

ON UKRAINE AND SELECTIVE SOLIDARITY

AHMED ABDELHAMID AHMED

The Russian invasion of Ukraine sent shockwaves across the world, and as Russia continues breaching Ukraine's sovereignty by expanding eastwards and displacing millions of refugees in the process, uncertainty looms over what the future holds for the Ukrainian people. What has remained certain, however, is the international community's solidarity with Ukraine.

Moscow has been sanctioned and boycotted by actors ranging from governments to international organizations to even major corporations. The West has agreed to exclude Russian banks from the international payment system SWIFT, the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication. This move will disconnect Russia from the international financial system, severely damaging their economy.¹ Multinational corporations like Starbucks and McDonalds, engaging in a form of boycott, have halted operations in Russia.²



"war does not discriminate"

FIFA has banned Russia from the World Cup and there are countless other expressions of political solidarity with the Ukrainian people. Furthermore, European countries have opened their typically padlocked borders to provide sanctuary to these newly created Ukrainian refugees.

From this coordinated and compelling response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it could be inferred that the West does indeed support boycotts and has the ability to embrace refugees. That being said, this sentiment starkly contrasts the relationship between the West and Middle Eastern nations in need of similar support, and this practice of selective solidarity and hypocritical double standards must be brought to light.

News coverage of the crisis in Ukraine has exhibited the varying manners in which different regions of the world are covered. Charlie D'Agata, a CBS correspondent in Kyiv, proclaimed that "this isn't a place...like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging," but rather Ukraine, which is "relatively civilized" and "relatively European."³ In essence, he implied that white Europeans are more civilized and superior to people in the

global south, thereby making them less deserving of such war and suffering. An *ITV News* reporter similarly asserted that the situation was "unthinkable" given the fact that "this is not a developing, Third World nation; this is Europe."³ Sentiments such as these are not only racist but also absurdly ahistorical given the fact that the two World Wars of the 20th century were initiated by Europeans and primarily occurred within Europe as well.

Racist and orientalist rhetoric has largely underpinned the reporting on this war. The former deputy prosecutor general of Ukraine stated on *BBC* that the situation is "very emotional for [him], because [he] see[s] European people with blue eyes and blond hair... being killed every day," implying that the degree to which we sympathize with victims of war should depend on the color of their eyes and the tint of their hair, descriptions which are mere euphemisms for their white race.³ By employing these heinous comparisons regarding the alleged higher value of European people's lives, news coverage has diminished the experiences of non-white victims of war in the Middle East, Africa, and beyond. This rhetoric implies that the world must sympa-

thize with Ukrainian refugees more than Syrians fleeing the Putin-backed Assad regime, Palestinians suffering from decades of military occupation, or the millions of South Sudanese refugees that have fled their war-torn nation in search of safety.

This racist rhetoric is not only implied but also explicitly stated. Russian-American Journalist Julia Ioffe, commenting on the potential use of chemical weapons in Ukraine, said, "It's one thing for sarin gas to be used on people in faraway Syria who are Muslim and who are of a different culture, but what is Europe going to do when it's used on European soil on Europeans?"⁴ These remarks were broadcasted live on *CNN*; in other words, a violently cruel dismissal of suffering of Syrian victims—entirely on the basis of their race and religion—was broadcasted live on one of the world's largest news sources, and we have yet to see any form of accountability.

It is important to note that these practices of selective solidarity and double standards have been widely noted and criticized, however; for example, Irish Member of Parliament Richard Boyd Barret called out the government's double standards in a passion-



earlier this year, leaving them trapped in the Poland-Belarus border, where they lived in make-shift tents and nearly froze to death.⁶

Like Poland, many European countries have previously claimed an inability to support refugees over security fears, especially in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis, whose people have been fleeing the same Russian aggression for over ten years. This newfound ability and willingness of Europe and the West to support Ukrainian refugees only highlights the true motives behind their previous inaction: racism.

War does not discriminate; a child suffering in Ukraine is the same as a child suffering in Gaza or in any other part of the world. Race, nationality, and religion cannot continue to determine whose life is valued more by the international community. An Afghani family fleeing their home and seeking refuge should be treated with the same care and solidarity offered to Ukrainian families. As human rights continue to be violated across the world, news coverage and public policy must cease to employ racist double standards and practices of selective solidarity.

ate plea for justice.

“You’re happy to correctly use the most strong and robust language to describe the crimes against humanity of Vladimir Putin,” he said. “But you will not use the same strength of language when it comes to describing Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians.”

“Five days for sanctions against Putin and his thugs,” he continued, but “70 years of oppression of the Palestinians.”⁵

Similarly, Egyptian squash player Ali Farag, who is currently ranked number two in the world, noted these double standards during his victory speech at Wimbledon’s Optasia Championship. He brought

up the long-standing tradition of apoliticism in sports—a tradition that has only made an exception for the Russian invasion of Ukraine—calling for solidarity with the Palestinians who “have been going through [similar struggles] for the past 74 years.”⁵

The racism and hypocrisy extend beyond rhetoric and news coverage to policies regarding refugee intake. Poland has been applauded for its acceptance of nearly two million Ukrainian refugees within mere weeks; however, while this is certainly praiseworthy, it is important to acknowledge that they refused entry to thousands of Middle Eastern and African refugees just



SYRIAN REFUGEES IN A CAMP ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF ATHENS, WHERE THEY AWAIT ASYLUM IN EUROPE .