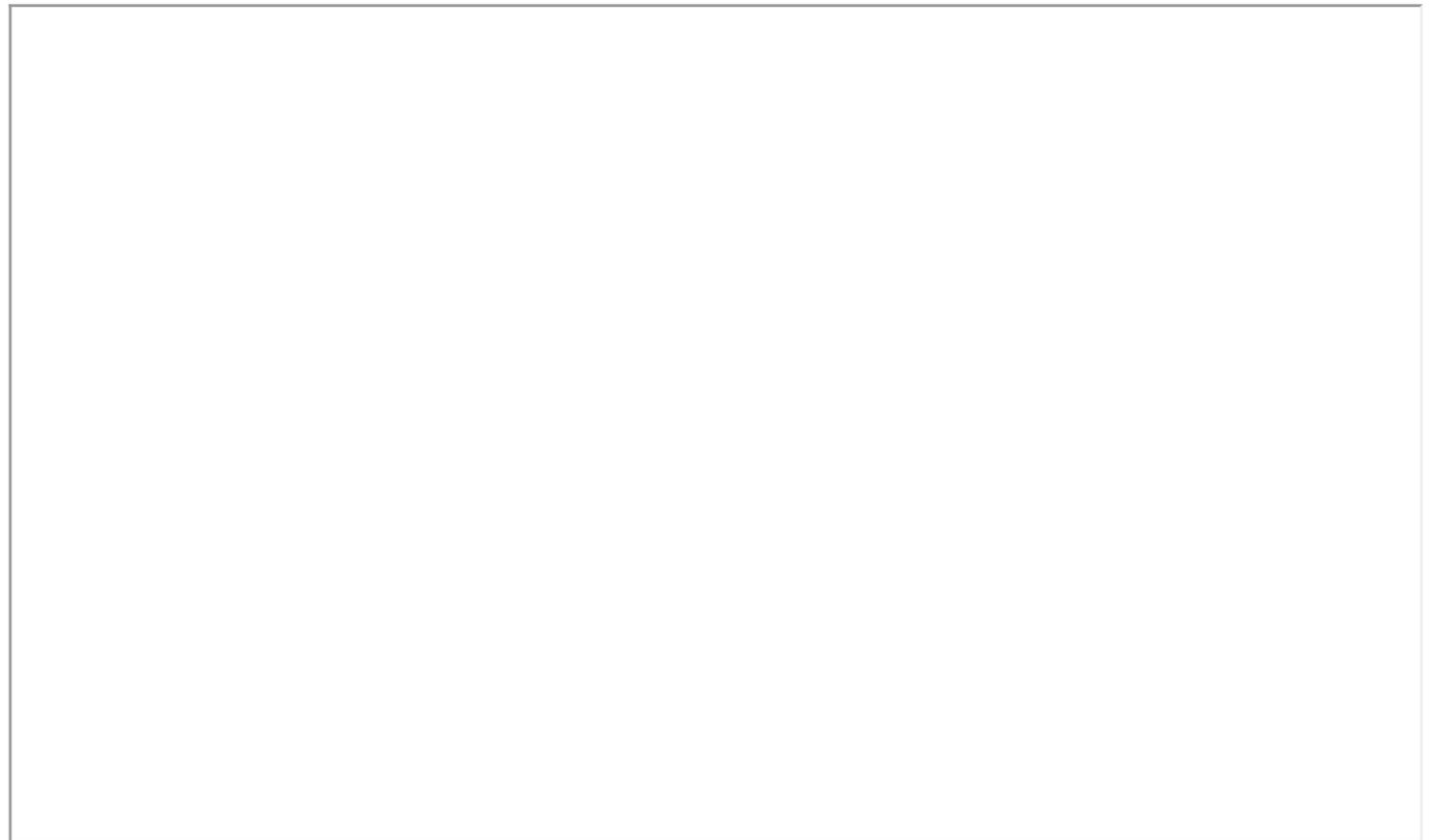
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Today's migration crisis has prompted comparisons with the recent past, with analyses [highlighting](#) the relatively successful integration of refugees from Bosnia in the 1990s. [Catherine Baker](#) reflects on why today's migrants are not being given as warm a welcome and why even the welcome of Bosnian migrants was less warm than it has been remembered as. Although even before 9/11 racism and Islamophobia were turning Muslim migration into an imagined security threat, Bosnian refugees did not fit the profile of suspected terrorists that in 1990s European cultural politics was already being attached to brown 'Middle Eastern' men.



