

Bachelor Thesis BSc. Global Responsibility and Leadership

**Belonging as a Syrian and Ukrainian migrant – a
comparative analysis in the Dutch context**

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Abstract

The present study aims to compare the migration experiences of Syrians and Ukrainians in the Netherlands and examine the effects of the Dutch migration policies on their sense of belonging within Dutch society. This desk research reviews important literature and analyses it using the three analytical levels of belonging and politics of belonging as introduced by Yuval-Davis. Syrian and Ukrainian migrants have been subject to two significantly different migration policies in the Netherlands, which had potential influence on their ability to belong to the Dutch society. Syrians were isolated from Dutch society and unable to access crucial areas of life such as housing or employment until being granted refugee status. Ukrainians received access to these areas almost instantly and were, unlike Syrians, perceived as indifferent by society. Findings suggest that being denied access to critical areas of life and being seen as different forced particular social- and economic locations and identities upon Syrians, significantly affecting their possibilities of becoming part of the Dutch community of belonging. Ukrainians do not experience these barriers to the same extent which implies that they were not excluded from the Dutch community of belonging the same way Syrians were.

Keywords: Belonging, Temporary Protection Directive, Migration policies, Syria, Ukraine



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Introduction

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, more than eight million Ukrainian migrants have been registered across EU member states (UNHCR, 2023). Solidarity towards Ukraine and its people spread rapidly, and countries were quick to welcome Ukrainians seeking refuge (Bang Carlsen et al., 2022; Bang Carlsen & Toubøl, 2023; De Coninck, 2022). It marked the second large wave of migration towards the European Union within the last decade, yet, it felt fundamentally different.

Less than two weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine's sovereign territory, the EU implemented its Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)(Vitiello, 2022). This directive originated from the 1998-99 Kosovo war, and has never been activated since its creation in 2001 (Parusel & Varfolomieieva, 2022). The goal of the TPD is to provide immediate and efficient protection in case of a 'mass influx' of individuals who cannot return to their countries of origin due to systematic/generalized violence or an armed conflict (Carrera et al., 2023). Furthermore, the TPD is supposed to take stress off national asylum systems by following a more collectivistic approach of 'burden-sharing' across EU member states (Kortukova et al., 2022; Parusel & Varfolomieieva, 2022). Beneficiaries of the TPD receive a residence permit for the protection period, and they are granted access to crucial areas of life such as the labor market, social welfare, housing, educational institutions for minors, or medical assistance (Carrera et al., 2023). While the initial protection period lasts one year, it can be extended in six-month periods up to a maximum duration of three years, given the original reasons behind the protection persist (Beirens et al., 2016).

Despite a significant increase in migration in 2014/15, many drastically overwhelmed asylum systems, and thousands of migrants drowning in the Mediterranean sea, the TPD was not activated (Ineli-Ciger, 2016). Instead, the EU prioritized keeping refugee-seeking migrants outside its periphery (Genç & Şirin Öner, 2019). However, even those who managed to reach the EU were confronted with the harsh reality of lengthy and untransparent asylum procedures and partly inhumane living conditions (Arsenijević et al., 2018; Eleftherakos et al., 2018; Leiler et al., 2019; Pérez-Sales et al., 2022; Thränhardt & Kober, 2016). During the application process in the Netherlands, applicants are not allowed to work, study, or even learn Dutch (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018). The combination of lengthy asylum procedures, the inability to find housing, and limited access to the labor market all results from the Dutch asylum policies (van Heelsum, 2017). Previous studies have shown how this inability to integrate into vital parts of the host-countries society and everyday life marks one of the biggest challenges



in the acculturation processes of migrants seeking asylum (Bakker et al., 2014, 2016; Kos et al., 2016; van Heelsum, 2017).

Much of the literature on migratory experiences in the Netherlands focuses on Syrian migrants. Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, more than 6.7 million Syrians have been forced to leave their home country, making them the largest nationality of forced migrants worldwide (Cummings et al., 2015; UNHCR, 2021). With Syrian migrants forming the most significant proportion of all asylum seekers in the Netherlands since 2014, they hold a distinct position within the Dutch migration history (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2021). Looking at the migration experiences of Syrian Migrants in the Netherlands can serve as a broader example of how specific migrant cohorts are affected by a country's migration policies. While both Syrians and Ukrainians share a history of forced displacement, they encountered migration policies that were significantly different.

The objective of this research is to compare the migration experiences of Syrians and Ukrainians in the Netherlands and to examine the effects that the Dutch migration policies had on their sense of belonging within Dutch society. This research will review existing literature on the migratory experiences of Syrian and Ukrainian migrants in the Netherlands with a particular emphasis on the Dutch migration policies, using Yuval-Davis' three analytical levels of belonging and her approach to the politics of belonging. The relevance of this research is given by the novelty of having a group of migrants protected by the EU's temporary protection directive, which marks a first in the EU's history. While there is extensive literature on the experiences of Syrian migrants in the Netherlands in terms of homemaking and the ability to belong (Huizinga, 2022; Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018; van Heelsum, 2017; van Liempt & Bygnes, 2022; van Liempt & Miellet, 2021), there is no research examining the effect that the activation of the TPD had on beneficiary, and non-beneficiary migrant groups in the Netherlands. Moreover, there is no research yet investigating the resettlement process of Ukrainian migrants in the Netherlands since the outbreak of the war in 2022. While this study will contribute to the broader discussion of belonging as a migrant in the Netherlands, it will also create new ground for discussing the implications of drastically different migration policies on different migrant groups.

