

Cross-Border Movements Compared: Migration from and to Ukraine in Historical Comparison with Other Conflict-Induced Situations

Vít Novotný¹

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 created massive cross-border movements out of Ukraine and back into the country. This short piece presents a historical comparison of the Ukraine post-invasion migration with other similar situations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The comparison reveals that with more than 6 million crossings in both directions, the cross-border movements in the first 2 months of the Russian assault on Ukraine constitute probably the most intensive conflict-induced migration on record at the global scale during a two-months period.

By 24 February 2023, some 8.1 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded across Europe (including non-EU countries). Surprisingly, the EU, which has welcomed the majority of the refugees following the Russian attack, has been able to absorb such large numbers without the inflow causing a major political conflict between the member states. The European societies' sympathy for the plight of the fleeing Ukrainians has played a decisive role in this. The Ukrainian displacement shows that each immigration flow is unique and that there are instances where mass immigration does not shake the EU to the core. The unexpectedness of this influx also serves as a reminder that the EU needs to develop robust plans for migration contingencies.

Methodology

Measuring the intensity of forced flight and displacement is fraught with methodological difficulties. Data presented in this piece draw on a variety of sources, including history books. Border crossings can be counted only where border controls exist, but border controls are a function of the nation-state and thus largely an invention of the twentieth century. Until the creation of nation-states, borders between countries were porous and usually not guarded². As a result, any attempt at comparison of mass migrations is limited to twentieth and twenty-first century situations.

Statistical pictures of conflict-induced international migration do not necessarily draw on the same type of data. In some cases, a count of border crossings provides the most truthful representation of the reality. In other cases, border crossing counts are not available and one has to rely on the numbers of refugees registered in countries neighbouring conflict, censuses and other type of data.

Peaks in cross-border movements caused by conflict happen to occur roughly over two to four months following the start of the conflict. In the comparison presented here, the reference period of 2 months, i.e., approximately 9 weeks, has been selected.

¹ The India, Pakistan and Bangladesh part (1940s-1970s) of this InBrief could not have been written without a research note with detailed sources of information, kindly created for the Martens Centre by Professor Peter Gatrell. I would also like to express thanks to Loik Lütkehus and Davide Marcantoni for their research assistance. Peter Hefele provided helpful comments. Any factual errors, omissions or mistakes in interpretation should be attributed to myself.

² I. Goldin et al, *Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped Our World and Will Define Our Future*, fourth printing and first paperback printing (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012).

For twentieth-century situations, calculated two-months averages are provided based on estimates of overall numbers of people expelled or refugees fleeing conflict. In these cases, care has been taken to select median values among the estimates presented in the available historical literature. Figures for twenty-first century situations have been taken from datasets created by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Internally displaced people are not included in the comparison.

Table: Volume of forced flight compared

The table below provides the recorded numbers of people crossing international boundaries during two-month peaks. The following section explains how the numbers have been derived.

Situation	Number over two months	What is counted	Number during the relevant year
Central and Southern Europe 1944-48	450 000 (average)	people expelled from Czechoslovakia, Poland and other countries to Germany and Austria	2.7 million (average)
India-Pakistan 1947	4 900 000 between 15 August and 15 October 1947	an estimate of people moving between the Dominion of India and the Dominion of Pakistan	8.0 million
Bangladesh 1971	2 550 000 in April and May 1971	an estimate of people fleeing East Pakistan for India	9.5 million
Syria 2013	785 000 between 10 March and 10 May 2013	refugees registered outside Syria	2.3 million
Ukraine 2014	200 000 (average)	refugees and migrants applying for a status outside Ukraine	0.6 million
Türkiye 2015	363 000 in October and November 2015	sea and land arrivals to Greece	0.9 million
Venezuela since 2016	205 000 (average)	refugees and migrants registered outside Venezuela	1.3 million (average)
Ukraine 2022	6 248 000 between 24 February and 24 April 2022	number over two months: border crossings from Ukraine to the sum of the neighbouring countries (including Russia), plus the number of crossings back to Ukraine. number during the relevant year: refugees from Ukraine recorded across Europe (including in Russia which, in turn, includes forced deportations to Russia).	8.0 million

Conflict-induced cross-border movements compared

Central and Southern Europe 1944-48

According to Prausser and Rees, between 1944 and

1948, at least 12 million German speakers were expelled from Central and Southern Europe (Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and other countries) to the territories of what later became the Federal Republic of Germany

and the German Democratic Republic³. Some 160 thousand were expelled to Austria⁴. First conducted as 'wild expulsions' by the newly restored Czechoslovak and Polish national authorities, transfers of German speakers were subsequently sanctioned by the Potsdam Conference in July 1945. In contrast to other displacement situations presented here, the expulsions of the ethnic Germans thus were largely planned and premeditated acts of ethnic cleansing.