In 1992, when 1,000 Bosnian refugees were housed aboard an adapted container ship in Copenhagen while the Danish government decided their asylum applications, 12-year-old Vladimir Tomić could not have known either that he would grow up to make an [acclaimed documentary](#) about the protracted wait to begin his life in Denmark or that 25 years later the arrival of refugees from the even more extensive conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa would become one of the most divisive issues in European politics.

Tomić's *Flotel Europa*, based on refugees' own video tapes from the ship, documents a moment in European refugee history that now serves as a comparison, contrast and example for experts debating whether and how more than a million Syrians and other refugees can be integrated into European societies.



A [recent study](#) by the Centre for European Policy Studies, rating the integration of Bosnian refugees in Austria, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden as successful, [attributes the success](#) to host countries opening up their labour markets to them – sooner or later – and to the high levels of education with which most Bosnians arrived.

Today's refugee crisis, in contrast, is much more than a socio-economic policy challenge: in the eyes of the transnational populist far right which has moved its arguments about Islam as a threat to European culture into the political centre (the culmination of a process that started [well before 9/11](#)), Muslim refugees are so unable to culturally integrate into European cities that their resettlement would endanger Europeans' public safety, secularity and democracy itself.

If European perceptions about the integration of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, the majority Muslim, were so different from today, this is not just a matter of labour market policies – but also of how the politics of European racism and Islamophobia have categorised each group of refugees.

Indeed, the very nature of '[temporary protection](#)' measures extended to Bosnian refugees like Tomić when they fled to Western European countries independently or through organised resettlement programmes shows the extent of European welcome in the 1990s should not be overstated. Germany, in particular, was keen for its 320,000 Bosnians (the largest number accepted by any European Union member state) to return home as soon as Bosnia-Herzegovina could be declared 'safe' again; the British government haggled for months before receiving a much smaller quota of 2,500.

Western European governments had already tightened their asylum policies in the 1980s, undoing the relatively relaxed attitude they had shown to individual

political defectors during the Cold War, in recognition that refugees were now arriving in larger numbers and from crisis zones in the Global South which could be expected to lead even more people to migrate. Khalid Koser and Richard Black [obliquely noted](#) in 1999 the fear that these migrants might have been 'the harbingers of mass North–South migration in the face of uneven economic development' (p. 525): in other words, Lucy Mayblin [suggests](#), asylum rules tightened as soon as the typical asylum-seeker came from somewhere Europe had colonised and was non-white.

Popular imaginations of near-future disaster in the 1990s pictured vast waves of impoverished African, Middle Eastern and South Asian migrants – racial 'others' to the traditional whiteness of Europe, and targets of a pervasive cultural racism – clamouring to flee to Europe in order to escape savage conflict and environmental catastrophe; indeed, the very language of 'waves' of refugees and 'savage' conflicts fed into alarmist visions of the '[coming anarchy](#)'. 'Fortress Europe' policies, the antecedents of today's FRONTEX and militarised EU borders on land and sea, were the result.

Bosnian Muslim refugees faced the [anxiety and disempowerment](#) of life in abeyance while they waited to find out whether they would be allowed to start new lives in their home countries – or whether they wanted to – but very rarely had to contend with the blanket Islamophobia that stigmatises every Muslim refugee as a potential terrorist today.

The reasons why Bosnian Muslims, or Bosniaks (a term that became much more widespread in the 1990s), were not subject to the same suspicion as Middle Eastern Muslim refugees today depend on how narratives of identity, religion and security inside and outside Bosnia have combined then and now.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, news images of Palestinian hijackers and Libyan and Iranian state-sponsored terrorists, mediated further by the [stereotyped terrorist villains](#) of Reagan- and post-Reagan-era Hollywood, had mapped the security threat of Islam on to brown, male, vigorous bodies of 'Middle Eastern' appearance, and more specifically [on to 'Arabs'](#) (no matter that Iranian ethnic identity is not Arab at all).

These Islamophobic representations catch today's refugees in their net but exempted Bosnians. Light-skinned Bosnians wearing Western clothes were not 'visibly Muslim' in European symbolic politics, even when they were Muslim by religion and ethnic heritage, and did not resemble the stock figure of the Islamic fundamentalist and militant.



A family in a refugee camp in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, during the 1991-1995 Yugoslav War. Credits:British Red Cross (CC BY 2.0)

Bosnians themselves strongly distanced their form of Islam from the image of the Arab terrorist: the Yugoslavia they remembered was no rogue state, but a modern and diplomatically successful European country. The fundamentalist had been an 'other' of the 1980s in Yugoslavia as well, and indeed became an imaginary devil in the propaganda of Radovan Karadžić's Serb Democratic Party, which sought to convince Serbs they were at risk of genocide by painting Bosniak nationalists as a second Taliban.