First, this paper will discuss the theoretical framework used for the scope of this research followed by the methodological approach, the authors' positionality, and the limitations of this research. The first chapter will then briefly examine the origins and consequences of the Syrian conflict, the Dutch asylum procedure, and common difficulties that Syrian migrants were facing during the procedure. The second chapter will elaborate on the



Russian invasion of Ukraine, the activation of the TPD and its implications in the Dutch context, and common difficulties that Ukrainian migrants were facing during their resettlement in the Netherlands. Finally, the third chapter will utilize the theoretical framework to compare the migration experiences of Syrian and Ukrainian Migrants in the Netherlands and to examine the effects that the two migration policies had on their sense of belonging. The third chapter will be followed by a conclusion with the main points of this research paper, its limitations, and suggestions for further research.

Theoretical framework

Since this research focuses on how different migration policies affect and shape migrants' sense of belonging, it is essential to differentiate between the notion of belonging and the politics of belonging. In her analytical framework of belonging, Yuval-Davis (2006) identified three core dimensions of belonging: Social locations, identifications and emotional attachment, and ethical and political values.

To what extent and to whom a person can belong is partly shaped by structural factors that Yuval-Davis describes as social locations. These factors include categories such as gender, race, nationality, age group, or profession. The combination of these categories forms an individual's positionality and puts them into a social- and economic location within society. The power relation a person finds themselves in is often fluid and contested and, therefore, dependent on the historical moment. A person's social location can also influence the process of shaping their identity/identities and forming emotional attachments.

Yuval-Davis (2006) describes identities as "[...] narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)" (p. 202). Identities can be singular or multiple, individual or collective, shift and change, and relate to the past, present, and future. They express who we are and who we ought to be. However, this process of identity formation can, in some historical contexts, also be forced upon people. In such cases, a person's identities become important parts of their social locations, and their relationship becomes more intertwined.

Finally, a person's values and beliefs are important orientation points regarding how and to whom a person belongs. Values and beliefs are heuristics that help us decide what is right or wrong, just or unjust. A person's ethical and political values define their attitudes towards certain social locations, which in turn sets their boundaries of belonging. Whether a person believes these boundaries should be drawn more inclusive or exclusively depends on their set of ethical and political values.



While the three analytical levels of belonging focus on the desire to belong and the path toward that desire, Yuval-Davis (2006) describes the politics of belonging as drawing more upon creating, shaping, and managing the boundaries of belonging according to particular goals. More specifically, the politics of belonging are concerned with setting the boundaries of the political community, differentiating between 'us' and 'them'. The politics of belonging serve as a heuristic for people to decide whether another person stands within or outside the boundaries of one's community of belonging. Depending on its character, the politics of belonging produces patterns and structures of more inclusive or exclusive character. These structures have a direct impact on individuals' possibilities to belong.

The three dimensions of belonging and the politics of belonging, as introduced by Yuval-Davis, will be used to examine two distinct, yet deeply intertwined components of this research. The politics of belonging will be used as an analytical tool to examine how the two different migration policies have set the boundaries for Syrians and Ukrainians to belong and how the Dutch society perceived them as being the other or not. The three dimensions of belonging will examine and compare how the politics of belonging shaped each dimension of belonging for Syrians and Ukrainians. Furthermore, it will emphasize the positive and negative implications that the policies had on the respective group to identify key issues.

Methodology

Initially, this paper aimed to use a qualitative research approach by conducting 10-12 in-depth interviews with Syrian and Ukrainian migrants who resettled in the Netherlands. The interviews were set to last between 60-90 minutes and the questions were aimed to understand the participants' migration/resettlement experiences in the Netherlands with a special emphasis on their sense of belonging. However, due to unexpected difficulties in terms of accessibility to the field, and a consequent lack of participants, the ethnographic approach has been abandoned. Instead, this research will analyze academic articles, secondary literature, and policy reports to better understand the resettlement experiences of Syrian and Ukrainian migrants in the Netherlands and the different migration policies they have been subject to with the general research objective remains the same. The collected data will then be analyzed by comparing how the different migration policies affected Syrian and Ukrainian migrants' sense of belonging by using Yuval-Davis' three analytical levels of belonging and the politics of belonging. Future research could take up the initial research approach to gain firsthand insights from Syrian and Ukrainian migrants and their migration experience.



Positionality

I am aware that my positionality influences the ways in which I think and the way in which I perceive my surroundings. My positionality consists of being a white male from high income country within the global north, being a student at a prestigious university pursuing my bachelor's degree and having parents of two different nationalities. I consider the latter as an important part of my identity since having families in two different countries, with two different cultures, has always played an important role in shaping my sense of belonging. Having lived in both countries, I caught myself often being torn between being either Dutch or German. It can be a discussion I force on myself, or a discussion that is forced on me by others. Thus, I am aware how it feels when one's sense of belonging is challenged and what this can result in.



Chapter 1: Migratory experiences of Syrians in the Netherlands

Introduction

With the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, many Syrians headed towards Europe seeking for safety and protection. As a result, more than one million Syrians were received by the EU during the peak of the migration influx in 2015-2016 (Safak-ayvazoglu et al., 2021). The large increase in asylum applications posed a significant burden to the Dutch asylum system resulting in major shortages in asylum seeker centers and prolonged processing times (Thränhardt & Kober, 2016). With emergency shelters becoming the norm, Syrian migrants found themselves sharing a room with up to twenty others and having to move multiple within a few months (van Heelsum, 2017). Moreover, they were often isolated in camps in the rural areas of the Netherlands, with barely any contact with the Dutch culture and society (Bakker et al., 2016). Not being allowed to work, study, or learn the Dutch language, Syrians were left in a precarious situation without much perspective. This chapter will explore the origins of the Syrian conflict, the Dutch asylum procedure, and how certain parts of the procedure posed significant barriers in the resettlement process of Syrian migrants.