Existing literature does not describe a clear peak concerning the speed of expulsions. Taking the 12 million figure and calculating an average from the time period that starts in July 1944 and ends in December 1948, one arrives at the count of some **450 000 people per two months**.

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Partition of India 1947

The violent partition of India on 14-15 August 1947 created, at that time, unprecedented migration between the newly created Dominion of India and Dominion of Pakistan. The partition created an estimated 14.5 million refugees between 1947 and 1951. By November 1947, according to official figures, the total number of refugees who crossed the borders in both directions stood at around eight million.

The most intensive flight of both Muslims to Pakistan and Hindus to India occurred immediately following the coming into effect of the UK's Indian Independence Act in 1947. The Act created two new state lines within the former colonial India: one in Punjab in the north-west and one in Bengal and

several peripheral states in the north-east of the current Republic of India. According to Khan, by 21 November 1947, the number of refugees fleeing in both directions in Punjab exceeded 8 million people.⁵ This would average **at 4.9 million in two months in Punjab** if counting people moving in both directions.

The number of refugees moving between today's India and the (Pakistani) East Bengal is unknown (estimates suggest 2.52 million between 1946 and 1952⁶) but in the peak period of August to November 1947 is likely to have been significantly lower than the numbers moving between Western Pakistan and India.

Bangladesh 1971

The partition of Pakistan into two separate states, (West) Pakistan and Bangladesh, in 1971 created further massive refugee flows. There are estimates of 9.5 million refugees from East Pakistan by the end of 1971, arriving mainly in Indian West Bengal. According to O'Sullivan, 1.7 million fled East Pakistan in 6 weeks up to 6 May 1971.⁷ The average refugee flow over 2 months (9 weeks) would have been **2.55 million people**.

Syria 2013

The Syrian civil conflict began in 2011 and continues to this day. It has produced millions of refugees. At the time of writing, the vast majority of Syrians residing outside their country have not been able to return. They mostly stay in the countries neighbouring Syria: Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

UNHCR has been recording the exodus of Syrians since the beginning of 2013. According to the organisation's dataset, 5 436 000 Syrian citizens were registered abroad on 31 January 2023.⁸ In more than 11 years since the beginning of the conflict, on average 85 000 people fled every 2 months. An inspection of the relevant UNHCR Excel sheets indicates a peak in flight intensity from Syria between

³ S. Prausser and A. Rees, 'Introduction', in S. Prausser and A. Rees (eds.), *The Expulsion of the 'German' Communities from Eastern Europe at the End of the Second World War*, EUI Working Paper HEC No. 2004/1, European University Institute, Florence, 4.

⁴ N Perzi, 'Flüchtlinge und Vertriebene in der Republik Österreich', *Online-Lexikon zur Kultur und Geschichte der Deutschen im östlichen Europa*, 2015, accessed at: <https://ome-lexikon.uni-oldenburg.de/begriffe/fluechtlinge-und-vertriebene-in-der-republik-oesterreich> on 9 February 2023.

⁵ Y. Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan. The New Edition*. Kindle edition. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), location 193.

⁶ A. Dasgupta, 'The Puzzling Numbers: the Politics of Counting 'Refugees' in West Bengal', *South Asia Refugee Watch*, 2/ 2 (2000), 64-73, citing India's Department of Rehabilitation data from 1981.

⁷ K. O'Sullivan, *The NGO Moment: the Globalisation of Compassion from Biafra to Live Aid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) 38-9, citing UK Foreign Office reports for the summer 1971 figures, and Oxfam reports for the overall figure.

