

# Questioning Universal Humanism: The European Double Standard on Refugees

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## ABSTRACT

*About 4.6 million Ukrainians were forced to migrate to several European countries. This number is about four times the number of Syrian refugees seeking asylum in Europe. With a ratio of 1:4, European countries are more likely to accept Ukraine refugees in larger numbers, and this raises the assumption that there is a double standard among European countries in treating refugees between Ukraine and Syria. This assumption is primarily based on issues of race, religion, culture, and even politics. However, humanism's universal view neglected partialism and viewed humans as members of the human family who did not leave others behind. Furthermore, the Europeans who invented the concept of humanism itself in reality did not implement the concept universally but only in the European region. Therefore, with a descriptive-qualitative approach, this paper aims to emphasize that regional solidarity can go beyond universal humanitarian impulses. The theory of universal humanism is used as the primary standard in analyzing the phenomenon of the European double standard. It can be said that even though the Ukraine-Russia crisis has the potential to cause high inflation with slow growth, Europeans are still making solid efforts to help refugees from Ukraine. In other words, regional solidarity seems to be more of a priority than universal humanitarian impulses.*

**Keywords:** *Regional Solidarity, Universal Humanism, Refugees, Russian Invasion, Syria, Ukraine*

*Sekitar 4,6 juta orang Ukraina terpaksa bermigrasi ke beberapa negara Eropa. Jumlah ini adalah sekitar empat kali jumlah pengungsi Suriah yang mencari suaka di Eropa. Dengan rasio 1:4, negara-negara Eropa lebih mudah menerima pengungsi Ukraina dalam jumlah yang lebih besar, dan hal ini menimbulkan anggapan bahwa negara-negara Eropa menerapkan standar ganda dalam menangani pengungsi antara Ukraina dan Suriah. Asumsi ini sebagian besar didasarkan pada masalah ras, agama, budaya, dan bahkan politik. Akan tetapi, pandangan universal humanisme mengabaikan keberpihakan dan memandang manusia sebagai anggota keluarga manusia, yang tidak meninggalkan manusia lain. Selain itu, orang Eropa yang menemukan konsep humanisme itu sendiri pada realitasnya tidak menerapkan konsep tersebut secara universal, tetapi hanya di wilayah Eropa saja. Oleh karena itu, dengan pendekatan deskriptif-kualitatif, tulisan ini ingin menekankan bahwa solidaritas regional sejatinya dapat melampaui dorongan kemanusiaan universal. Teori humanisme universal digunakan sebagai standar utama dalam menganalisis fenomena standar ganda Eropa ini. Dapat dikatakan bahwa meskipun krisis Ukraina-Rusia berpotensi menyebabkan inflasi tinggi dengan pertumbuhan yang lambat, orang Eropa masih berupaya keras untuk membantu para pengungsi dari Ukraina. Dengan kata lain, solidaritas regional tampaknya lebih menjadi prioritas dibandingkan dengan dorongan kemanusiaan universal.*

**Kata-kata Kunci:** *Solidaritas Regional, Humanisme Universal, Pengungsi, Invasi Rusia, Suriah, Ukraina*

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The issue of European countries' double standards in handling refugees from Ukraine and Syria has become a central global issue. A number of practitioners and academics assess that what European countries have done for refugees from European and non-European countries applies double standards (Duz 2022; Banchio 2022). Moreover, journalists from several media outlets, such as Al-Jazeera and CBS, also commented, showing the inequality between refugees from Ukraine and those from outside Ukraine (Brito 2022). Not only that, a number of students from varied universities in Ukraine who came from outside Ukraine experienced difficulties during the evacuation process. For example, Rachel Onyengbule from Nigeria and Saakshi Ijantkar from India, the two students currently studying in Ukraine, reported to CNN regarding the limitations they experienced when they fled to other European countries as an impact of Russia's invasion in Ukraine (Busari et al. 2022).

