

# Factors influencing U.S. and Canadian policy responses to Ukrainian refugees

## Factores que influyen las respuestas políticas de Estados Unidos y Canadá a los refugiados ucranianos

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### Abstract

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, several Western countries have opened their borders to Ukrainian refugees, even though their international protection systems tended to be restrictive and selective. Based on a hemerographic analysis and a review of the academic literature, this paper analyzes the factors that influenced the United States and Canada's migration policy responses to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Additionally, Ukrainian migration and the emergence of the diaspora in Europe and North America are presented and examined for contextualization. It argues that the openness to welcoming Ukrainian nationals can be understood as an expression of smart power in the global conflict between the West and Russia.

Keywords: Ukrainian refugees, hard power, soft power.

### Resumen

Después de la invasión rusa a Ucrania en febrero de 2022, varios países occidentales han abierto sus fronteras a los refugiados ucranianos, cuando la tendencia en sus sistemas de protección internacional era de restricción y selección. Con base en el análisis hemerográfico y en la revisión de la literatura académica, este trabajo analiza los factores que influenciaron las respuestas de Estados Unidos y Canadá ante la crisis de los refugiados ucranianos, en términos de políticas migratorias. Adicionalmente, a modo de contextualización se presenta y examina la migración y la emergencia de la diáspora ucraniana en Europa y Norteamérica. Se argumenta que la apertura para recibir a los nacionales ucranianos puede entenderse como una expresión de poder inteligente en el conflicto global entre Occidente y Rusia.

Palabras clave: refugiados ucranianos, poder duro, poder blando.

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## Introduction

In recent decades, the United States and the European Union have shown an increasing lack of solidarity with people fleeing their countries of origin who need international protection. They have imposed obstacles and “closed their doors” to them (Arango, 2019; FitzGerald, 2020; Villar, 2017). In contrast, in the first two years since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the world has witnessed how the United States, the European Union and other Western countries have opened their territories and offered relatively more advantageous treatment to Ukrainian people fleeing the war, compared to the treatment given to migrants of other national origins.<sup>1</sup>

The European Union’s response to the Ukrainian refugees, the rapid implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive on March 4, 2022—considered an “open door” policy that facilitates access to basic services (such as health or education) and work permits for an initial period of three years—has been extensively analyzed in the literature on refugees and refugee policy (see, for example, Albertari & Principe, 2023; Costello & Foster, 2022; Crossley, 2023; De Coninck, 2023; Garcés Mascareñas, 2022; Grosman & Raadschelders, 2024; Ineli-Ciger, 2023; Lacy & Van Houtum, 2022; Skordas, 2023; Van Selm, 2022; Xhardez & Soennecken, 2023).

To explain the more lenient treatment, these studies highlight: 1) cultural, identity and racial factors: cultural proximity, the European identity of Ukrainians, and ethno-racial and religious considerations; and, 2) pragmatic geopolitical factors: the geographical proximity that allows large flows to arrive quickly, that Ukrainians can cross as tourists, and the previous presence of Ukrainians in the European Union that facilitate migrant mobility.

This paper analyzes the factors that have influenced the U.S. and Canadian refugee policy responses to the influx of Ukrainian refugees due to the large-scale Russian invasion. It identifies the geopolitical, economic, social and cultural elements that have shaped them. The study of the refugee policies of these two countries is of particular interest because of the features they have in common: the size of the Ukrainian diasporas in their territories before the invasion, as countries traditionally open to international migration, their prominence as countries of the so-called Western world, and their membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Also, both countries are geographically distant from Ukraine, which implies a greater possibility of restricting or blocking Ukrainian refugee flows.

This study is structured in four sections to achieve the proposed aim. First, the evolution of Ukrainian migration to Europe and North America is described and examined. Second, the literature that analyzes the factors that explain the openness or restrictiveness of migration and refugee policies<sup>2</sup> based on nationality is reviewed. Two types of theorizations are analyzed: theories concerning hard and soft power as factors shaping migration policies from the international relations sphere and three domestic

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<sup>1</sup> Regardless, Ukrainian refugees have to face numerous difficulties and obstacles interposed by states (see, for example, Grosman & Raadschelders, 2024; Meyer, 2022; Torre Cantalapiedra & Moreno-Amador, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Although the specialized literature is divided between studies that focus on migration policies and those that focus on refugee policies/international protection, in this paper it is assumed that refugee policies are subsumed into the broader concept of migration policies. Therefore, in the theoretical-conceptual review carried out, both migration and refugee studies are referenced.

factors driving these policies: identity culture, and racial issues. Third, based on an extensive review of the academic literature and the literature on migration, the policy openness of the United States and Canada to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees to their territories after the Russian invasion is examined. Fourth, a discussion is carried out in which the theories and antecedents of the academic literature are confronted with the systematized empirical data of the discourses and actions on migration issues of both countries.