The start of the Syrian conflict and the migration toward Europe

To understand why so many Syrians sought and are still seeking refuge in the Netherlands and other EU member states, it is essential to understand the origins of the Syrian uprising and its repercussions for the Syrian population. In 2011, a group of teenagers was arrested in the southern city of Dar'a because they allegedly sprayed anti-government slogans on walls (Azmeah, 2014). They were arrested and tortured by authorities, and protests of the local community demanding their release were met with violence. This sparked further protests throughout the country to which the government under Syrian president Bashar al-Assad responded with the use of live ammunition, torture, and mass arrests. The conflict escalated and led the country into a large conflict. While the arrest and torture of the teenagers might have marked a tipping point for many Syrians, tensions in Syria have been building up long before that with the country suffering from political oppression, economic inequality, and human rights abuses under the Assad regime (Veintmilla, 2016). The conflict quickly became complex and fragmented with the involvement of international powers such as the United States, Russia, and Iran, and Islamist terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. It is estimated that the conflict, which still lasts up to this day, has costed the lives of more than 300.000 people, and forced more than 6.7 million Syrians to flee to neighboring countries (OHCHR, 2022; UNHCR, 2021). Many Syrians first fled to neighboring countries of Jordan, Lebanon, or



Turkey, hoping the conflict would only be temporary (van Heelsum, 2017). However, with the conflict lasting for years and the harsh living conditions within the camps becoming unbearable, those who were desperate enough and had the financial means to pay for the trip headed towards Europe.

During the peak of the so-called 'migration crisis' between 2015-2016, more than one million Syrian migrants were received by the EU (Safak-ayvazoglu et al., 2021). Although the term 'migration crisis' has been primarily used to describe the illegal border crossings of migrants throughout Europe, it is more adequately used to describe the inability of the EU and national governments to provide humane living conditions for migrants in which they can rightfully apply for refugee status (van Heelsum, 2017). The EU saw its initial policies of maintaining and protecting its borders fail, and they were lacking both the political will and a coherent plan to develop a concept of 'burden-sharing' across its member states to take stress of national asylum systems (Genç & Şirin Öner, 2019). Before exploring common difficulties that Syrians experienced during their resettlement in the Netherlands, it is crucial to understand the Dutch asylum procedure and the special measures taken in response to the migration influx in 2015.

The Dutch asylum procedure

Between 2014-2017, around half of all migrants applying for asylum in the Netherlands were Syrian (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2021). For many displaced people, the Netherlands seemed attractive due to its allegedly fast asylum procedures (van Heelsum, 2017). However, this assumption was only partially correct. While the Dutch asylum procedure was indeed significantly more efficient in processing asylum applications after introducing a new asylum strategy in 2010, procedure durations drastically increased in 2015 (Thränhardt & Kober, 2016). While the processing of the asylum application remained short, waiting times were added, which increased from two months in the summer of 2015 to six months in November of the same year. Generally speaking, the Dutch government grants asylum to: "[...] people who would be in danger if they were to return to their own country.", with the genuine need of protection being decided through the asylum procedure (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.). The following section will examine the specific steps of the Dutch asylum procedure as described by the Dutch government in more detail.

Foreign nationals seeking asylum must first apply to the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). After identification and registration, the person applying for asylum will be relocated to a reception center. It depends on the circumstances whether a person



is placed within a regular asylum seekers center (AZC), an emergency reception, or a crisis reception. The latter two are only meant for short-term accommodation of asylum seekers in case there is a shortage of AZCs. These temporary accommodations include repurposed buildings such as multi-purpose parks or, in severe cases, sports centers. Every asylum seeker is given at least six days to recover from their journey, and they are being provided with information about the asylum procedure, help from a lawyer and a medical declaration which they can use for their asylum procedure. Afterward, the applicants will be subject to a second interview (identification and registration are to be understood as the first interview).

Within the second interview, the applicants provide reasoning for their asylum application. Applicants are asked to describe the circumstances of them leaving their home country and why they are unable to return. An interpreter is being provided by the IND. The applicant is being sent a report of the interview, which they correct and make addition to together with their lawyer. The IND then assesses the asylum application based on the applicant's 'account' and its credibility and with regards to the security situation of the applicant's country of origin. According to the Dutch government, the applicants are being told within six months whether they will be granted a residence permit. However, this process can be extended by nine months if there are too many applicants or if an application needs more time to be evaluated. The applicant has the right to appeal the decision of the IND in consultation with their lawyer. If the IND concludes that the applicant needs protection, they are granted an asylum residence permit valid for five years. This asylum residence permit provides the holder with certain rights, such as housing, but also requires them to take a civic integration examination. If an application is being denied, the applicant has the right to apply for a district court's revision of the INDs decision. During this revision period, applicants are often allowed to remain in the Netherlands. The following section will elaborate on common difficulties which many Syrian migrants experienced as a result of the Dutch asylum procedure.

The living situation

According to the Dutch government, asylum seekers are only placed in emergency shelters in response to shortages of AZCs, and even then, the stay should only be a short-term solution (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.). However, the experiences of many Syrians have shown otherwise. As a result of the significant increase in asylum applications in 2015, Dutch authorities were faced with a severe lack of AZCs to accommodate the needs of asylum applicants (Bakker et al., 2016). This shortage resulted in Syrians being placed in improvised emergency shelters such as old-school buildings, prisons, or tents (Postmes & Rolim Medeiros,



2023). Since these emergency shelters were only a temporary solution, people were forced to move multiple times within a few months (van Liempt & Bygnes, 2022). Conditions within emergency shelters and AZCs were extremely harsh, with people having to share their rooms or tents with up to twenty others and privacy being de-facto non-existent (van Heelsum, 2017). Asylum seekers were often isolated in camps located in rural areas of the Netherlands (Bakker et al., 2016). Many of these rural areas had a predominantly white population, creating a stark contrast between the inside and outside of the camps. Huizinga and van Hoven (2018) argue that the interaction between asylum applicants and the spatial context they are placed in is underemphasized by the Dutch government. Until the IND has formally granted Asylum applicants refugee status, they are not allowed to work, study, or even learn the Dutch language (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018). This inability to integrate into vital parts of the Dutch society and the Dutch culture can pose significant barriers for migrants, especially once they receive their temporary residence permit (van Liempt & Bygnes, 2022).

