Romania: Histories of Refugee Reception

Fondation **Pierre du Bois**
pour l'histoire du temps présent

Dr. Anca Cretu*

Romania: Histories of Refugee Reception[i]

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, causing a full-blown refugee crisis in east-central Europe. Ukrainian refugees, mostly women and children, quickly ran to the borders of Ukraine's neighbors. Romania has, since then, represented one of the main countries of relatively permanent refuge or transition for Ukraine's displaced. In mid-June 2022, the UNHCR recorded approximately 90,000 individual refugees registered in Romania, 659,000 border crossings from Ukraine, and almost 458,000 from the common neighbor, Republic of Moldova.[ii] Unlike other parts of Europe, Romania's recent history has seen little mobility and movement of refugees at and within its borders. On the contrary, this has long been considered a country of exit. To be sure, the exodus of the last three decades has not been the result of war or natural disasters, but rather a form of primarily economically-driven mass migration. However, Ukraine's refugee crisis placed Romania at the heart of this new displacement moment in European history, as this country's leaders and population have had to contend with a new status on an international stage: from a country of flight to a country of entry.

Prehistories

Romania has had a long history of refugee mobility and reception and three episodes of displacement management in this country show the different motivations and the fluid approaches to assistance. A significant episode in the string of histories of displacement coincided with the creation of modern Romania, after the First World War. Then, once again, Ukrainians were forced to flee violence and destruction. Between 1918 and 1921, a series of violent pogroms against Ukrainian Jews generated a full-blown humanitarian crisis. Many of these Ukrainian Jews quickly became refugees as they fled into Romania, marking one of the most significant episodes of mass displacement in this country. This moment of refugee influx came at a time when European empires collapsed after the end of the First World War, with various states of east-central Europe emerging or expanding geographically. Romania's territory and population numbers grew as a result of the unification of the pre-1918 Old Kingdom of Romania with the provinces of Transylvania (in the West), Bukovina (in the North), and Bessarabia (in the East). In this context, the next two decades saw Romanian politicians, policymakers, and a burgeoning form of civil society create avenues to reconstruct and consolidate this geographically, politically, socially, and economically-transformed state.

Ukrainian Jewish refugees arrived in Romania at an arguably volatile moment. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that their reception was relatively erratic. The Romanian government's response was tentative at best. For one, state leaders of the time often cast doubt on these refugees as they treated them as foreign outsiders, coming into Romania at a time of an ambitious project of nationalization of an ethnically diverse population. Furthermore, these were Jews, arriving in a country where laws that gradually excluded this group from public life had been ratified long before the start of the First World War. In this context, grassroots Jewish associations, alongside international organizations (e.g. American-Jewish Joint Distribution Committee), created the core of humanitarian assistance for Ukrainian Jewish refugees in Romania in the early 1920s. On its side, the government did not restrict this humanitarian work, but it remained largely hands-off, as leaders of the time considered these refugees as potentially damaging individuals to their long-sought ambitions of state building.[iii]

The arrival of Ukrainian Jews and the assistance dynamics that followed in Romania saw the varied mobilization of resources to relieve these refugees. This episode also gave the tone of the multiple perceptions on how refugees could threaten or eventually support structures of governance. Eventually, the question marks regarding the "usefulness" or the "danger" of the refugee defined other episodes of displacement in the decades that followed.

A second significant episode of refuge in Romania was in 1939. Then, Polish refugees fled the Soviet invasion in the early days of the Second World War. Over 25,000 civilians reportedly arrived in Romania in September 1939, many of whom considered this flight to be one of transition to the West. Romania started the Second World War in alliance with Germany and Italy. Thus, the government quickly came to the aid of these victims of Soviet belligerence. Funds for immediate relief via food, clothing, or medical care for refugees, as well as schooling for displaced children were some of the ways that government-backed committees for Polish refugee relief responded through. At the same time, once again, foreign humanitarians (particularly coming from the United States) attempted to transfer material and bureaucratic aid for these refugees based in Romania. The narrative of Romanian reception of Polish refugees is partially one of openness and proactive assistance through governmental and non-governmental channels. However, the story of Romania's reception of Polish refugees is not one of mere benevolence. As foreign individuals, many were deemed spies or propagandists of communism, with the Romanian government organizing internment camps for alleged enemies of the state among these refugees. In the end, from the vantage point of Romania's state leadership in this case, the refugee was both a vulnerable ally to aid and a potential enemy to suppress.[iv]