⁸ UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response, Trend of Registered Syrian Refugees, accessed on <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria> on 7 June 2022.

10 March 2013 and 10 May 2013, with some **785 000** people leaving the country in those two months.

Ukraine 2014

The Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 created internally and externally displaced people. Between the outbreak of hostilities in August 2014 and the relative stabilisation of the conflict in December 2014, some 233 000 applied for asylum in Russia. In addition, more than 317 000 Ukrainians applied for other forms of legal stay in Russia (222 000), Belarus (60 000), Poland (23 000) and other neighbouring countries.⁹ When the figures of those who asked for some type of permit in a neighbouring country are added up, we come up with 550 000 over 22 weeks, which makes the average of **200 000** over 9 weeks.

Türkiye 2015

As soon as the Syrian conflict began in 2011, the majority of the country's refugees began leaving for Türkiye. Very soon, a secondary flow of Syrian refugees from Türkiye to Europe began, with other African and Asian nationalities joining. The UNHCR recorded the peak of the refugee flow from Türkiye to Greece in the months of October and November 2015, where the total of **362 912 people** arrived by sea and land.¹⁰ UNHCR data for arrivals from Türkiye to Bulgaria are not available but they can be assumed to be much lower than arrivals in Greece.¹¹

Venezuela since 2016

The exodus of Venezuelans from their country probably represents the largest ever forced flight in the Americas. Having started on a large scale in 2016 following a government coup, the Inter-agency Coordination Platform for Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants counted 7 132 000 migrants and refugees globally in December 2022.¹² Emigration from Venezuela started long before 2016 but on a scale that was small relative to the exodus that started in that year. Ignoring the pre-2016 numbers in this calculation, in the following six years on average approximately **205 000 people** left the country every two months.

Ukraine 2022

The UNHCR has been recording the numbers of crossings from and to Ukraine as soon as the Russian assault began on that part of Ukraine's territory that Russia has not occupied since 2014.¹³ People began fleeing Ukraine in large numbers on the first day of the invasion, 24 February 2022. The frontline states Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Moldova have been receiving the refugees, many of whom subsequently continued their journeys to other European countries. Other residents of Ukraine moved to Russia and Belarus. According to the UNHCR data, between 24 February and 24 April 2022, 5 212 185 border crossings occurred from Ukraine to the sum of the neighbouring countries and 1 035 338 crossings from the neighbouring countries to Ukraine.¹⁴ The total is **6 247 523 border crossings** during those 60 days.

⁹ UNHCR, 'Ukraine Conflict Uproots Hundreds of Thousands', 5 December 2014, accessed at <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2014/12/548190aa9/ukraine-conflict-uproots-hundreds-thousands.html> on 3 August 2022. Overall between 2014 and 2021, some 1.4 million had to flee their homes: International Crisis Group, *Responding to Ukraine's Displacement Crisis: From Speed to Sustainability*, ICS, 26 September 2022, accessed at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/b94-responding-ukraines-displacement-crisis-speed> on 7 February 2023.

¹⁰ UNHCR, Mediterranean Situation, Greece, Sea and land arrivals monthly, accessed at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179> on 12 September 2022.

¹¹ According to Frontex data the number of detections of illegal border crossings at Border Crossing Points (BCPs) between from Türkiye and Bulgaria during the whole of 2015 was 3 642. The number for 2014 was 3 052. While the number of detections of illegal border crossings at Border Crossing Points (BCPs) says little about the total number of people who irregularly arrived in Bulgaria by land in 2015, it indicates that the numbers did not change significantly between 2014 and 2015. In neither year was Bulgaria a major route for refugees to enter to the EU. Frontex, *Risk Analysis for 2016*, Warsaw, 2016, 26.

¹² Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes Venezolanos, 'Refugiados y migrantes de Venezuela', accessed at <https://www.r4v.info/es/refugiadosymigrantes> on 7 February 2023.

¹³ Frontex has been publishing its own data. The recorded numbers are similar to those produced by the UNHCR.