According to these findings, it is argued that, given the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the migration policies of the two North American countries were *de facto* displays of power in geopolitical relations, linked to the management of a political image of benignity and solidarity that is projected toward other countries in the Western world since the openness towards refugees constitutes a display of smart power in the global conflict between the West and Russia.

This study thus contributes to the debate on the intersection between migration policies and international relations, insofar as it shows how refugee flows are not only a humanitarian phenomenon, but also a strategic resource on the global stage. How countries manage human mobility continues to reflect their strategic interests, external conflicts and positioning in the international arena.

The methodological approach used is the analysis of secondary sources. In particular, it is based on analyzing news articles, opinion columns and editorials of the digital press and Mexican and international news agencies recognized for their journalistic rigor and approach to international issues (*The New York Times*, BBC, Associated Press, among others). It also includes an exhaustive bibliographic review of academic articles, books and chapters.

To find texts on the topics relevant to the study, searches included terms such as “Ukrainian refugees” or “Ukrainian immigrants” combined with the country categories “United States” and “Canada”. This review retrieves a body of research focused on the European Union’s responses to the refugee “crisis”. The review of sources is limited to the period between February 2022 and May 2024, when this study was completed. Nevertheless, the period 2014-2022 is additionally considered to illustrate the context as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a turning point in Ukrainian migration.

For the processing and analysis of the information, measures were adopted to mitigate interpretative biases, such as the triangulation of sources and the cross-checking of data between journalistic texts from various media and academic products and recourse was made, depending on availability, to government documents, press releases and statistical sources. Likewise, texts without documentary support or with evident biases that could compromise the objectivity of the analysis were excluded.

## The Ukrainian diaspora in Europe and North America

It is interesting to contextualize the phenomenon of Canadian and U.S. migration policies toward recent Ukrainian refugee flows by analyzing Ukraine’s migration history and the evolution of its diasporas in these countries. Ukraine has a long history of migration, including internal and external movements. During its membership in the Soviet Union (1922-1991), practically every Ukrainian family was disrupted by the

experience of massive relocations of populations linked to socialist projects (Shulga, 2002). The fall of the Soviet Union and the lifting of the Iron Curtain opened up new possibilities for mobility, which removed previous border restrictions. Political transformations generated economically marginalized populations in the two decades after independence (1991) (Fedyuk & Kindler, 2016).

These groups, thrust into a precarious situation by the collapse of the centralized economy, were integrated into the flows of migration abroad, both to the east and to the west of the country, linked to trade routes and informal employment and facilitated by the easy crossing of the borders of certain countries, such as the Russian Federation (Tegeler & Cherkez, 2011) and Turkey (İçduygu, 2006). Other migrations were characterized by permanence: the Ukrainian immigrants who arrived in the Western countries, then members of the European Union, such as Germany and the United Kingdom, tended to stay there (Fedyuk & Kindler, 2016). The devaluation of the national currency after the global crisis of 2008 against the currencies of the Visegrád countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) intensified labor flows to these countries, which were receptive to migrant workers from Eastern Europe (Lipták & Kincses, 2023).

In 2012, Ukraine had one of Europe's largest labor outflows, with 1.2 million people working on the continent; these immigrants mainly carried work permits and high human capital, although many entered unskilled jobs (Sushko et al., 2016). This exodus contributed to a significant population loss: between 1992 and 2013, Ukraine's total population declined by 12.8% (Karácsonyi, 2018).

