

## Summary: ‘Confronting Compassion Fatigue: Understanding the Arc of Public Support for Displaced Populations in Turkey, Colombia, and Europe’

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# Confronting Compassion Fatigue: Understanding the Arc of Public Support for Displaced Populations in Turkey, Colombia, and Europe

## Executive Summary

- The report tracks the lifeline of public support for refugees in Turkey, Colombia, and Europe where solidarity with newcomers bloomed at the start of the displacement, but gradually diminished over time.
- A common aspect of all three cases is that they lacked the necessary legal structures and services to manage the large-scale displacement of people, yet they responded with innovative legal instruments and provided temporary legal status and access to services.
- Positive reception of newcomers enabled novel responses by host communities that served as a blueprint to emulate for the rest of the world on how to quickly welcome large-scale humanitarian arrivals.
- The initial high levels of solidarity were predicated on several factors such as ethnic, religious, or cultural similarities, shared borders and histories, and the idea that newcomers would eventually return to their country of origin.
- However, long periods of solidarity are difficult to sustain indefinitely. Perceptions of policies favoring refugees, a sense of competition for the same resources and jobs, uncertainty about when refugees would return, and changes in demographics are seen as an existential threat to host communities, eroding public solidarity.
- Over time public support begins to fade when host communities feel that newcomers are taking more than contributing and vying for the same scarce resources or infrastructure.
- Investing in housing and employment, and transitioning from depending on private citizens to support refugees towards relying on the state once the emergency phase is over will help combat solidarity fatigue in the public.

Additionally, creating a dual intent policy that prepares refugees for potential long-term integration and the eventual return while also acknowledging the citizenry's practical concerns for welcoming refugees can help policymakers sustain solidarity and prevent public backlash.

## Three Case Studies: Perceptions of Syrians, Ukrainians, and Venezuelans

### *A. Syrians In Turkey*

- Initially public support for Syrian refugees was exceptionally high. There was a powerful discourse of 'Islamic brotherhood' and surveys showed that there was a prevalent feeling of empathy among the Turkish towards Syrians.
- However, seven years after displacement, serious anxieties emerged viewing Syrians as a threat and burden to Turkey.
- Several factors explain the change in mood.
  - Exponentially increased number of Syrians in Turkey,
  - Weakened Turkish economy,

- Sense of competing for employment and housing among the Turkish public,
- Raising questions about national identity,
- The occurrence of natural disasters,
- Large concentrated Syrian population in major cities which have become highly visible to the average Turkish citizen,
- Realization and concerns about Syrians not being guests but long-term residents,
- Concerns about border security.

### *B. Venezuelans in Colombia*

- Columbia granted millions of Venezuelans ten years of regular stay as a sign of solidarity and a practical measure to keep track of people in the country.
- Initial welcome is explained through a sense of moral obligation however pro-integration narrative was not accepted equally by all segments of the public.
- The ambitious national investment in integration was eventually met with negative public attitudes linked to a growing perception of Venezuelans as a threat to the country's security and economy.

### *C. Ukrainians in Europe*

- The Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered the largest and fastest displacement since World War II. The displacement witnessed widespread solidarity and support across European countries, as private citizens opened their homes to Ukrainian families. The discourse often distinguished between Ukrainian refugees and other refugees.
- Public support was high. However, particularly with the skyrocketing cost of living and housing prices, as the urgency phase of displacement is over, the level and length of government support for Ukrainians has been a source of controversy.

## **Waxing and Waning Public Support: Trends across Case Studies**

- The three case studies demonstrate an example of solidarity through generous public policies for the large-scale displacement of Venezuelans, Syrians, and Ukrainians.
- Identifying factors that increase public support and mitigate host communities' anxiety would allow policy makers to implement effective strategies in other situations of large-scale displacement.

### *What factors explain solidarity towards refugees?*

- Principal features driving solidarity between refugees and host populations include shared core characteristics, such as ethnic, religious, or cultural similarities. In Europe, Ukrainians' Europeanness was highlighted while the religious proximity between Turkey and Syria was a factor for support.

- Additionally, geographic proximity of shared borders and histories can be tapped to fuel solidarity. For instance, a common Ottoman past between Syria and Turkey was used to encourage solidarity.
- Pragmatism contributed to fostering a warm reception because it does not make sense to deny entry to those people who already have a right to access.
  - Ukrainians can travel to the European Union without a visa for 90 days. Providing them with a Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) is a practical response to avoid a perception of chaos at the border, since the asylum system is already overwhelmed.
- A sense of national pride, social duty, or values also nurtures solidarity. For example, Turkish hospitality and the Islamic value of compassion was used to welcome refugees.

*What factors can erode public support and cause compassion fatigue?*

- Solidarity is difficult to sustain indefinitely. Policy intervention curated exclusively for refugees fuels negative emotions in host communities because it can create negative perceptions such as refugees receiving more than native-born populations or refugees getting more than they are contributing.
- Additionally, those living near the border feel they bear a disproportionate burden because they are on the front lines dealing with a large concentration of people. The sense of unequal distribution of burden contributes to negative emotions.
- Another factor eroding public support is when host communities feel they are competing for the same scarce resources, such as housing or job opportunities. Individuals in low-income households see themselves as competing with newcomers.
- Also, Colombia and Turkey are illustrative of how solidarity weans off when there is no discernible end to the displacement, creating uncertainty about the future.
- Narratives that promote a of lack of control over migration and risks of demographic shifts in host societies contributes to a feeling of existential threat to host communities. For example, high fertility rates among refugees causes concerns about demographic change because it fuels anxieties about how that might alter the demographic, political, or religious balance in the country.

## Conclusions

- There are limits to how much a society is willing to offer and for how long. Feelings of unfairness becomes salient when refugees are perceived to be receiving more benefits, especially in border communities tasked with welcoming refugees at the first instance or during economic hardships and when resources are already stretched thin.
- Solidarity does not necessarily depend on how many people arrive, but how they are managed. Perceptions of loss of control fuels anxiety and a threat mindset even when the number of arrivals is not high. Additionally, support is predicated on the assumption that refugees will eventually return to their country of origin.

### Policy Recommendations

- Underlying the loss of public support are very practical concerns about housing shortages, job loss, or overburdened infrastructures. Investing in these areas would help avoid the source of friction between host communities and refugees.
- Governments can rely on grassroots support to temporarily help newcomers, but they should be prepared to transition into a long-term strategy under their control before continued reliance on private citizens results in fatigue.
- Politicians should strike a balance between whether to prepare for short-term measures addressing temporary displacement and a long-term integration policy if the situation becomes protracted. They can invest in dual-intent policies that prepare refugees for potential integration and an eventual return.
- Policymakers should acknowledge their citizens' concerns regarding the challenges of welcoming newcomers, but frame immigration as a positive that can benefit the whole country through concrete examples. For example, investing in renovating buildings to accommodate newcomers will increase the number of affordable housing for everyone.