

Comparative Iraqi and Ukrainian refugees' media coverage in Finland

Since the beginning of 2022 European Union solidarity has proved to be strong in welcoming Ukrainian refugees. This stems perhaps from the EU Brussels headquarters' political will and the ever-mediatized compassion for the sovereign state of Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. In the past, steps were taken to integrate Iraqi refugees into Finland. Despite political will to welcome these war and conflict zone refugees, Finland media seems to go slow to mitigate minority and migrant groups' misrepresentation and these being settled in Finnish society.

Media is a powerful tool to reinforce a welcoming culture. This article investigates how Iraqi and recent Ukrainian refugee stories are covered and how these groups are represented in the media. I talked to refugees, migration experts, and journalists about how they understood the issue and the refugee rate they represented.

Alina Zubko is a Ukrainian refugee living in Vassa, Finland. She said that she feels “well-accepted in Finland.” She informed me about what she has to do at the immigration office and feels that their employees are welcoming.

“Ukrainian are constantly greeted with a smile in this office so there is no reason to be sad and they also help us with any questions,” said Zubko. The 20-year-old, third-year law student from Vinnytsia, Ukraine, moved to Finland two months ago and has already been granted temporary permanent protection and an apartment.

The Finnish media coverage of Ukrainian refugees with Iraqi refugees as a backdrop

The University of Helsinki's lecturer on journalism and communication, Camilla Haavisto, argues that “the refugees in 2015 were different from Ukrainians today. In the case of the Iraqis, they were young men of a certain age whereas Ukrainians are largely comprised of women and children. The migration demographic looks completely different and it is also reflected in the way that the media treated traditionally women and children as victims of an international crisis or war rather than young men fleeing. This is a very skeptical critical discourse in the Finnish media.”

With that, Haavisto inevitably notes the general goodwill now in Finland for Ukrainians. She holds a strong view that it is somehow easier to raise sentiments of compassion and empathy toward the latest migrants, partially thanks to their skin color and socioeconomic status, comprising Ukrainian agricultural workers and their being portrayed as hardworking people. This collective assumption of the media is both sort of affirming and producing. It is different from the migration in 2015 where it was male-dominated, non-European and skin color was different.

Moreover, Noora Kotilinen, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä, points out, “Finnish attitude towards the people fleeing the Ukrainian war has certainly been more empathetic and understanding on a general level, and this is also mirrored by media representations. We have heard far less critical voices.

This is perhaps quite sad, but nevertheless, it is not something we can blame the media or the people for. This is something quite basic to human nature: when a crisis is near (geographically, politically, historically, and culturally), people tend to react in a more compassionate manner. This can be linked also to fear – people wanting to help because the war in Ukraine has made Finns realize that this sort of a catastrophe might just face us someday.”

Addressing one major problem in media coverage of a story captivating public interest around the conflict in Ukraine, the Head of Public Affairs at the Refugee Council, Katja Mannerström, observes, “The media has a major role in building public opinion on how refugees are perceived. Concerning Ukrainians, there is for instance building of similarities between Finnish people and Ukrainians.”

Also, the Finnish media gives the impression of signaling “Welcome to Finland. We are on your side. We will tell your story.” In other words, one is left with the impression that the media is speaking of support of the arriving refugees. It also sets the stage for them to tell their stories with 100 percent sympathy. For instance, now we have seen more journalists reporting on poor conditions in reception centers and giving a critique on the immigration service’s slow reaction, Mannerström said.

She added, “I think the media in 2015 was projecting fears. There was very little effort to contextualize why these people are coming as refugees. It was very focused on their imagined borders, focused on Europe mostly swarmed by culturally dissimilar peoples moving in. Thus, not only the high number of immigrants is a source of concern, but also mostly young men are seen as a threat. Associated with this are security issues and major concerns of immigrants receiving states and people.”

According to the Finnish immigration authority, around 80,000 refugees are expected to arrive from Ukraine. By 30 May, 25,000 Ukrainians had sought temporary protection from The Finnish Immigration Service.” In 2015, 32,000 people sought asylum in Finland; around 21,000 of them were Iraqis. More than 4100 returned to Iraq due to different reasons, one of which was that they felt unwelcome.