The conflict with Russia, particularly its military aggression since 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and support for separatist movements in the Donbass, has exacerbated migration further. Nonetheless, early studies showed that this migration was mainly internal, although there was a significant flow of displaced persons to the Russian Federation (Sushko et al., 2016). The migration categories applied to Ukrainians (refugee or labor or family migrant) depended on a complex variety of factors, but, in general, very few Ukrainians sought asylum or refugee status (Fedyuk & Kindler, 2016; Lipták & Kincses, 2023; Shulga, 2002).

Ukrainian migration went beyond the borders of Europe. By early 2022, the United States and Canada had large Ukrainian diasporas (Cecco, 2022; Rodriguez & Batalova, 2022). The first migration flow from Ukraine to Canada occurred in the early 20th century through Canadian government policies promoting the immigration of farmworkers (Swyripa et al., 2022). Canada became the North American country with the largest Ukrainian diaspora: more than 1.4 million people of Ukrainian descent, the majority with Canadian citizenship (Cecco, 2022).

The first post-Soviet wave of Ukrainians to the United States consisted largely of evangelical Christians and Jews, beneficiaries of the Lautenberg program that allowed nationals of former Soviet republics to migrate through the refugee resettlement program for religious or ethnic persecution (Klokiw, 2020), who together with economic and family immigrants formed numerous ethnic communities that clustered around Jewish, Protestant and Pentecostal churches. In 2019, the Ukrainian diaspora in the United States reached nearly 1.3 million, including regularized immigrants and naturalized citizens, which constituted the third largest refugee population, albeit remaining "hidden under the radar" (Klokiw, 2020, p. 781).

With the onset of the large-scale Russian offensive in February 2022, Ukrainians from the affected areas had to leave their homes to move, first of all, over the territory

of Ukraine and neighboring countries, with the idea of a quick return (Gregurović, 2022). Over time, refugees went to other countries, following previous labor and economic migration patterns, to Germany, the Czech Republic and Italy (Lipták & Kincses, 2023).

The massive displacement of Ukrainians led the European Union to an unprecedented migration response: in an extremely short time, less than a month after the outbreak of the invasion, the Temporary Protection Directive was activated for the first time (Albertari & Principe, 2023; Ineli-Ciger, 2023). As of February 2024, in the European Union, the countries with the largest number of Ukrainian refugees applying for asylum or other protection measure included Germany (1 220 000), Poland (958 000), Czech Republic (371 000), Spain (211 000), Italy (172 000) and Romania (162 000) (Naciones Unidas, 2024).

Given the relaxation of restrictions on migration systems in Western countries, after crossing the Ukrainian borders, Ukrainian refugees were generally able to seek asylum in the country of their choice (Grosman & Raadschelders, 2024).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, exit from the country was not open to all: Ukrainian martial law, activated from the beginning of the Russian invasion, prohibited men between 18 and 60 years of age from leaving the country, with few exceptions (Kononenko, 2023). As a result, 70% to 90% of the Ukrainian refugee population comprised women and minors (Rush, 2023; CARE International & UN Women, 2022).

Beyond the European Union, the United States and Canada were among the preferred destinations for Ukrainians (first and fourth place, respectively) (Elinder et al., 2023). The positive image of these two countries in terms of job opportunities and quality of life (which in the case of the United States is summarized in the expression “the American dream”), the options offered by their migration and refugee systems, and the significant social networks they had there thanks to the Ukrainian diasporas already consolidated in each country, were reasons of attraction for this population.

## International and domestic factors to explain refugee/humanitarian protection policies according to nationalities

As with any other migration policy, the openness of the management of Ukrainian refugee flows by the United States and Canada cannot be understood without considering two key aspects: 1) the domestic and international explanatory factors, or their combination (Cornelius & Rosenblum, 2005; Rosenblum, 2003); and, 2) the differentiated criteria by which migrations are managed according to the nationality of origin. This results in international protection systems giving unequal treatment to applicants based on various political, economic and social factors unrelated to individuals' human rights protection needs (Fassin, 2015; Torre Cantalapiedra & Moreno-Amador, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Even when refugees are conceptualized as subjects with little capacity for agency and the involuntary, reactive, or forced nature of their movements is highlighted (FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; Torre Cantalapiedra, 2023), the truth is that refugees' actual powers to move from one place to another are embedded in a continuum between hasty escape (from bombing and a collapsed economy) and organized search for countries (with the best asylum system according to political criteria, social networks they have and economic possibilities).