Status loss

Two years after arriving in the Netherlands, only 5.7% of Syrian asylum applicants have a full-time job, and 70% of Syrians who arrived in the Netherlands in 2014 still depend on social welfare in 2018 (Postmes & Rolim Medeiros, 2023). These numbers appear counter-intuitive when taking into consideration that 92% of Syrian migrants in the Netherlands received education prior to coming to the Netherlands, with 31% having attended university (Dagevos et al., 2018). While this relatively low engagement with the labor market is partially a result of being isolated in camps from Dutch society and limited Dutch language proficiency, it also a consequence of the Netherlands not accrediting prior job and educational experiences (Dagevos et al., 2018; van Heelsum, 2017). In their study on labor integration of Syrian migrants with a medical degree in the Netherlands, Postmes & Rolim Medeiros (2023) found that besides losing their social network, social status, and many possessions, ‘losing’ their profession and being unemployed was one of the main burdens in their resettlement process. Next to a steady income, some Syrians stated that it is also a part of their identity which is being taken away from them.

Discrimination and depiction in the media

Syrians have been subject to discrimination from the moment they arrived in Europe (de Graaff et al., 2020; van Liempt & Miellet, 2021). With the beginning of the migration flow in 2015, society was split between political paradigms of inclusion and exclusion (Albada et al.,



2021). Europe's political landscape shifted towards the right, with right-wing populist parties gaining much political support for their anti-immigration stances, with the Netherlands being no exception (Witteveen, 2017). Parties such as the Party for Freedom (PVV) or the Forum for Democracy (FvD) continuously attacked Syrians and other migrant groups using dehumanizing and highly discriminatory rhetoric (Smets, 2020). Part of the dehumanizing language consisted of xenophobic terminology and exaggerated metaphors such as 'migrant wave' or 'refugee floods', which imply a strong negative connotation (Benert & Beier, 2016). Additionally, parts of the media depicted Syrians in a way that partly depleted them of their individual story and judged them based on their physical appearance in the Netherlands, which led to harmful generalization and discrimination (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017). The continuous use of anti-immigrant rhetoric in politics and the negative depiction in media resulted in more people perceiving migrants as a burden and threat (Esses et al., 2017). Politics and media generalizing Syrians and other migrants into one undifferentiated mass of people and depriving them of their individuality can have severe consequences in terms of creating a feeling of being a second-class citizen with no chance of belonging to the general society solely based on their appearance, origin, and migration history (Arsenijević et al., 2018; Witteveen, 2017).

Conclusion

Since their forced displacement, Syrians have faced numerous barriers to their resettlement in the EU and the Netherlands. After undergoing the daunting and life-threatening journey towards Europe, Syrians were placed in severely overcrowded emergency shelter without any privacy. Until being granted refugee status by the IND, Syrians are isolated from the Dutch language and society and disallowed to work or study. Since Syrians are not being accredited any prior working experience or educational degree in the Netherlands, their status loss went beyond the materialistic and social level. Additionally, Syrians have been subject to discrimination and generalization fuelled by politics and media. The combination of resettlement barriers, the long waiting times in camps and the feeling of being a second-class citizen can have severe implications on the sense of belonging of Syrian migrants in the Netherlands.



Chapter 2: Migratory experiences of Ukrainians in the Netherlands

Introduction

With the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU saw itself confronted with a large flow of displaced Ukrainians (Parusel & Varfolomieieva, 2022). Many member states saw themselves reminded of the problems they faced during the 2015/2016 migrant flows regarding incapable infrastructure and facilities (De Coninck, 2022). In an unprecedented move, the EU Council unanimously voted to activate the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) (Kortukova et al., 2022). The TPD aims to create a unified response to a sudden 'mass influx' of displaced people by granting immediate but temporary protection and access to crucial areas of life (Beirens et al., 2016; Carrera et al., 2022). The TPD defines a minimum of standards that all member states must provide to beneficiaries, however, every member state is free to take additional measures. Other similarly sudden and large movements of displaced people did not trigger an activation of the TPD, which led critics to accuse the EU of acting on double standards (Karageorgiou & Noll, 2023). This chapter will analyze the activation of the TPD and its implications while also looking at how politics and society perceived Ukrainians and what possible difficulties Ukrainians experienced in the Netherlands during their resettlement process.

The activation of the TPD

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, The EU activated its Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) by unanimous decision on 3 March 2022, just two weeks after the outbreak of the war (Carrera et al., 2022). Originally created in 2001 in response to the 1998-99 Kosovo war, the TPD has never been activated before (Parusel & Varfolomieieva, 2022). The TPD was created to have a mechanism in place enabling a more collective and unified response among EU member states in case of large and sudden migration flows of displaced people (Vitiello, 2022). While the TPD specifies a particular set of standards that must be provided to beneficiaries, it also grants every member state the freedom to implement additional measures (Karageorgiou & Noll, 2023). The activation of the TPD has been demanded several times before, e.g., in response to conflicts in Afghanistan, Libya, or Syria (Carrera et al., 2022; Kortukova et al., 2022). While opponents were concerned that an activation might trigger a 'pull factor' attracting more migrants, supporters of its activation believed the TPD could be an important step toward more humane migration policies for



displaced people (Genç & Şirin Öner, 2019; Ineli-Ciger, 2016; Parusel & Varfolomieieva, 2022). In a quest to find out why the TPD was not activated before, Ineli-Ciger (2022) identified four main conditions that have to be met for the TPD to be activated; (1) A 'sudden mass influx' of individuals needs to be imminent, (2) these individuals are third-country nationals, or stateless, (3) the amount of individuals arriving in a member state are disproportionate to its population and GDP, and (4) the member state's asylum system has become unfunctional and is unable to cope with the scale of arrivals. The exact definition of 'mass influx' is hereby not specified.