Many Bosniaks from middle-class urban backgrounds viewed religious practice in general as an outdated countryside tradition, within the politics of cosmopolitanism and secularity under Yugoslav state socialism. Those who did actively participate in religious customs believed perhaps even more strongly that Bosnia had been the cradle of a *different* kind of Islam, with an admixture of European culture and Bosnian tolerance that separated it utterly from the radical Islam of the Middle East.

By the time most of Bosnia's 1.2 million refugees were fleeing, hundreds of thousands of Croats and Serbs had already been displaced by ethnopolitical conflict in Croatia, many arriving in Western Europe (though more ending up in Serbia or other regions of Croatia, depending on their ethnic identity). Bosnian Muslim refugees could easily fit into the same category as Croats as subjects of public sympathy and victims of Milošević's aggression.

The second large group of Muslim refugees from the Yugoslav region – many of the Roma and Albanians who fled Kosovo (though Albanian ethnic identity accommodated Islam, Catholicism and Orthodoxy at the same time) – also largely escaped the framing of Islamist terrorism (again thrown against them by Serbian propaganda) when they arrived in western Europe in 1998–9.

This is not to say that Kosovars escaped xenophobia and racism. In Britain, at least, their resettlement was much more controversial than Bosnians', and the arrival of 24,000 Kosovars came at the same time as a [tabloid panic](#) about 'bogus asylum seekers' that primarily targeted Romani nationals of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania.

The anti-Roma prejudice, or [antiziganism](#), directed against these migrants and refugees carried over towards Kosovars. Some were Roma themselves, while many others had an ethnically ambiguous appearance that semi-racialised them as 'other' to more of an extent than the smaller number of Bosnians in Britain had been in 1992–5. The 'racialisation' of east European migrants in Britain as targets of xenophobic prejudice, which would [intensify](#) after the British government opened its labour market immediately to citizens of the new EU member states in 2004, began with the confluence of refugees from antiziganism in east-central Europe with those from the Kosovo War.

The Muslim refugees arriving in Europe now, in contrast, are from the very parts of the world which, since the waning of fears of nuclear destruction at the end of the Cold War, have represented the most immediate threat to European security in the geopolitics of racism and Islamophobia: the Middle East, Africa, Iran and Afghanistan.

They enter a political and social climate where, within the wider European economic and constitutional crisis, tabloid and far-right discourse has pushed back against the very category of refugee. Remarks like those of the Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović in September 2015 that '[w]e know that [...] there are also people with forged Syrian passports, who are not real refugees, but have other aims in entering the EU' exemplify a fear that refugee and terrorist are in practice indistinguishable – a myth which, when a very few terrorists (like [two perpetrators](#) of the November 2015 Paris attacks) have indeed entered the EU by claiming refugee status on forged passports, affects how more than a million people are perceived.

The imagination of Muslim refugees in general as a security threat, therefore as an existential risk to European life-as-we-know-it who cannot be allowed to settle in any European city, gained extra force after the Paris attacks – 'Paris changes everything,' said the Bavarian finance minister Markus Soeder in [calling on Angela Merkel](#) to reverse Germany's large-scale resettlement of refugees. The implication that Christians and Muslims cannot coexist in European cities suits the [polarising purposes](#) of ISIS as well as the far right.

It became more emotive yet after the mass sexual violence on New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne, strengthening forms of nationalism that operate as masculine or liberal-feminist performances of power by [turning away refugees and policing borders](#) in order to protect white European women and their freedoms from Muslim men.

Indeed, while European media represented Bosnian and Kosovar refugees as multi-generational groups dominated by women and children, plus smaller numbers of old men, the most widespread images of today's Muslim refugees – in photographs such as the UK Independence Party's '[Breaking Point](#)' poster, unveiled during the Brexit referendum hours before a neo-Nazi sympathiser shot the MP Jo Cox – are of men as an undifferentiated mass.

The different patterns of migration during the Yugoslav wars and today, with more families resettled together from Bosnia and Kosovo and [more men](#) in the current crisis travelling ahead on the dangerous crossing into the EU to make arrangements for their relatives to join them, are the missing context behind these different representations: but so too is how ideas of race, nationality and religion have intersected to imply that integrating Middle Eastern, North African and central Asian Muslims should inherently be more difficult than welcoming white European Bosnians 25 years before.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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