Rosenblum (2003) emphasizes that, in industrialized countries, migration and domestic policies are the result of discussions between legislators, the executive and originating states with presidential predominance in the area of refugee flows (FitzGerald 1996, cited in Cornelius & Rosenblum, 2005). Although the primary impetus for refugee policies is international factors, domestic factors are essential to a comprehensive understanding of refugee policies. In this section, factors influencing the treatment of refugees according to their origin are analyzed, emphasizing the role of power in the international arena and certain domestic policy factors in shaping migration responses.

Foreign policy defines the profile of admitted refugees (Loescher & Scanlan, 1986). States employ migration and migration policies to obtain certain political objectives in international relations (conversely, they employ policies from other domains to achieve migration objectives) (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Meyers, 2006). Accordingly, following the underlying logic of hard power, realists emphasize “the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might” to achieve one’s objectives (Nye, 2003, para. 2). Thus, for example, conflicts between states influence the generation of restrictive or open immigration policies (Meyers, 2006). The West, including the United States, favored Soviet refugees to show rejection of communism during the Cold War (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Meyers, 2006). Currently, European responses to Ukrainian refugees have geopolitical components because of the aggressor’s identity and the conflict’s implications (Albertari & Principe, 2023; De Coninck, 2023).

In contrast to this view of power, international protection and refugee policies have also been considered soft power (Rosina, 2024; Voisine, 2021). The latter concept refers to “the ability to influence others to obtain desired outcomes through attraction, rather than coercion or payment. A country’s soft power is based on its cultural resources, values, and policies” (Nye, 2008, p. 94). This form of power can “shape perceptions and narratives concerning the legitimacy, responsibility and human rights record of various governments, ultimately aiming to influence countries’ ‘power of attraction’ on the international stage” (Rosina, 2024). Governments often accept refugees if it benefits their current government’s agenda or signals their position in international conflicts.

In terms of theorizations regarding domestic policy, this paper brings up a triad of factors: cultural, identity and ethno-racial issues, which in practice are intertwined. According to Meyers (2006), “national identity” shapes migration policies in three ways: 1) countries that historically accept immigration are more open than ethnic nations; narratives about the historical arrivals of settlers, immigrants and refugees in the country influence current responses to new migration flows (Jacobsen, 1996). 2) Ethnically heterogeneous societies are more open-minded, favoring groups with shared ethnicity. 3) States with *jus soli* are more open than those with *jus sanguinis*; historical and colonial ties between countries explain both migration flows and policies (Reitz et al., 2022; Yuval-Davis et al., 2005).

Perceptions about refugees also shape migration policies (Jacobsen, 1996). When people consider that the reception of foreign populations may carry associated risks (Albertari & Principe, 2023), the “symbolic threat” reflects the fear that immigrants pose a challenge to the group’s religion, values, belief systems, ideology or worldview (Stephan et al., 2009, cited in De Coninck, 2023). Immigrants of certain origins are seen as carriers of socioeconomic and political problems that can be transferred to



the receiving country (Grosman & Raadschelders, 2024). In the same way, certain populations in need of international protection end up being considered by politicians and citizens as a risk for security, both national (generation of internal conflicts) and economic (an economic burden on the treasury).

In turn, socio-racial gradients continue to condition the mobility and integration of immigrants (Freier & Bird, 2021). Nonetheless, the role of “race” as an explanatory factor of migration policies is a controversial issue; while for some authors it has been little studied (Costello & Foster, 2022), for others its relevance has been exaggerated (Grosman & Raadschelders, 2024). Historically, discrimination based on nationality replaced explicit racial discrimination, with some countries adopting immigration systems based on universal and meritocratic criteria (Farcy, 2020). Notwithstanding, Sow (2022) points out that asylum policies continue to privilege whiteness.

Overall, this review of theories offers two types of tools for further analysis. The first is the forms of hard and soft power that shape countries’ foreign policies, especially from the perspective of political leaders and public policy decision-makers. The second is that identity, cultural and racial issues can define refugee policies by forging perceptions and prejudices about different immigrant groups. This is especially relevant when a country’s electorate largely favors restrictive migration policies, and political leaders can use these anti-immigrant sentiments for electoral gain (Torre Cantalapiedra, 2015).