A rather more straightforward and more politically friendly reception of refugees came during the Cold War. For example, Greek refugees fleeing the persecution that followed the Greek Civil War in the 1950s or Chileans running from the military dictatorship installed between 1973-1990 arrived in Romania at various moments. Then, the Romanian government responded to the Greek War and the Chilean coup with a declared openness to take on refugees from these respective countries.[v] In these cases, the state took the reins of management of refugees' assistance, welfare, and their overall (attempted)integration. And unlike previous cases of tried internationalization of refugee assistance within Romania's borders, western forms of humanitarian work were virtually non-existent in the bipolar political frame of the time. Once again, at first glance, these refugees had arrived in a country that opened possibilities and ensured survival in the fraught context of the Cold War. Decades later, the post-1989 Romanian media has preferred a representation of these refugee moments under socialism through the lens of goodwill and success. In my view, much remains to be written on the realities of these refugees and their rapport with Romanian governments, their reception in the early days of the installed communist regime and its overall transformations by the 1970s. Was the friendly reception of these displaced people legitimizing to the state or were they ever perceived as an underlying disruptor to the regime in the same vein as Ukrainian Jews or Polish refugees? Was Romania's proposed refuge inclusive or exclusive? Still, beyond questions that undoubtedly need further scholarly attention, the Cold War, and the episodes of displacement in this period, framed reception to refugees through the lens of their status as direct *political* victims, rather than as sufferers of war-produced flotsam.
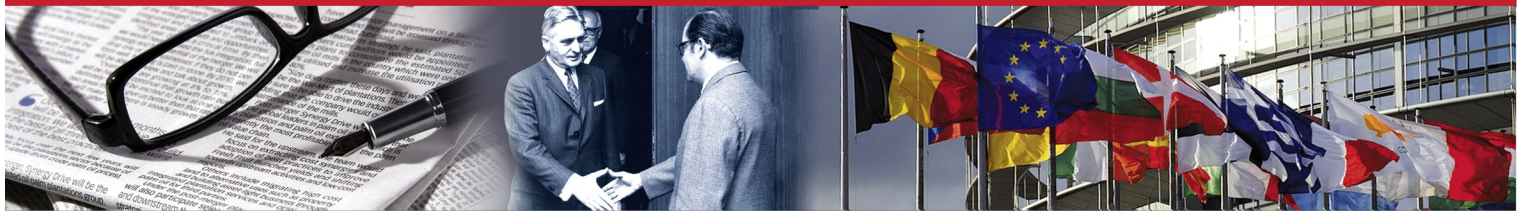
Ukraine's Refugees: Continuities and Boundaries

The Ukrainian refugee crisis of 2022 is, perhaps, the most significant one in simple numerical terms since 1989 until present. The initial public response to the influx of refugees has been, by many accounts, remarkable. Prime Minister Nicolae Ciuca proudly declared that essentially "Romania shined" in its response. Individuals, border communities, grassroots organizations, local administrators, or public figures mobilized resources to relieve these refugees. This meant driving refugees across the country, donating food, medicine, or clothing, opening apartments, and helping their accommodation needs. Moreover, local and national aid institutions arguably became the main channels that international humanitarian agencies and organizations functioned through in this country. The leitmotif of "solidarity" took center stage as fundraising events, small or big, took place all over the country. While events are unfolding at the time of this essay and the refugee wave has somewhat subsided in a context of Russian withdrawal primarily to Ukraine's eastern regions, Romania remains one of the important countries of refuge, either on a temporary or a permanent basis. In this context, I suggest that the overarching response to this influx mirrored previous trends in how to assist refugees and what this category of people represents in relation to the Romanian state and society.

Generally, Romanian openness for Ukraine's refugees should be placed in multiple historical, social, or political contexts. While responses to movement across borders remains fluid, there is no singular explanation to discursive and practical solidarity performed in the first few months since the start of the war in February 2022. In this sense, I argue that Romanian reception of Ukrainian refugees can be understood through three (yet non-exhaustive) intertwining lenses: first, proximity between the two countries, both historically and geographically, drove the organic response to the mass displacement that resulted in the first few days of the Russian invasion. Underlying ideas of brotherhood and sisterhood with a shared imperial history in the eastern part of Europe generated a wave of empathy, driving the often-informal responses to this refugee crisis.