As part of a 'burden sharing' approach, the TPD includes a relocation scheme that enables the transfer of beneficiaries between member states, maintaining their residence permit and the rights included if consenting to the relocation (Beirens et al., 2016). The activation of the TPD in 2022 also resulted as a lesson from past experiences in which less collective approaches of the EU to larger flows of displaced people have caused many national asylum systems (e.g. in Italy or Greece) to collapse (Den Heijer et al., 2016; Lavenex, 2018). Therefore, the TPD is also intended to avoid lengthy bureaucratic recognition processes as it was with many asylum systems (De Coninck, 2022). Beneficiaries are granted a one-year residence permit, which can be extended by six-months up to a maximum duration of three years, given the reason of protection persists (Vitiello, 2022). Along with a residence permit, beneficiaries are also allowed access to the labor market, housing and adequate accommodation, social welfare, education for minors, and the right to family reunification (Carrera et al., 2022; Ineli-Ciger, 2016). Additionally, beneficiaries are given access to integrative measures, such as help with recognizing and validating prior skills and qualifications (Ineli-Ciger, 2022). Beneficiaries do not have to apply for asylum as they are seen as temporarily displaced people who desire to return to their home country once the reasons for protection have been resolved (OECD, 2022). This assumption of a voluntary return is also reflected in the maximum protection period being three years.

Reception of Ukrainians in the EU

Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted a sudden, large-scale displacement of millions of Ukrainians, with the vast majority fleeing to the neighboring countries such as Poland, Romania, or Hungary (Parusel & Varfolomieieva, 2022). As of March 2023, more than four million Ukrainians were protected under the TPD (European Council, 2023). Only women and children were allowed to leave Ukraine since the declaration of martial law prohibits men between 18-60 from leaving the country (Vitiello, 2022). In general, temporary protection is



granted to Ukrainian nationals and their family members who have been displaced on or after 24 February 2022 due to the Russian invasion (European Commission, 2022). However, Carrera et al. (2022) point out that member states are not formally obliged to grant temporary protection to third-country nationals who were in Ukraine when the Russian invasion began as decided by the European Council. This leaves stateless persons, asylum seekers, and other third-country nationals, such as Students, possibly excluded from the scope of the TPD, as every member state is free to decide whether to grant them protection or not. One consequence of this protection gap was that more than 1200 international students were prevented from crossing EU borders after the invasion had started (Carrera et al., 2023).

As a result of long-term negotiations between the EU and Ukraine, Ukrainian citizens were exempted from Schengen visa requirements in 2017, allowing them Visa-free entry and stay of up to 90 days (Kortukova et al., 2022). This enabled Ukrainians to travel beyond the country of first arrival and exempted them from the requirements specified by the EU's Dublin regulation. However, even without their ability to travel visa-free, under the TPD, they have free choice of settling before a residence permit has been issued by a member state (Kienast et al., 2023). The sudden and large flow of displaced Ukrainians caught many countries by surprise. Most member states did not have the necessary infrastructure and facilities to accommodate the large number of Ukrainians (De Coninck, 2022). While patterns from 2015/2016 seemed to reappear, the term 'refugee crisis' was nowhere to be heard, despite the numbers of displaced Ukrainians within the EU exceeding those in 2015/2016 (Näre et al., 2022).

These are not the 'normal refugees'

While some have applauded the activation of the TPD, others have deemed the activation as an act of double standards, creating an unequal image of who counts as a displaced person and who does not (Karageorgiou & Noll, 2023). Despite similar characteristics in terms of size and how fast everything developed, Ukrainians were received and perceived significantly different than other migrant groups such as Syrians (De Coninck, 2022). Media coverage and political statements portrayed Ukrainians as being equal to oneself rather than being the other. Bulgarian Prime minister Kiril Petkov stated for instance that 'These [Ukrainians] are not the refugees we are used to... these people are Europeans...These people are intelligent, they are educated people.... This is not the refugee wave we have been used to ...there is not a single European country now which is afraid of the current wave of refugees.' (Carrera et al., 2023). Politicians rallying to help Ukrainians because they are European



Christians too, and nothing like the 'other' refugees quickly became a commonality in European politics (Skordas, 2023). This rhetoric of Ukrainians being no 'ordinary refugees' spread across society and reflected in people's opinions. Dražanová & Geddes (2023) investigated the public attitude towards welcoming Ukrainian migrants in comparison to receiving Syrian migrants in eight key hosting states. While the vast majority of respondents supported allowing at least a few Ukrainians, 60-80% even supported allowing some or many (Dražanová & Geddes, 2023). At the same time, respondents were significantly less likely to support allowing Syrians into their country, highlighting a significant difference in the attitude towards the two migrant groups.

Ukrainians in the Netherlands

As of March 2023, The Netherlands granted protection to over 112.000 Ukrainians (European Council, 2023). As the first step of the temporary protection procedure, Ukrainians must register at a local Dutch municipality (Immigration and Naturalisation Service, 2023). Once they have successfully registered, they are granted basic rights to accommodation, education, and healthcare. The second step requires Ukrainians to sign an application form at the IND, which will evaluate whether the applicant has a right to temporary protection. Upon being granted temporary protection, Ukrainians receive proof of their right to work and live in the Netherlands. Individuals protected by the TPD and residing in the Netherlands have no right to apply for asylum. However, in case a beneficiary exceeds the three-year protection period and then still resides in the Netherlands, an asylum application can be started. While the Netherlands does not grant temporary protection to all third nationals in Ukraine, they do consider refugees whom Ukraine recognized before 23 February 2022 as eligible beneficiaries of the TPD (Bakhtina, 2022).