In line with that, TRT World, a Turkish media outlet, also reported these double standards. The three-minute video described how Poland, as one of the countries receiving refugees, provides different treatment to refugees from Ukraine, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In the video, Lena and her family, one of the refugees from Ukraine, receive a warm welcome from Poland, where the Ukrainian flag is even plastered on the walls as a form of solidarity (TRT World 2022). Meanwhile, Mustafa Shimmari, a refugee from Iraq, reported that a female refugee from Iraq was beaten and eventually died while seeking asylum in Poland (TRT World 2022). The same thing happened to refugees who came from Afghanistan. Amnesty International also reports that European countries are implementing this double standard by offering different treatments to refugees (Euronews 2023).

Additionally, less than a year after Russia invaded Ukraine, the European Union (EU) activated the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) that the Council had approved since its implementation in the Kosovo War in 2001 as a sign of EU solidarity against the Ukraine crisis. In the TPD, without an in-depth individual investigation, anyone who leaves Ukraine is able to obtain harmonization rights in Europe for three years, including housing, health assistance, and access to work and education (Venturi and Anna 2022). Meanwhile, for non-European refugees, European countries do not seem to be very concerned about the refugees' situation and well-being. One of the refugees from Syria said that the Syrian refugees were still in tents and remained under the winter sun,

facing death (Hankir and Rabah 2022).

Several scholars have studied the issue of handling refugees in Europe. The Global Detention Project, in response to European countries' treatment of refugees from Europe and non-Europeans, stated that every country should implement a refugee protection regime without racial treatment (Global Detention Project 2022). On the other hand, several studies emphasize that each country still has the power to behave independently in dealing with refugee problems by heeding the rules of the EU or the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). In other words, there is still a gap between the EU and other countries regarding matters of handling refugees (Banchio 2022; Anadza 2019; Bordignon and Moriconi 2017). In addition, the problem of integrating refugees into Europe's host countries is still the main topic of discussion on the international political agenda (Robila 2018).

The application of double standards by European countries and reflecting on the handling of refugees by European countries raises the argument that regional solidarity among European countries packaged in humanitarian assistance is more dominant than universal humanism values. Meanwhile, the media is bridging this gap through the narration of their news. Many reporters from The Telegraph, CBS, BMF TV, Al-Jazeera, and NBC News reported that Ukrainian refugees embody certain differences compared to refugees from other countries, especially from the Middle East or North Africa. Through their comparison, these media build a narrative that states how Europeans' welcoming treatment in protecting Ukrainian refugees is slightly influenced due to the similarity between Ukrainians' behavior, culture, and values with the Europeans, which other refugees, like Syrians, do not have (Sales 2023).

From this assumption, the question arises: to what extent can regional solidarity defeat universal humanitarian drives in the handling of European and non-European refugees by European countries? The level of European integration and the universal humanism concept approach that Europe has adopted as a justification for the solidarity of European nations provide an answer to this question. This study has used a qualitative approach to compare the notion of regional solidarity that European nations possess with global humanitarian endeavors. According to Amy Blackstone (2012), this qualitative study aims to acquire a distinct perspective on understanding the phenomenon. This

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qualitative paper could explain and support the current argument that regional solidarity undermines universal human values as another viewpoint regarding refugee management in Europe. The contradiction between the universality of humanity and regional solidarity becomes the main reason why European countries apply double standards in dealing with the problem of European and non-European refugees.

Therefore, to answer this question, this paper is divided into five parts. First, the introductory section explains the sequence from the emergence of scientific problems to methodology. Second, the severity of the causes of refugees seeking asylum in Europe is based on the history of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees, both of whom are the result of wars. This section also compares critical refugee cases quantitatively and qualitatively. Third, in debating the level of universality and particularity in the concept of humanity, especially in Europe, it is found that universal humanism was founded in Europe. Therefore, the practice of universal humanism should be better in the place where it was invented. Fourth, the domination of regional solidarity values over humanitarian impulses that have universal values in Europe. This section describes to what extent the universal value of humanity infiltrates the social level in Europe. Fifth, the author provides conclusions, policy suggestions, and recommendations for further research.