Second, the racial and religious proximity has, thus far, played a fundamental role. Ukrainians are white and (mostly Orthodox) Christian, seemingly holding common "values" with Romanian society by and large. Journalists, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, or political scientists have spent a lot of ink highlighting the double-standards in European refugee reception when compared to the cases of the Syrian or Libyan displaced.[vi] Indeed, the long-headlining Syrian refugee crisis of 2015 has become a standard point of comparison. This 2015 moment saw various European governments contain mobility and place refugees in makeshift, restrictive, and often carceral refugee camps. In the process, non-governmental and international organizations and agencies represented the main relief avenues for these refugees, as opposed to more local responses. Certainly, Romania's reception of Syrian refugees has remained relatively subdued in a context of low influx numbers. After all, these refugees' urgency to reach western Europe has been well documented. However, on the other hand, the low support for creating refuge for Syrians in Romania has fundamentally contributed to the little to no formal opening of relief and overall reception. In March 2022, a Romanian sociological study claimed that 56% of the population remains very open to assisting Ukrainian refugees. By comparison, in September 2015, over 70% of the population was against reception of Syrian refugees.[vii] In this sense, Romania follows European trends of racially charged double standards in refugee reception.

Third, the perception of Ukrainian refugees as both war and political victims created a seemingly ideal drive for assistance in Romania. The "prehistories" of displacement management described above saw shifts and turns regarding of how state leaders perceived refugees, either as victims or as potential dangers in various moments of war and violence. The early reactions to Ukraine's refugees suggested that, in this case, victimhood and suffering caused by a violence, war, and an ostensible common enemy created what we can call a perfect *relief storm*.
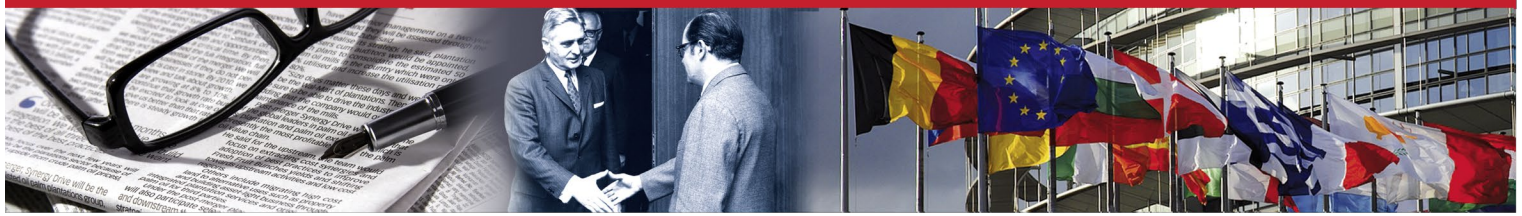
So far, by many accounts, Romania has offered forms of refuge for Ukraine's displaced people. However, it remains unclear whether officials' practical openness to assist refugees' plight and ordinary people's sentiments of empathy could remain constant as the war becomes protracted. A very recent study has showed that there is strong support for Ukraine's displaced people across different European countries.[viii] In the case of Romania, the numbers remained positive, with more than half of the respondents supporting the in-country relief of Ukraine's refugees. However, this study also alerts of an underlying fragility of these sentiments. For instance, 49.2% of interviewed Romanians claimed that, in fact, their country has "no duty" to Ukrainian refugees and Ukraine in general. While the concept of "duty" is (or should be) highly nuanced, in my view, the cited percentage hints at a potential and gradual withdrawal of refugee support coming from the general population, as well as from state and non-state institutions. In a context of unstable economy and high inflation rates, perceptions of competition for resources between locals and refugees are highly probable. Bureaucratic and material infrastructure capacity for local NGOs and local administrators to respond to needs of refugees could dwindle once the organic and emotional response to the crisis subsides and the financial support wanes. Ultimately, it is plausible that the reins of assistance will be eventually taken by the international community.[ix]

In many ways, the current moment of Ukrainian mass displacement highlights a few continuities in Romania's histories of *refuge*-making. For example, from a practical standpoint, there is the interlocking of grassroots, informal and formal, local and state-driven responses (each at various degrees of intensity in different contexts). Moreover, there is the in-and-out presence of international actors of relief, such as the UNHCR or UNICEF. These continuities are also about perceptions of what the refugee is or could be in various political or economic circumstances in Romania. On one hand, in Romania's longer history of refugee reception, the displaced people arriving in the country have been victims of war and/or of political repression. But at the same time, they have also represented potential dangers in frail economies and in feeble political contexts. The story regarding Ukraine's refugees and their fate in Romania is still on-going. However, going forward, it is worth reflecting on recurrent histories of often changing and seemingly brittle solidarity for forcefully displaced people in this country of refuge.