Given how recent the displacement of Ukrainians is, studies examining the TPD's effect on their resettlement experience in the Netherlands are scarce. Bakhtina (2022) conducted a small-scale study (n=60) investigating the opinions of displaced Ukrainians on the TPD and the procedure in the Netherlands. She found that almost 50% of beneficiaries were satisfied with the temporary protection procedure. However, at the same time, more than 70% indicated feeling as if they were not provided enough information by the Dutch authorities about their rights. She also pointed out how Ukrainians are experiencing multiple difficulties in their resettlement process. Frequently named issues regarded accommodation, lack of clarity, finding a job, or language barriers. While more private housing opportunities for Ukrainians would take stress off reception centers, the Netherlands is suffering from a severe housing



shortage for both displaced and non-displaced people (Jansen, 2023). The language barrier and finding a job were mentioned as intertwined struggles since many jobs in the Netherlands require Dutch language proficiency (Bakthina, 2022). Out of the 35 thousand displaced Ukrainians aged 15-64 residing in the Netherlands, almost half (46%) had a full-time job (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2023). Besides, the uncertainty of not knowing whether they will receive refugee status only until the end of the protection period is one of the main concerns for many Ukrainians. In addition to the specific geographical hurdles, Ukrainians experience post-migration stressors such as status loss which significantly affect their resettlement process (Buchcik et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The activation of the TPD marked a first in the EU's migration history. Setting a minimum standard of what must be provided to beneficiaries, the activation of the TPD aimed at avoiding lengthy and bureaucratic processing of displaced people. While its activation sparked support by some, others criticized the EU's double standard of benefiting some groups of displaced people more than others. This narrative of double standard was further supported by media and politicians depicting Ukrainians as being not like 'those other refugees'. This narrative spread across the broader population leading to greater levels of solidarity towards Ukrainians than to other migrant groups like Syrians. Nevertheless, Ukrainian migrants are experiencing significant barriers in their resettlement process. In the Netherlands, for instance, Ukrainians report having troubles with different matters, such as uncertainty about their ability to remain in the Netherlands when the maximum protection period of three years has been exceeded. However, despite experiencing several hurdles, Ukrainians are generally content with the temporary protection procedure. The following chapter will utilize the theoretical framework of belonging and the politics of belonging to examine how the migration legislation shaped the sense of belonging of Syrian and Ukrainian migrants in the Netherlands.



Chapter 3: Comparison of migratory experiences

Introduction

To belong is one of the fundamental needs of human life and a key determinant of mental health and well-being (Kuurne & Vieno, 2022). Displaced people face specific barriers in their efforts to belong in their host country (Shannon et al., 2015). Some of the key mental health and well-being stressors for displaced people can be understood as both determinants and outcomes of their ability to establish a sense of belonging. Factors leading to these stressors include accessibility of private housing, employment, education, or social networks (Bakker et al., 2016). Until being granted refugee status, Syrians found themselves being prohibited from accessing housing, employment, education and isolated from the Dutch culture. This put them at risk for resettlement, acculturation, and isolation stress and consequently affected their ability to belong in the Netherlands. Ukrainians do not experience these stressors to the same extent since they have almost immediate access to crucial areas of life upon arriving in the Netherlands. Due to the different migration policies, Syrians and Ukrainians do not experience the same stressors and, hence, have different possibilities in terms of developing a sense of belonging in the Netherlands. This chapter examines the different migration stressors that Syrians and Ukrainians experienced and how these have affected their ability to belong to the Dutch society.

The Importance of Belonging

To belong is one of the most basic desires of humankind (Kuurne & Vieno, 2022). Belonging depends on various factors, some within and some outside one's reach. To belong is a question of being emotionally attached and feeling safe and at home. It is a dynamic process that can be both an act of self-identification or identification by others (Yuval-Davis, 2006). While displaced people might flee for various reasons, they all share a past of forced displacement and a future of efforts to belong (Papadopoulos, 2002). Unlike most migrants, displaced people face many unique challenges and difficulties in their resettlement process, especially if the host country and culture are significantly different from their own (Hollifield et al., 2002; Shannon et al., 2015). Feeling as if one does not belong can severely affect mental health and well-being.

Ellis et al. (2012) have identified four core mental health stressors for displaced people: Traumatic stress, Resettlement stress, Acculturation stress, and isolation stress. Resettlement



stress refers to the stress when resettling in a new country and trying to start a new life. Factors such as financial issues, difficulties finding a new job, and adequate housing significantly influence the level of resettlement stress displaced people might experience. Acculturation stress focuses more on difficulties when adapting to the host country's culture and values. Many displaced people experience acculturation stress due to cultural misunderstandings or problems fitting in. Isolation stress is closely related to acculturation stress and can, to some extent, be understood as a consequence of some of its aspects. Isolation stress refers to the experiences many displaced people go through being a marginalized minority within their host country. They often face racism and discrimination and feel left out because they are being seen as the 'other'. This feeling, combined with the loss of their social network, is likely to lead to a feeling of isolation and loneliness. All three stressors can be a determinant, or outcome of a person's social- and economic locations, their identities, or values, and beliefs, especially if they are forced upon people. Therefore, these three stressors are closely related to the three analytical levels of belonging, as proposed by Yuval-Davis. The following sections will examine which of these stressors Syrians and Ukrainians experience due to the Dutch migration policies and how these affect their sense of belonging.