## Migration policies given the arrival of Ukrainian refugees

### *United States*

The U.S. international protection system has become more restrictive in recent decades. Both the asylum and refugee systems have been restricted to certain nationalities, especially during the presidency of Donald Trump (2017-2021) (Bermúdez, 2018). In March 2022, the pledge to take in one hundred thousand refugees from Ukraine announced by Joe Biden presented a stark contrast to the rhetoric toward other immigrant populations (BBC News Mundo, 2022; The White House, 2022). In his speech, Biden referred to an “international responsibility”, noting that the Ukrainian refugee situation was not something that Germany, Poland or Romania alone should take on (Biden, quoted in Associated Press, 2022).

Differential treatment of Ukrainians was evident from the beginning of the Russian invasion. Initially, Ukrainians crossing the United States-Mexico border received a 12-month humanitarian parole. The allocation of such permits had never been used *en masse* at the U.S. border. This was a makeshift response (Beers, 2023).

The first dedicated mechanism for the Ukrainian population, introduced by the Biden administration, was the extension of the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for 18 months, which allowed individuals with a temporary immigration status (students, tourists, temporary workers) to remain legally in the country (Smith et al., 2022). It was estimated that this measure benefited 30 000 Ukrainian citizens residing in U.S. territory (Sullivan, 2022).

In April 2022, the U.S. government reaffirmed its commitment by introducing the Uniting for Ukraine program, the largest U.S. private sponsorship program for refugees in decades, which can also be considered as the extension of the humanitarian permit (Murdoch, 2024). The program allowed Ukrainian nationals and their immediate family outside U.S. territory to come to the United States and stay temporarily in the country under the two-year conditional humanitarian parole (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2025). This program required a sponsor, a resident citizen or a permanent resident who had to file an I-134 form (Grosman & Raadschelders, 2024). The program provided a more predictable and organized entry channel, and spontaneous border crossings by Ukrainians decreased by 98% between April and May 2022 (Beers, 2023).

In sum, most Ukrainians admitted to the country in 2022 entered through “a patchwork of temporary protection mechanisms” (Beers, 2023, p. 27), the reunification program that would be developed to favor the arrival of Ukrainian refugees with family ties and the traditional refugee program, among others (BBC News Mundo, 2022; Associated Press, 2022). The Biden administration introduced these mechanisms unanticipatedly, so the applicable immigration scheme depended on when the individual sought arrival (Beers, 2023; Grosman & Raadschelders, 2024; Sullivan, 2022).

By February 2023, less than a year since the Russian invasion, 271 000 Ukrainians had been admitted to the United States, more than 117 000 through the Uniting for Ukraine program, a program for which more than 200 000 Americans came forward as sponsors. Approximately 150 000 Ukrainians came to the United States outside of this special program, some employing the traditional refugee program or crossing the U.S. southern border from Mexico (Ainsley, 2023).

By April 2024, the refugee program had resettled 187 000 Ukrainians on U.S. soil, without much controversy; to this, the 350 000 Ukrainians who arrived in the country without a sponsor, mainly through temporary visas, must be added (Montoya-Galvez, 2024). This amounts to more than 250 000 Ukrainians each year since the beginning of the Russian invasion, a figure considerably higher than Biden initially indicated.

## Canada

Canada has been exceptional in its immigration policies thanks to its geographical position, which has allowed it to effectively control migration flows and maintain a population with a favorable attitude toward immigration (Castillo Salinas, 2022). On the one hand, it has strengthened control over irregular or unwanted immigration flows through new mechanisms, such as the safe third country treaty with the United States that strengthens its southern border and limits the possibility of receiving asylum seekers (Bejan et al., 2023). On the other hand, the Canadian government has managed a constant openness to regular migration flows in three areas: economic migrants, family reunification and international protection (asylum system and refugee resettlement) (Verea, 2020).

Following the invasion of Ukraine, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau indicated that the country would receive as many Ukrainian refugees as possible, being very empathetic to the situation of millions of Ukrainians fleeing the war and abandoning their homes (Scislowska, 2022). Between March 2022 and November 2023, Canada



issued 936 293 temporary emergency visas of up to three years for Ukrainians who expressed a desire to work or study in the country while the war continued, and a total of 210 178 people moved to Canada (Global Affairs Canada, 2024; RCI, 2024).