¹⁴ UNHCR, Ukraine Refugee Situation, accessed at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> on 3 August 2022. A methodology note, 'Ukraine Refugee Situation' on the portal cautions that its figures on border crossings from and to Ukraine represent only an estimate. The organisation has also been recording the numbers 'registered for temporary protection or similar national protection schemes' outside Ukraine. Registrations for temporary protection are an imperfect measure: The vast majority of Ukrainian refugees has been heading to the EU. However, Ukrainian citizens have enjoyed visa-free travel to the EU for the period of up to 90 days since 2017 and as such, are not obliged to register in the bloc. There are many indications that some have registered for temporary protection in more than one country and that many have not registered at all. For our purposes, border crossings seem the better indicator. Given the absence of more precise data, the assumption is made here that the same individuals did not move in significant numbers across Ukraine's

The figure of 5 212 185 border crossings from Ukraine includes 605 815 crossings to Russia.¹⁵ Russia has been conducting forced deportations from Ukraine. All indications are that the Russian government has been reporting to the UNHCR the forcibly reported people among 'border crossings from Ukraine'. No information is available on border crossings of Ukrainians from Russia back to Ukraine. The overall figure for border crossings from and to Ukraine can thus be treated as a very rough estimate.

Conclusions

It follows from this brief comparison that the cross-border movements during the two months following the Russian attack on Ukraine on 24 February represent probably the most intensive conflict-induced migration on record. The speed of forced flight following the partition of India in 1947 was almost as high if the estimates presented in academic literature are correct. In both situations, cross-border migration was two-directional, between the Dominion of India and Dominion of Pakistan, and out and into Ukraine. Movements from Ukraine to the EU and vice versa were made simple by the fact that the EU's pre-invasion visa-free regime was not suspended.¹⁶ However, the one-directional flight from East Pakistan (Bangladesh) to India in 1971 probably produced more refugees who stayed outside their country of origin than the Ukrainian displacement did during 2022.

We can observe that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, rail transport and, in the case of Ukraine, also the existing road infrastructure, have enabled highly intensive movements of people across international borders.

For today's policymaker, the unexpected speed of refugee flight from Ukraine points towards the need for contingency planning for migration flows induced by conflict. EU societies have welcomed Ukraine's forcibly displaced with open arms but logistically, the national governments were not prepared for the influx. As an illustration, Czechia's Minister of the Interior, Vít Rakušan, stated in March 2022 that the country's contingency plans for Ukraine that had

been prepared in 2015 considered that a maximum of 20 000 people would be arriving per month.¹⁷ The real number turned out to be 200 000 arrivals in less than a month following the invasion.

With means of public and private transport becoming ever cheaper and easily available, the prospect of sudden large immigration flows in the EU is becoming more likely than in the past. In autumn 2022, the EU witnessed unexpected inflows of tens of thousands of Asians and Africans, arriving legally in Serbia due to the country's generous visa policy, then continuing illegally into the EU. Although on an incomparably smaller scale than the crossings of Ukraine's border during 2022, this development demonstrated how unpredictable EU-headed migration flows can be.

The EU is putting in a lot of effort to stem those immigration inflows that it considers undesirable. Despite this effort, one cannot completely rule out the possibility that the bloc's policy toolbox would fail or that another war in the EU's immediate neighbourhood would produce large numbers of refugees to whom the bloc will decide to grant temporary protection. Authorities at national and EU levels must be prepared for such eventualities.

Vít Novotný is Senior Research Officer at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies.

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borders in the two months following the invasion. The predominant movement was one of females, children and men above the age of 60 moving out of Ukraine, and of those Ukrainian men of military age (18-60) who resided in the EU moving back to Ukraine to enlist in the army.

¹⁵ Figure provided by the UNHCR in an email, 10 February 2023.

¹⁶ V. Wagner: *Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have their European prospects confirmed. What does it mean for migration policies?*, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 5 August 2022, accessed at <https://www.icmpd.org/blog/2022/ukraine-moldova-and-georgia-have-their-european-prospects-confirmed.-what-does-it-mean-for-migration-policies> on 8 February 2023.

¹⁷ Echo24, 'Česko balancuje na hraně, přiznal Rakušan. Nevyloučil stanové tábory v Česku', *echo24.cz*, 20 March 2022, accessed at <https://echo24.cz/a/SHvSY/cesko-balancuje-na-hrane-priznal-rakusan-nevyloucil-stanove-tabory-v-cesku> on 10 February 2023.

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