Access to crucial areas of life

One of the key differences in the migratory experiences of Ukrainian and Syrian migrants in the Netherlands is the access to private housing, employment, and the Dutch society. Housing is a crucial factor for displaced people, which significantly influences the extent to which they experience resettlement stress (Ellis et al., 2012; Ziersch et al., 2017). Along with housing, employment and social network are key social determinants of health and well-being (Bakker et al., 2016). For migrants, housing can pave and determine how successful their integration can be (Ager & Strang, 2008). Housing provides a place to feel at home and safe, a place of stability, and a place of belonging (Ziersch & Due, 2018). Upon arrival in the Netherlands, Syrians were denied access to private housing. Instead, Syrians were forced to stay in overcrowded emergency shelters and AZCs until being granted refugee status (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018). Their 'home' lacked any kind of privacy, and given how Syrians were often forced to move, stability was lacking too (van Heelsum, 2017). While waiting to be granted refugee status, Syrians were isolated in camps in the rural areas of the Netherlands (Bakker et al., 2016). Besides being geographically isolated, Syrians were prohibited from working, studying, or learning Dutch (van Heelsum, 2017). The combination of being isolated



from the Dutch culture, not having a place of privacy and safety, and being disallowed to work and study are all significant barriers in the migration experience of Syrians in the Netherlands.

As beneficiaries of the TPD, Ukrainians do not face the same issues as Syrians in terms of housing, isolation from the Dutch society, or the right to work (Parusel & Varfolomieieva, 2022). Ukrainians do not have to undergo the bureaucratic process of applying for asylum and, therefore, are being granted access to private housing much quicker than Syrians. This results in Ukrainian and Syrian migrants having two significantly different starting points in the Netherlands. These two different starting points can significantly influence their sense of belonging in terms of the social- and economic locations they are put into and the identity that is being formed as a result. They also hold different positionalities within the Netherlands, which are partly based on their different statuses and the rights they imply.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, social and economic locations define the extent to which a person can belong in a certain context based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, or profession (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Combined, these factors create a person's positionality, which puts them into a specific social and economic location within society. While both Syrians and Ukrainians have been displaced from their country of origin and sought refuge in the Netherlands, their social and economic locations are very different from each other. The inability to work and study hinders Syrians from establishing a sense of belonging based on the social and economic location that is forced upon them by the Dutch migration policies. Not being able to study and work if they desire puts Syrians in a fundamentally different position from the rest of the Dutch population. Ukrainians do not experience this barrier to an equal extent, as they are free to look for employment after briefly waiting to be granted temporary protection. This discrepancy also becomes evident when comparing the employment rates of Syrians and Ukrainians in the Netherlands. Two years after arriving in the Netherlands, only 5.7% of Syrians had a full-time job (Postmes & Rolim Medeiros, 2023), compared to around 46% of Ukrainians being employed in a full-time job after only one year (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2023). The Dutch migration policies forcing Syrians to be without private housing, work, or a study place, also force particular identities upon them.

As another analytical level of belonging, Yuval-Davis (2006) describes identities as narratives that people tell themselves and others about who they are and who they are not. While these narratives can be constructed by oneself, they can also be forced upon people, as it is the case with Syrians. Involuntarily, Syrians have gone from being a worker, student, or house owner/renter to being unemployed, excluded from academia, and dependent on governmental accommodation. Moreover, they have been given the feeling of being different



from the Dutch society through their isolation in camps. Even once Syrians have been given refugee status, the inability to integrate into vital parts of the Dutch society and the social- and economic locations and identities that have been forced upon them will pose as significant barriers in their further acculturation and resettlement process (van Liempt & Bygnes, 2022).

Since Ukrainians receive access to crucial areas of life, such as the labor market, education, or suitable housing, without having to await refugee status, they do not experience the barriers that Syrians face, at least not to the same extent. While Ukrainians also experience difficulties in terms of finding housing or employment (Bakthina, 2022), they are allowed to look for it in the first place. Additionally, Ukrainians are not being isolated from the rest of the Dutch society against their will and they are not necessarily considered as outsiders based on their physical appearance. As a result, Ukrainians are not forced into social- and economic locations they cannot escape independently. Consequently, Ukrainians are more independent in constructing their identities according to their desire, which means they enjoy greater freedom in establishing their sense of belonging in the Netherlands.

Media representation and Societal Boundaries

The decision to not activate the TPD in 2015/2016 but activating it in 2022 had significant implications on the migratory experiences of Syrians and Ukrainians in the Netherlands and how society perceived them. From the moment of arrival, Syrians in the Netherlands had to endure discrimination from politics, media, and society (de Graaff et al., 2020; van Liempt & Mielle, 2021). With the whole EU being split between politics of inclusion or exclusion, the political right with its anti-immigrant rhetoric gained popularity (Albada et al., 2021; Witteveen, 2017). In the Netherlands, dehumanizing language was used to describe Syrians and other migrants from the global South (Smets, 2020). In combination with a negative and generalized depiction in media, Syrians were increasingly perceived as a burden and threat by parts of the Dutch society (Esses et al., 2017). Ukrainians were received with great solidarity in many European countries (Bang Carlsen et al., 2022; Bang Carlsen & Toubøl, 2023). In less than two weeks, the EU decided that displaced Ukrainians should be protected under the TPD (Vitiello, 2022). Despite similar patterns as in 2015/2016, the term 'refugee crisis' has never been commonly used to describe the arrival of displaced Ukrainians in the EU (Näre et al., 2022). In politics and media, Ukrainians were depicted as being no different from any other 'Christian Europeans' (Carrera et al., 2023). The perception of Ukrainians being no 'ordinary refugees' spread across society and framed their attitude towards them accordingly (Dražanová & Geddes, 2023).



How Syrians and Ukrainians were depicted by parts of the media and some politicians in the Netherlands created boundaries of belonging as described by the politics of belonging by Yuval-Davis (2006). The use of dehumanizing and anti-immigrant rhetoric when talking about Syrian migrants suggests that its recipients were supposed to develop values and beliefs that Syrians are outside of one's own community of belonging. To be considered an outsider based on social locations, such as nationality or being displaced, has significant implications to what extent Syrians can establish a sense of belonging in the Netherlands. In addition to being physically isolated in camps, this left Syrians also isolated from the possibility of eventually becoming a part of the Dutch society in the eyes of some. This inability to become part of the Dutch society can also have negative implications on the identity-forming process of Syrians since they might see themselves as different, or othered to Dutch people. Ukrainians are partially perceived as sharing the same values and beliefs as other Europeans or Dutch people, leading some people to set the boundaries of belonging differently than for Syrians. Furthermore, Ukrainians have not been subject to discrimination as Syrians have. While Ukrainians might face some forms of discrimination, they have been predominantly welcomed with significant levels of solidarity on a political and societal level. This puts Ukrainians into social locations that provide them with significantly different possibilities in terms of belonging to the Dutch society.