Almost two years after the Russian invasion, Canada reaffirmed its support to Ukraine in terms of financial, development, military, peace and stabilization assistance and migration policies (Global Affairs Canada, 2024). This country implemented a program that allowed Ukrainian refugees with family members in Canada to apply for residency (Alatrste, 2023). Nonetheless, the exceptional nature of Canada's welcoming migration policy may be coming to an end as the surge in migration flows outstrips the capacity to integrate such large flows (Rivas, 2024).

## Discussion

Theories of power are key to understanding the response of the U.S. and Canadian governments to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees on their territories. The confrontation between Russia and Western liberal democracies can be understood by analyzing hard and soft power strategies. The Russian military invasion exposed the failure of Russia's soft power and its limits to "persuade" (Nye, 2004) the Ukrainian people and align its geopolitical interests with Russian ones.

Beginning in 2014, through a series of demonstrations that received the name of Euromaidan, Ukrainians opted for further rapprochement with the European Union: the notion of a "Greater Europe", inclusive for the Ukrainian nation, linked to democratic and liberal values and the potential for further economic development, was more attractive than the more nostalgic idea of the common *Ruskiy Mir* (Russian World), promoted by Putin's government (Pizzolo, 2024).

The authors agree with research noting how geopolitical factors and the Russian threat to the NATO bloc and international order drove the extensive military and humanitarian assistance provided by the United States and Canada (Lacy & Van Houtum, 2022; Sajjad, 2022). Fear of an expansion of the conflict beyond Ukraine and Russia's possession of the world's largest nuclear arsenal has been a determining factor in international responses toward Ukrainian refugees (De Coninck, 2023). For the case of the European Union, the geopolitical reasoning is clearly expressed in the considerations section of the Implementing Decision 2022/382 of the Council of the European Union, which states that the invasion of Ukraine by Russia aims to diminish the security and stability of Europe and the world (Skordas, 2023).

The United States continues to possess the most powerful military globally and plays a key role as a guarantor of the security of many nations. In its struggle to maintain its hegemonic role, it has a clear interest in a favorable outcome for Ukraine—and NATO—regardless of the degree to which it plays a leading role in the initiation or development of the war. Canada, although its military power is much less than that of the United States, is a member of NATO and has similar interests.

Some analysts believe that the United States and Canada, as well as other countries in the West, are engaged in an undeclared and unconventional war with Russia, manifested through economic sanctions on Russia and the provision of weaponry and other military support to Ukraine (Carment & Belo, 2022). The U.S. government has focused more on military than humanitarian aid (Grosman & Raadschelders, 2024). It has been by far the largest donor of military aid (BBC News World, 2025).

Nevertheless, the displaced Ukrainians' reception and humanitarian aid provision should also be understood as a display of soft power. It is stated that, in contrast to the traditional approach to conflicts based on measurements of military capabilities, the confrontation between the West and Russia should be analyzed as a phenomenon in which soft power plays a central role. One of its key expressions is the ability of key players to manage migration flows. In a multipolar and interdependent world, and in the face of technological progress and the destructive potential of nuclear weapons, using soft power becomes crucial (Ercan, 2024) and, combined with traditional power, is seen by countries as the most effective strategy. The combination of hard and soft power resources constitutes "smart power", optimal for the hybrid conflicts of the 21st century (Nye, 2009).

The protection of refugees is part of a set of measures aimed at safeguarding democracy and human rights, which strengthens soft power in this hybrid war. By receiving a significant number of Ukrainian refugees when they could have restricted their entry, the United States and Canada consolidate their image as role models in the Western world, especially among NATO countries and their allies.

Traditionally, U.S. immigration policies have been a source of soft power. Nonetheless, its image in this area has been damaged in recent decades due to its restrictive policies toward asylum seekers and the "uncontrolled" migration flows at its southern border (Mariscal Nava & Torre Cantalapiedra, 2024). A noteworthy aspect is that the arrival of a large number of Ukrainian refugees to U.S. territory has been uncontroversial in political circles (Montoya-Galvez, 2024): this is partly because their reception reinforces support for an ally in conflict, but also because Ukrainians do not arouse the same fear, xenophobia and racism in the U.S. population as immigrants arriving from the south, who are perceived as an "uncontrolled invasion" and reluctant to assimilate into U.S. culture.

