

# Kosovo and beyond: popular and unpopular refugees

by Matthew J Gibney

The flight of some 900,000 refugees from Kosovo sparked the revival in Western states of something exceedingly rare: the phenomenon of the popular refugee.

Since the mid 1980s when the numbers of asylum seekers claiming refuge in Western Europe began a sharp and prolonged ascent, refugees have come to be a most unwelcome sight. To prevent the entry of those seen as illicit economic migrants, welfare scroungers and, in some cases, threats to national security, European governments have assembled a substantial array of preventative and deterrent measures.

Amazingly, in March when the Kosovan Albanians began to flee in large numbers, it was as if this river of hostility started to flow backwards. Suddenly, the media, previously concerned primarily with unveiling refugee welfare scams and illegal migration schemes, sympathetically related the desperate experiences of those forced to flee. Virtually overnight the dominant public perception of refugees as economic migrants gave way to a view of the displaced as worthy recipients of public and private aid. A substantial number of people offered to take Kosovans into their own homes. Even the actions of governments changed. Longstanding rhetoric on the need to deal with 'root causes' gave way to practical measures as NATO acted to end the humanitarian crisis, albeit through the pursuit of a controversial bombing campaign.

How did the Kosovo crisis produce a response that ran counter to the general tide of hostility towards refugees in Western states? Is there anything we can learn that might help us to elicit a more inclusive and humane response to refugees and asylum seekers in general?

## Kosovo in perspective

Viewed historically, popular refugees are hardly exceptional. Successful humanitarian responses to large-scale refugee movements have formed an important, if intermittent, part of post-war European history. UNHCR owes its own existence largely to the way it successfully coordinated the Western response to the refugee crises produced by the Hungarian uprising of 1956. Over 200,000 refugees temporarily hosted by Austria were permanently resettled across Europe and in other liberal democracies. Similar large-scale resettlement also characterized the response to refugees from Czechoslovakia in 1968. Arguably most successful of all was the response when hundreds of thousands of refugees fled Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s. Significantly all these refugees emerged from communist regimes. Their popularity owed as much to the ideological desire to demonstrate the moral bankruptcy of communist regimes as to humanitarian need. The response to the Kosovan refugees, on the other hand, occurred after the end of the Cold War, when a key prop supporting the popularity of refugees was no longer available.

If the popularity of the Kosovans is notable in historical terms, viewed comparatively the contrasts are even starker. Media coverage, financial resources and international concern lavished on Kosovo have represented a huge depar-

ture from the international community's responses to refugee and IDP needs in such places as Sierra Leone, the DRC and Ethiopia. On one estimate UNHCR has been spending \$1.23 on refugees per day in the Balkans, eleven times more than the 11 cents it spends daily on refugees in Africa. In Macedonia, many refugee camps had a ratio of about 1 doctor per 700, whereas many camps in Africa have one doctor for approximately 100,000 refugees.

In a number of Western countries, policies which had been constructed with an eye to restricting the entry and integration of asylum seekers were hastily rearranged for the sake of the Kosovans. After some indecision the US decided that providing temporary shelter for refugees at the Guantanamo naval base in Cuba, though judged suitable for Haitians, was deemed inappropriate for the Kosovans. In the UK, the Kosovans were able to bypass normal family reunion restrictions in a way unavailable to other refugees. In Germany, Kosovans, unlike previously arrived Bosnians, were granted the status of 'civil war refugees' rather than catego-

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rized as 'Duldung', mere temporary exemption from deportation. The distinctive case of the Kosovans is, however, indicated most clearly in the efforts marshalled for their reconstruction and return. By August 1999 over 60 nations and dozens of organizations had already pledged some two billion dollars in aid. According to UNHCR sources, this amount "far exceeded immediate need". All the while, crises in Africa simmer along with only a fraction of the humanitarian assistance required.

## What made Kosovo different?

It is tempting to attribute the Western response to the Kosovans simply to a desire to alleviate human suffering. From this perspective, what made Kosovo special was the magnitude and intensity of the suffering of the refugees concerned. But appalling as their situation was, there is little to differentiate the experiences of the Kosovans from almost all of the world's other 15 million refugees, most of whom have lived through experiences of equal horror or brutality.