The special treatment of refugees in the media provokes the reaction of non-white migrants and refugees

“The Finnish media manifests a double standard,” said Waeel Shaker, an asylum seeker from Iraq. “The mainstream media do not treat the refugees who came from the Middle East and those from Europe equally”. He argues that there is also a double standard when it comes to how the immigration system perceives refugees' presence in their community. In addition to that, he reiterates that the narratives of the media are biased when it comes to refugee coverage and visibility in Finland.

Currently, he is using his refugee work permit to work as an entrepreneur and has his own mini-market. In Finland, after spending some time in the country, refugees are allowed to work. A week ago, Shaker received a negative decision from Finnish Immigration Service on his asylum reapplication. "I'm afraid they won't let me work," he said.

Apparently, Iraqi refugees did not get the same treatment as Ukrainian ones. The reason, some migration experts argue, is that compassion toward Ukrainian refugees went viral due to the geopolitical, historical, demographic, and strong “like us” identification. For instance, Alina from Ukraine has enjoyed compassion and care, guidance and support, something Shaker claimed he did not get it.

“I am sad for Ukrainians fleeing their country. I know what war means. I hope this war will be over soon. But Ukrainians came and they got a temporary protection permit within two weeks, whereas for us 3 years will take to get a decision,” says Shaker.

Every day, stories of the Ukraine war against Russia are in the Finnish news; eventually, the needs and demands of Ukrainian refugees follow suit. However, only rarely have Iraqi refugees' stories been seen. Apparently, Iraqi refugees have gone invisible, and this has hindered compassion toward their communities' inclusion needs and protection.

Shaker is one of the Iraqi refugees who have been living in Finland paperless for over seven years. “When our asylum re-application is delayed we ask them why don't make it fast. We got a response from the immigration office saying we don't have enough workers. For me this is sad. Why do they give different treatment to Ukrainians because they are white and Christian?”

Recently, non-white immigrants told Yle, Finland's national broadcast company, that they “criticize how unfair the Finnish system is, and they feel unwelcomed.”

Journalists' perceptions

Journalists in Helsinki argue that a lack of multilingual media programs, as well as misrepresentation, have hindered the visibility of many migrants and refugees in the Finnish mainstream media. Since May 2022, Yle has been providing a Ukrainian news service. According

to Yle, “the service is based on machine-translated stories.” For instance, during Covid-19, Yle provided coronavirus information in four languages: Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, and Somali. Yle does not provide continuous news coverage in these languages, except during the pandemic.

Journalist Sampsa Peltonen is an Arabic translator working at Yle (a national broadcast company). He says that since Iraqi refugees’ arrival in Finland in 2015, the language barrier has been one of their main challenges in reframing the narrative of how they have been represented. He adds that another factor was that this was a new phenomenon for local journalists, and there was little experience covering related immigration issues.

“In Yle, I am the only Arabic translator. I was completely overwhelmed with work because I didn’t really have many people that I could get help from,” he says.

He points out that covering Iraqi refugees’ stories was also a challenge for local journalists who had to find interpreters and translators to get the whole picture. “In the beginning, the voice of the immigrants was not heard very easily because of purely technical reasons,” he argues.

Peltonen describes how, at the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, he found it shocking how the Iraqis were received. “They fled from war and from misery – like Ukrainians, but the welcome was not the same.”

He argues that he understands that the reason could be that Ukraine is a neighboring country, invaded by Russia. It’s easier for a Finnish person to imagine what this is like for Ukrainian people.

Nevertheless, emphasizes Peltonen, “It seems Iraqi suffering isn’t as important as the suffering of Ukraine. So sorry for the Ukrainians; it is awful what happened in their country. They deserved a good welcome. But when you compare different welcomes it’s so disappointing to see that we are not able to give the people who look a little bit different from us a real welcome. All of a sudden, we have less empathy for them and that’s sad.”

Iraqi journalist Kadir Ali explains, “The Ukrainian war exposed the biased (perhaps even racist) side of the Finnish official system. The Finnish media now is crying a lot about the Ukrainian refugees and how they are victims of the invasion and war and they deserve shelter and assistance.” As if the Middle East had not witnessed wars and conflicts that caused migration and the need for asylum.