The opening to Ukrainian flows was facilitated by the decision to establish direct arrival routes by air, mainly through the Uniting for Ukraine program. This prevented their arrival through the country's southern border after crossing Mexico (Gómez, 2022), which would have generated a negative image of the U.S. government regarding immigration control. Moreover, the discrimination between the different applicants at the official entry points was no longer so evident, and the media image of an orderly migration flow was projected. At the same time, the United States was shown as a proactive country in the defense of human rights, instead of a country that receives refugees in an unwanted and uncontrolled manner. This strategy made it possible to transform a negative image of welcoming refugees into a positive diplomatic asset, as observed in other regions where migration diplomacy has achieved its goals (Tolay, 2022).

For its part, Canada, thanks to its geographical position and effective management of the flow of Ukrainians, projected a favorable image to the world of its adherence to democratic and humanist values. The lack of institutional support was compensated by the participation of Canadian citizens and the Ukrainian diaspora, who made generous donations and even opened their homes to the newcomers (The Canadian Press, 2024).

Finally, as in other contexts of Ukrainian refugee reception, it is considered that reception in the United States and Canada was also conditioned by gender perception, given that the majority of international Ukrainian refugees were women and minors. Previous studies have shown that mass media representations of immigrants are strongly

conditioned by gender: while media images of men are associated with crime, terrorism and violence (Blumell & Cooper, 2019), immigrant women tend to be portrayed as especially vulnerable or else as passive subjects in need of protection (Ivanova & Burón Rodríguez, 2023). Gender-differentiated perceptions had an impact on housing policies for Ukrainian refugees in the United Kingdom (Crossley, 2023) and in Mexico, where men found it more difficult to find homes open to receive them.

## Conclusions

The U.S. and Canadian governments offered protection mechanisms for Ukrainian citizens outside of the usual system of providing care for refugees after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These measures were mostly temporary, so observing how both countries will approach a more durable solution for Ukrainians will be necessary. Nevertheless, their response was quicker and more efficient than they usually provide for other refugee groups.

One of the main findings of this study is that the reception of Ukrainian refugees in both countries can be understood as a strategy based on smart power, a term coined by Nye (2008, 2009) to indicate that the best strategy combines hard and soft power. The reception of refugees fulfills both facets, both as an element of indirect support to the Ukrainian side in the conflict, and as a key tool to consolidate their image as defenders of human rights and democracy. In this regard, migration management has humanitarian implications and plays a strategic role in the overall conflict between the West and Russia.

Another relevant finding of the research is the secondary but necessary role of the domestic sphere's cultural, identity and racial factors, as well as the feminization of the migration flow in the social acceptance of Ukrainian refugees. This is particularly evident with the debates on the selectivity of international protection, particularly the weight of the racial factor in the reception of Ukrainians, with some authors pointing out that whiteness and cultural identity play a key role in the way certain groups of refugees are perceived and accepted, which reinforces the need to analyze migration policies from a perspective that considers the intersection between "race", identity and geopolitics.

The permanence of open refugee policies requires sustained support from political leaders and continued acceptance by citizens. In this case, the perception of Ukrainian refugees has generated less resistance than other migration flows due to the unfavorable stereotypes that weigh on the latter. There is a risk that this reception will reinforce a double standard in asylum policies, deepening inequalities between refugees of different national origins.

This study shows that, far from being mutually exclusive, the explanatory factors of refugee/humanitarian protection policies in the international sphere complement and combine with those in the domestic sphere. In this case, power issues in international relations would explain the openness of the policies of both countries, while from the domestic sphere, the U.S. and Canadian citizens would not be pushing for restrictions on Ukrainian refugee flows. The relevance and complementarity of both types of factors in explaining the openness of refugee migration policies are largely due to the 'intermestic' (international and domestic) nature of the phenomenon of international migration and, therefore, of migration policies (Rosenblum, 2003, 2004).

The findings presented here provide suggestions for future research. First, given the limitations of secondary sources, it would be of interest to deepen the study of these international protection migration policies by incorporating interviews with governmental actors and key informants. Second, it would be interesting to analyze how this whole scenario is being transformed in recent months with the presidency of Donald Trump and the evolution of the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

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