Conclusion

The different migration policies that Syrians and Ukrainians were subject to, influenced the type of migration stress they experienced and consequently affected their ability to belong to the Dutch society. Syrians experienced a range of stressors due to the restricted access to crucial areas of life. Being prohibited from accessing private housing, full-time employment, or education, Syrians were forced into social and economic locations significantly different from the rest of the Dutch society. Additionally, Syrians were faced with discrimination and marginalization, which created boundaries of exclusion and forced identities upon them, placing them outside the Dutch community of belonging. On the other hand, Ukrainians could access crucial areas of life almost instantly after arriving in the Netherlands. Moreover, they were seen as indifferent by large parts of society and, hence, were not considered as being like other displaced people. Therefore, Ukrainians were not forced into social and economic locations and identities in the way that Syrians were. As a result, Ukrainians have significantly different possibilities in terms of becoming part of the Dutch community of belonging.



Conclusion

This paper aimed at examining the migratory experiences of Syrians and Ukrainians in the Netherlands, the underlying migration policies both migrant groups were subject to, and how these migration policies have affected their ability to create a sense of belonging in the Dutch society. The first chapter focused on the migratory experiences of Syrian migrants in the Netherlands. The displacement of Syrians in 2015/2016 and the consequent migration toward Europe caused many European asylum systems to collapse due to under preparedness. The EU was lacking a collective response to accommodate the needs of Syrians in that they could rightfully apply for asylum. While some demanded the activation of the TPD, the EU chose not to. Consequently, Syrians were confronted with partly inhumane living conditions and lengthy and untransparent asylum procedures. Until being granted refugee status, Syrians were prohibited from accessing crucial areas of life such as housing, employment, or education, causing extensive loss of pre-migration status. Moreover, Syrians were excluded from engaging with the Dutch society by being isolated in camps located in the rural areas of the Netherlands and by being prohibited to learn the Dutch language. Additionally, Syrians faced discrimination and marginalization by parts of the Dutch media and politics, leading to society perceiving Syrians increasingly as a burden and threat.

The second chapter focused on Ukrainian migrants in the Netherlands and the implications that the activation of the TPD had on their migration experience. As a result of the Russian invasion in 2022, the EU decided that activating the TPD is necessary to take stress of national asylum systems of member states. This enabled Ukrainians to avoid the bureaucratic process of having to apply for asylum and receive access to critical areas of life almost immediately. Ukrainians experienced significant levels of solidarity upon arriving in Europe. Terminology and rhetoric to describe Ukrainians emphasized them being indifferent to other Europeans. Consequently, Ukrainians were able to integrate into the Dutch society more quickly and experience a more dampened loss of pre-migration status. While being generally content with the temporary protection in the Netherlands, many Ukrainians described the uncertainty of not knowing whether they will obtain refugee status once reaching the maximum duration of protection as a significant burden.

The third and final chapter compared the migratory experiences of Syrians and Ukrainians in the Netherlands and how specific stressors influenced their ability to belong to the Dutch society according to the three analytical levels of belonging and the politics of belonging by Yuval-Davis. Belonging is of great importance for the mental health and well-being of people, and striving to belong is part of human nature. Migrants experience specific



stressors when resettling into a different culture, which, in turn, influence their ability to create a sense of belonging. Syrian migrants encountered several burdens resulting from the Dutch migration policies and the depiction in parts of politics and media. Consequently, social- and economic locations and identities were forced upon them, creating significant differences between them and most of the Dutch population. Ukrainians did not experience these stressors to the same extent due to having almost immediate access to crucial areas of life and being depicted as indifferent by politics and media. Consequently, Syrians and Ukrainians are given different possibilities in terms of being able to become a part of the Dutch community of belonging.

The objective of this research was to compare the migration experiences of Syrians and Ukrainians in the Netherlands and to examine the effects that the Dutch migration policies had on their sense of belonging within Dutch society. Despite striking commonalities in terms of scale and suddenness, Syrians and Ukrainians were subject to migration policies that are significantly different from each other. Fundamental aspects of these differences stem from the rights granted to Syrians and Ukrainians, and how they are depicted in politics and media. Denying Syrians access to crucial areas of life, isolating them from the Dutch society, and portraying them as burden and threat forces them into social- and economic locations and identities that negatively affect their ability to create a sense of belonging to the Dutch society. The activation of the TPD enabled Ukrainians to avoid experiencing the same barriers and stressors that Syrians were experiencing. The combination of having access to crucial areas of life and being perceived as mostly similar by the Dutch society lead to a reduced loss of pre-migration status. As a result, Ukrainians were not excluded from the Dutch community of belonging the same way Syrians were.

Several limitations influenced the results of this research. To begin with, the original study approach had to be abandoned due to limited access to the field. While the research objective remained the same, a literature review produces results that can vary significantly from ethnographic research. Furthermore, literature examining the migration experiences of Syrians and Ukrainians in the Netherlands might be too scarce to form generalized conclusions. Lastly, analyzing existing literature through the utilization of a theoretical framework produces results that are purely theoretical and suggestive rather than being factual and confirmed by those affected. Future research could utilize this research's objective following a more ethnographic approach to obtain first-hand experiences of Syrians and Ukrainians, focusing more on how they perceive the barriers and stressors resulting from the migration policies.



Additionally, this research could be executed in other European countries to identify potential commonalities in the migration experiences of Syrians and Ukrainians across the EU.



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