### **Chronicle of Syrian and Ukrainian Refugees**

Lasting for over a decade, the Syrian refugee crisis is the largest refugee and displacement crisis in the world in this era (World Vision 2022). This certainly impacts us not only from a regional perspective but also globally. Syrian refugees are scattered in various countries, especially neighboring countries from Syria, namely Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt, including European countries. More than 1 million Syrian refugees seek asylum in Europe, with 59% in Germany and 11% in Sweden. At the same time, in countries such as Austria, Greece, the Netherlands, and France, the number of Syrian refugees only amounts to 2-5%; meanwhile, in other countries, it is just under 2%. (UNHCR Cyprus 2021). Additionally, authorities in EU+<sup>1</sup> nations such as Austria,

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<sup>1</sup> The EU+ countries include Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom (EOSC 2020).

Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom (EOSC 2020) that handle asylum requests have granted more than 1 million applications for international protection by Syrian citizens since 2011 (UNHCR Cyprus 2021).

Apart from the number of displaced people impacted by the Syrian crisis, the number of civilian victims, as well as the number of violations of the Geneva Conventions, made the Syrian crisis a crisis that occurred beyond expectations. In fact, a German diplomat who participated in a Carsten Wieland interview claimed that in his 20 years of working in the humanitarian field, he had never encountered a situation with as many complex difficulties as what occurred in Syria (Wieland 2021). Additionally, Martin Griffiths, the UN's emergency relief coordinator and chief of humanitarian affairs, reported that the country of Syria had the largest-ever need for humanitarian assistance, totaling \$10.5 billion (United Nations News 2022).

On the other hand, more than 4.5 million people in Ukraine have fled as a result of the Russian invasion, which has been going on for two months, namely since February 24, 2022 (UNHCR 2022a). Compared with the total population of Ukraine, which is 41.2 million in 2021 (State Statistics Service of Ukraine 2022), the percentage of evacuees from Ukraine is quite large, namely 11% of the entire population. This is the largest exodus in Europe since World War II. Therefore, various responses emerged regarding this crisis. For example, the print and electronic media mostly reported on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, the crisis has also triggered the emergence of World War III discourse, which appeared in various media, especially social media, along with the Russian-Ukrainian war.

The humanitarian situation in Ukraine has changed due to Russia's extensive military campaign against it. The impact of this invasion is the destruction of public facilities, disruption of the production chain, market disintegration, loss of human capital, and the large flow of refugees from Ukraine (Astrov et al. 2022). While the destination countries for these refugees are mostly European countries, with the largest being Poland, followed by Romania, Moldova, Hungary, Slovakia, Belarus, and other European

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countries (UNHCR 2022a), especially countries that are part of the Schengen area<sup>2</sup>.

This amount is negligible in light of the crisis that the Syrian civil war has caused. The number of Syrian refugees who fled their country was 5.7 million (UNHCR 2022b), although other sources put it at 6.8 million (World Vision 2022). However, if present, this number is approximately 30% of the total population of Syria, which amounted to 21.08 million at the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011 (Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics 2018). Thus, in comparison, Syrian refugees are larger than Ukrainian refugees in terms of the number seeking asylum abroad.

**Figure 1**  
**Comparison Between Total Refugees from Ukraine and Syria**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Total Refugees</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Syria	21.124.000	5.722.996	27,09%
Ukraine	41.130.432	4.656.509	11,32%

*(Source: Processed by authors from various sources)*

As seen from the data above, the civil war in Syria had a more significant impact than Russia's invasion of Ukraine in terms of absolute numbers and percentages. Therefore, it is crucial to explain the universal values embodied in the Western world's, particularly Europe's, conception of humanity.

### **The Debate on Universal Human Values in Europe**

The issue of refugees and migrants is widely discussed and developed in European countries. This issue is inseparable from the fact that several European countries, such as Germany, Switzerland, and Denmark, are the leading destinations for refugees. In addition, problems arise in refugee transit countries, especially southern European countries with coasts, such as Italy and Greece. This refugee problem is essential because the

<sup>2</sup> The Schengen Area is an area consisting of 26 countries that set aside their national boundaries so that citizens of each country can pass freely. The 26 countries are Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland (Schengenvisa 2022).

European Union's Refugee Acceptance System is not designed to accept large numbers of refugees, especially those driven from their countries due to war (Jones et al. 2017).