Blace border camp, Macedonia

Alternatively, we might attribute this response to the increased awareness of suffering enabled by widespread media coverage of events in the Balkans. As one observer noted, it was almost impossible to walk around the camps in Albania and Macedonia without tripping over television cables. However, this view too falls short of providing a complete explanation. It assumes a simplistic, asymmetrical account of the relationship between the media and the general public, where the latter are simply passive consumers with no preferences of their own. Moreover, this offers no insight into why the media itself thought that the humanitarian aspects of this particular crisis were important enough to warrant such extensive coverage. If we wish to explain the reaction to Kosovo, we must consider those features of this crisis which linked the public, media and governments of Western states to the plight of this particular group of refugees. Let me briefly outline three such features.

The first of these is **regionality**. The practical significance of Kosovo owes much to the geographical location of this crisis in Europe. The proximity of Kosovo to key Western states raised the obvious possibility that a humanitarian crisis would impact directly upon their economic, social and political interests. In terms of direct costs, Western European states risked being faced with large-scale movements of refugees escaping conflict and human rights violations in the province. For states such as Germany, the UK and the Netherlands,

the prospect of refugees from Kosovo further burdening their asylum determination systems was one that they were understandably very keen to avoid. Moreover, there were clear limitations in applying traditional measures (eg visas and carrier sanctions) to keep these refugees out of Western Europe. The potential instability of the Balkans region, and in particular the ethnic fissure in Macedonia, made a policy of containing the refugees in the Balkans highly questionable in terms of regional security.

The location of events also had the potential to exact more indirect costs from Western European states. In particular, the situation in Kosovo threatened to detract from the prestige of those organizations charged with protecting European security. This was particularly true in the case of NATO which, robbed of its traditional rationale by the end of the Cold War, found a new *raison d'être* in the protection of 'humanitarian values' in Kosovo. The development of this humanitarian agenda has been seen in some quarters as a victory for a new kind of international politics, albeit one so far regionally confined, in which states are less motivated by their own national interest (narrowly defined), and increasingly by a concern to promote human rights. For some, on the other hand, humanitarianism is simply a convenient cover for a few powerful Western European states to use NATO to expand their influence and power across the entire European continent. In either interpretation, however, the location of

this crisis in Europe gave a special impetus to Western involvement and interest that has been lacking in most other refugee-generating situations.

The second feature is what I will call **implicatedness**. There has been much debate about whether the NATO intervention simply pre-empted the use of a mass expulsion campaign by Serbian authorities or provided the impetus for the creation of one. It is difficult to deny that the NATO bombing campaign turned what was, at most, a plausible scenario - the mass expulsion of Kosovans - into an immediate and pressing reality. This link between NATO's actions and the movement of refugees into Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro implicated the NATO countries (and their supporters) in the plight of Kosovan Albanians in a special way. It meant that these countries had played some - albeit complicated and unintentional - part in creating these refugee movements. It was thus hard for Western states to deny a duty to ease the plight of the displaced through the provision of temporary resettlement, aid and relief, or support for those neighbouring countries hosting the bulk of the refugees. Kosovan refugees thus had something going for them which other refugees from Ethiopia or Sierra Leone do not. Like the refugees created by the end of Vietnam war over two decades before, Western states had, through military engagement in support of their aims, come to feel a deep and special responsibility for their plight.

A final key factor I will call **relatedness**. Europe is more than simply a geographical region. It is also a category of identification: the signifier of a people sharing a common civilization and culture. Most of the time this identification means little, as the very limited success of recent European Union attempts to build a common European identity shows. It is possible that in terms of objective characteristics the differences among Europeans are as great as the differences between them and non-Europeans. Yet the response to Kosovo indicates that elements of this identity do have a great deal of force, not least when confronted by extreme suffering.