During my investigation and exploration of this coverage, it is true that not only Finland, but other parts of the world have been discussing why Ukrainian refugees have gotten more support and compassion from the international community than any other refugee group. The point here is that

geopolitics, actors in the conflicts, and geographic locations matter the most when it comes to refugee inclusion worldwide.

Identity representation in Finnish media

For the past years, identity has been one of the controversial topics in migration studies. Often, European media has been representing minority groups, particularly refugees, as a cultural, security, and identity threat to the nation. In Finland, some of the participants interviewed in this project argue that Iraqi and Afghan refugees, for instance, are among the ones who should be criminalized when it comes to public offenses or crimes.

Ukrainian refugees have been represented fairly well, compared to Iraqi refugees who have arrived in Finland since 2015. But, all in all, migrant and refugee misrepresentation has persisted in Finnish media. There are many factors that lead to this conclusion, according to different research findings: (1) media focus on negative stories; (2) crime reporting which is often linked to refugees and asylum seekers, particularly in Iraq and Afghan in Finnish society.

According to Iraqi journalist Kadir Ali, the Finnish media frequently highlights minor transgressions by a few refugees and accuses all other refugees – even all immigrants – of being rapists or criminals.

In Oulu, Northern Finland, in 2018–19, sexual crimes and rape committed by a small group of asylum seekers from Iraqi and Afghan sparked public anger. Some media used a broad brush to paint all asylum seekers as potential rapists. This is not an isolated case. In Germany, in 2015, there were what was termed “the Cologne attacks.” German women at the train station claimed that some Syrian refugees rounded them up and harassed them. The media took up the story and it was seized upon by the far right-wing.

Camilla Haavisto, a lecturer at Helsinki University, reacted to this incident by stating that “if a majority representative, a White Finnish man, is portrayed in the media as a criminal, people tend to make sense of the crime in terms of personal weaknesses or faults, such as mental health problems. On the contrary, if a coloured migrant commits a similar crime, people often see the background or community as the root of the problem. She added that it's not only journalists who do this. The media environment is so diverse, and bloggers and influencers who have right-wing affiliations take these stories out and spread them around.”

Meanwhile, Katya Mannerström explains that there have been several immigrant criminal case statistics and reports published “periodically criminalizing Iraqi and Afghan men as potential rapists.” The media likes narratives of individuals. Nowadays, the police and media publish the name of the person who has been convicted of a crime, and if the name sounds non-Finnish, people immediately see in their minds' eyes images of Iraqi and Afghan men. The bases for this are the

statistics and journalists' properly unsubstantiated articles. Sometimes there is debate over the journalist's understanding of the statistics.

Mannerström added, "Migrants' representation in the media is very often based on stereotypical images of immigrants in general. Women, particularly of Middle Eastern origin, are very often presented as victims of Islam and/or their culture," she said.

In media studies, there is what is called *proximity theory*. This means that the local and mainstream media may mainly focus on stories that involve citizens of their country rather than foreign issues. In terms of how the Finnish media may treat the identity issue in their reporting, it is presumed they may ignore refugee stories, considering them foreigners in this context, to focus on their citizens' concerns.

Will the media discourse change?

Camila Haavisto notices that the media discourse may change. "It's hard to say how it will change because, as migration researchers know, the demographics will change if the conflict lasts longer," she says. It is the early stage of Ukrainian migration and those who have had the opportunity to flee come from relatively high socioeconomic backgrounds. Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may not be able to flee yet but have the potential to do so later. And if we encounter harder times then we will have a lot of European refugees coming who are not as competent in our eyes as the contemporary migrants. It may be that the tone in the media will become much harsher against Ukrainians unheard of thus far. There is now general goodwill: Finns still are in a state of shock and could continue to stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian migrants.

It is true that Finnish media migration stories now are dominated by Ukrainian refugees, policies, and needs. Apparently, other groups such as Iraqis have been forgotten as long as the Russian war continues, with the geographic proximity of Ukraine to western Europe. Nevertheless, migration and media discourses are not fixed; rather they change according to world affairs. There is a strong belief of migration researchers that media coverage of refugees will get back to balance to some extent and all minority groups will be represented, though on a small scale. Misrepresentation will always be a minority concern, not a majority issue. In this regard, only state institutions and structural settings can change the frame.