Europe itself is considered to be stuttering in dealing with the enormous wave of refugees in 2015–2016. Although the European Union has declared itself organizationally ready to accept refugees, there are differences among its member countries. The refugee crisis has resulted in several European countries tightening their borders so that the refugee policy, in general, cannot be implemented. Jones et al. (2017) write that the difference of opinion is more of a political problem because these countries do not know how big the wave of refugees will be when it enters their territory. In other words, European countries did not prepare themselves for the sudden influx of refugees.

In 2015, there were a total of 1,255,685 refugees who registered to enter Europe (Jones et al. 2017). Furthermore, in 2016, this number was even higher because there were one million new refugees who registered. The refugee crisis in central Europe in 2016 was considered a mistake by Germany through its “welcome” policy towards refugees from Syria in September 2015. The number of refugees then became unstoppable, reaching more than one million.

Essentially, European countries already have rules regarding refugees and asylum seekers in the Dublin Convention, which has been in force since 1997. The convention was renewed through Dublin III in 2013, which seeks to prevent asylum seekers from submitting multiple applications to different countries and curb the uncontrolled movement of asylum seekers through the Schengen Area (Jones et al. 2017). It does this by stipulating that refugees must apply for asylum in the first signatory country of the country where they arrive, which will then be responsible for making the decision. Moreover, refugees cannot restart the process elsewhere in the member state. As a regional institution, the European Union has guidelines for accepting refugees. These guidelines comply with the rules of International Humanitarian Law. According to the guidelines, the European Union has promised to uphold the rule of law for women, children, refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people, migrants, and other groups needing special protection against torture and ill-treatment (Najimdeen 2016).

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Jones et al. (2017) stated three reasons for the crisis to occur: denial of commitment to shared responsibility, denial of incentives for placing refugees, and lack of coordination between countries. These three reasons boil down to two things, namely financial and the number of refugees. Ten countries affected by the mobilization of refugees then spoke critically, declaring that it was impossible to process an unlimited number of migrants and refugees (Najimdeen 2016). European Union member states in Eastern, Central, and Southeastern Europe, such as Croatia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Austria, Bulgaria, and Romania, and even non-EU members such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, and Montenegro, were critical and put pressure on Greece to stem the influx of refugees.

This shows that even though refugees are a universal humanitarian problem, national and regional interests are still the basis for the actions chosen by each country or region. In line with the opinion of Boaventura de Sousa Santos that universality is a formation of Western culture (Santos 2009), the universality value of humanity is basically measured using the standards of Western countries, including Europe. In other words, Western countries are the originators of universal values in human terms. Still, Western countries also measure the level of these universal values by the standards they've established themselves. Later, the EU's use of the word "universal" experienced a lot of ambiguity. As Lucien Rapp comments, using the universal word by the EU with the noble cause that meets the complexity means that it finally must be returned to the previous term (Rapp 1996). Also, it indicates that the EU often uses the word "universal" at will without any consideration for the impact of its utilization.

After all of the debate, the meaning of universal in Europe seemingly has its own distinctive interpretation. The ambiguity of universal meaning in the concept of universal humanism comes within the framework of accepting the value of the dominant actor. Immanuel Wallerstein noted that the world we live in today uses the criterion of global universalism that copes with European universalism (Wallerstein 2006). In other words, the values coincided with the concept of humanism regarding the European values of humans and so forth. Gradually, non-Europeans will not know what these values are. Therefore, the meaning of universal that is spreading in the world is not the meaning of *universal* that is generally acceptable by others, and it seems paradoxical that it



must be accepted as a European value rather than universal as the world itself.

### **Regional Solidarity Beyond Human Understanding**

Humanity is not built on the basis of individuality but is established communally (Lyssy and Yeomans 2021). Thus, humanity views humans as a whole, not as partial. Articles 1 and 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) state that all humans are born equal and cannot be differentiated based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other views, country, property, birth, or other statuses (United Nations n.d.). This article refers to a universal theoretical and normative view of humanity. However, humanitarian problems such as refugees are complex problems, so they must be handled carefully.