Most African refugees are enigmatic to Europeans. The lives they lead are perceived as alien - so different from their own that it is virtually impossible to imagine how they might be disrupted by displacement. This alienness is, moreover, magnified by elaborate, historically persistent and often racist assumptions. In the case of Kosovo, by contrast, Western audiences were confronted by refugees to whom they could relate. Here were forced migrants who looked and dressed like them, who fled by car (even facing traffic jams on their trip to safety) and who, through the use of articulate and well-educated translators, could express their suffering in terms that resonated with Western audiences. What made the Kosovans popular refugees was the ability of Westerners to see themselves - and their families, friends and neighbours - in the Kosovans' suffering. They were touched in a deeper way by their plight because they caught in these refugees an inkling of what it would actually be like to be a refugee.

### Learning from Kosovo

What can we learn from these features of the Kosovo response? Recognising the role that connections based on regionality, implicatedness and relatedness play in influencing our responses to suffering helps us to identify a gap between what we thought we were doing (responding to suffering) and what we were actually doing in the case of Kosovo (responding to the suffering of those with whom we have a strong connection). We need some way of bridging this gap, if we aspire to a world where refugees in the heart of Africa matter to us as much as refugees in the centre of Europe. The obvious way to do so is by striving to

purge our responses to refugees of the kind of arbitrary political and cultural biases that currently make some people's suffering count for less than others. International refugee law offers one model for a world without popular and unpopular refugees, one in which all refugees enjoy equal treatment. The 1951 Convention, as modified by the 1967 Protocol, is universal in scope. The Article 33 prohibition on refoulement applies to refugees as refugees, not just to those whose plight happens fleetingly to take the fancy of electorates in Western states.

Yet what was remarkable about the response to the Kosovans was that it went well beyond the basic (though fundamentally important) demands of international law. There is no international legal requirement that states evacuate refugees, or provide aid for the reconstruction of their homelands, let alone a requirement that the general public donate vast sums of money to humanitarian organizations. These features of the Kosovo response sprang not out of an impartial desire to alleviate human suffering but from people's sense of implication in, and relationship to, the plight of refugees involved. Perhaps the most important question to emerge in the aftermath of Kosovo is not how can we purify ourselves of the connections that make this kind of powerful response to refugees possible but whether we can replicate such a response to the situation of those refugees whose plight is currently neglected. Can we cultivate the kinds of connections that would make Ethiopians or Rwandans popular refugees?

We need to begin by recognising that the connections that underpinned the Kosovo response are social and political constructs that change over time. There is always the possibility, therefore, that they might be reinterpreted and put to the service of other groups of refugees. To get an indication of how this might be done, let us reconsider those factors that made the Kosovo response so powerful.

Starting with regionality, we need to ask what proximity can mean in a world where changes in technology, including transportation and communication, have fundamentally transformed the nature of distance. Is it really true to say that the long-term interests of Western states are unaffected by crises in Africa? In an international context where refugees

have the potential to cross continents to claim asylum, how much can regionality matter?

Moving to implicatedness, we may need to rethink what it is to be involved in the generation of refugees. While the link between Kosovan refugees and the NATO bombing campaign was particularly strong, Western states are connected, in more subtle ways, to other conflicts through arms trading, colonial involvement or support for governments or rebels. Are not Western states also implicated in the plight of refugees who emerge from these conflicts?

Finally, we need to recognise that the boundaries of relatedness are capable of revision and change. What stands in the way of Westerners relating to the experiences of African refugees is not an insurmountable gap but a set of assumptions that are largely the result of ignorance. By challenging these assumptions, and by striving to convey in a range of different ways the experiences of African refugees, public opinion in the West might begin to relate more closely to the situation of more of the world's refugees. Potentially the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of Western societies could serve as a springboard for reassessing who we, in Western states, are, and through this process to rethink our relationship to outsiders.

The process of cultivating connections is not guaranteed to result in a more inclusive response to refugees. Powerful historical, social and cultural forces will no doubt ensure that some refugees remain more popular than others. But the reaction to Kosovo demonstrates the ability of these connections to, at least for a short period, transform fundamentally the politics of responding to refugees. At a time when restrictionist policies show no signs of waning, more transformations of this kind may be exactly what we need.

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