Dr. Anca Cretu

* Research Associate at the European Research Council within the ERC Consolidator Grant project "Unlikely Refuge? Refugees and citizens in East-Central Europe in 20th century."
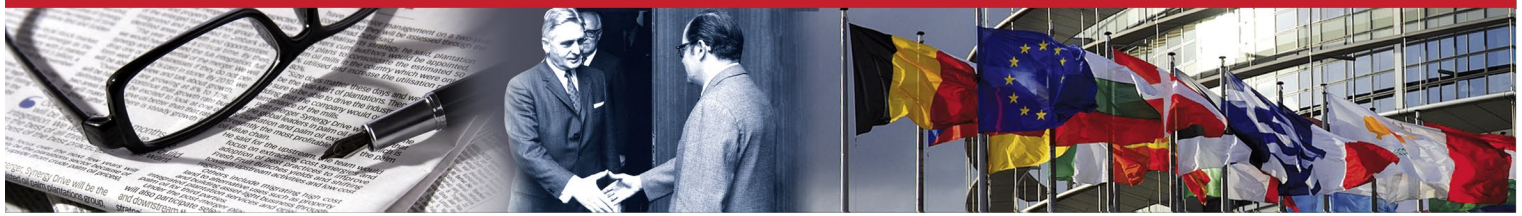
[i] Some of the ideas for this essay stem from conversations and the work within the ERC Consolidator Grant "Unlikely Refuge? Refugees and Citizens in East-Central Europe during the Twentieth Century," hosted by Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic.

[ii] The numbers are continuously updated. See "Ukraine Refugee Situation: Romania," *UNHCR*, June 2022. Accessed at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location/10782

[iii] Doina Anca Cretu, " "For the Sake of an Ideal:" Romanian Nation-Building and American Foreign Assistance (1917-1940)," (unpublished dissertation, The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland, 2018), 201-214.

[iv] Anca Filipovici, "De la drama refugiatilor polonezi in cel de-al Doilea Razboi Mondial la provocarile regimului politic postbelic (1939-1952)," in *Polonezii din România: Repere Identitare,*ed. Anca Filipovici (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Institutului pentru Studierea Problemelor Minoritatilor Nationale, 2020), 177-192.

[v] Loring M. Danforth and Riki van Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War: Refugees and the Politics of Memory* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012); Gruia Badescu, "Homelands and dictators: migration, memory, and belonging between Southeastern Europe and Chile," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* (2022), 1-19.

[vi] See for example Simon Frankel Pratt and Christopher David LaRoche, "Ukraine's Refugees are Close Enough for European Solidarity," *Foreign Policy*, 29 March 2022. Accessed at https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/29/ukraine-refugees-european-solidarity-race-gender-proximity/

[vii] Data taken from Sabina Fati, "Psihologia de razboi: cum s-au schimbat românii," *Deutsche Welle* 20 May 2022. Accessed at https://www.dw.com/ro/psihologia-de-r%C4%83zboi-cum-s-au-schimbat-rom%C3%A2nii/a-61872198

[viii] See the study by Lenka Drazanova and Andrew Geddes, "Europeans welcome Ukrainian refugees but governments need to show they can manage," *Migration Policy Centre Blog*, 20 June 2022. Accessed at https://blogs.eui.eu/migrationpolicycentre/attitudes-towards-ukrainian-refugees-and-the-responses-of-european-governments/

[ix] I have argued this previously; see Doina Anca Cretu, "Ukraine's Refugees and the Muddy Waters of Aid:Some Early Thoughts," *New Fascism Syllabus Blog*, 3 April 2022. Accessed at http://newfascismsyllabus.com/contributions/ukraines-refugees-and-the-muddy-waters-of-aid-some-early-thoughts/