Frank Decker (2002) argues that globalization increases the need for countries to integrate. As noted from the beginning, the solidarity between nations in Europe was at the heart of the EU project (Vignon 2011). Regarding regional cooperation, the EU is a regional organization known to be the most integrated compared to other regional organizations. According to Robert Cooper, the EU is included in the category of postmodern countries owing to its ability to accommodate state sovereignty within it so that it can submit to accepting supranational legal authority, namely the EU itself (Fonte 2011). This shows the regional exclusivity of Europe. However, in handling refugee problems, Europe has standards that can be applied regionally but do not limit the origin of refugees.

Judging from the structure, CEAS is one of the EU's legal authorities and is intended to standardize European refugee handling management. By definition, CEAS is an EU framework to reduce differences in refugee handling for EU member countries and strengthen technical cooperation between countries with external dimensions related to refugee issues (European Commission n.d.). The CEAS framework itself is an application of the Geneva Refugee Convention and Protocol, which in 1967 abolished regional boundaries for refugee destination countries and previously stated that Europe was a prohibited area for refugee destinations (UNHCR n.d.). This protocol should indicate that handling refugees is universal, neither national nor regional.

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This protocol acknowledges the extermination of a position based on a specific region or culture. According to Tone Svetelj's (2014) conclusion, universal humanism is something that all people should share in common, such as meaning, happiness, peace, and so forth, rather than prejudice based on culture, religion, nation, and other factors. Formally, the implementation of CEAS in the EU cooperates with the concept of universal humanism, which neglects the differentiation among humans. Otherwise, this normative approach did not meet the practical requirements of universal humanism itself and avoided the term universal humanism. In line with this indication, Donald Tusk stated in his speech:

“Tonight, I am making a plea for pragmatism and moderation. These are the very same principles that should guide our response to the other challenge facing Europe: the huge and increasing number of refugees. EU countries will not change their migration policies overnight. But our attitude to refugees is, in fact, an expression of European solidarity inside of Europe.” (European Council 2015)

In the case of the Ukrainian war, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, remarked that all those fleeing Putin's bombs are welcome in Europe (Leyen 2022). Although Leyen's (2020) remarks on Syrian refugees slightly considered welcoming Syrian refugees who want to build a better future in Europe, this remark presumably does not correlate with European deals with refugees. These two remarks indicate that the structural approach to implementing universal humanism did not do enough to permeate the understanding of the universal value of humanism. The rejection of Syrian refugees while welcoming Ukrainian refugees still occurs in Europe, and the narrative remarks of the media, especially Europe-based media, which differentiate the Ukrainian and Syrian refugees worsen this value. The mentality of regional superiority in Europe still exists; therefore, it reduces the understanding of universal humanism, which is the differentiation of humans based on their own values.

Additionally, there is no excessiveness when alleging that the war in Syria is much different from the war in Ukraine. The war in Syria did not influence Europe, while the war in Ukraine happened inside the European region. Accommodating Cooper's argument that the integration of Europe is postmodern, it indicates that European solidarity is beyond another level of solidarity in other

regions (Cooper in Fonte 2011). Its solidarity therefore makes the invasion of Russia encourage, to some extent, the emergence of Russian status as a common enemy for Europeans. This status then validated Europeans taking action against the Russian invasion solely in the name of solidarity, which resonates with Aristotle's statement that a common enemy could unite the actors (Aristotle et al. 1999), and the arrangement of accepting refugees is one of the actions. Wolfgang Schmale argued that, based on data, European solidarity is the most crucial aspect of European political culture, although it is used with a vast vocabulary (Schmale 2016).

The treatment of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Europe exemplifies how time and space can separate shared human values. In line with the thoughts of Immanuel Kant, who stated that shared human values are universally shared throughout human life in different cultures and times (Sticker 2021). Thus, universal values in terms of humanity are not entirely universal but are determined in each culture and era in which they are used. According to this argument, Makau wa Mutua argued that the conception of humanism is fundamentally Eurocentric and that the historical understanding of universal humanism is considered a claim of cultural hegemony in concealing one's identity (Mutua 2001). In other words, universal values in terms of humanity in Europe are limited merely to Europe and not to other regions. As a result, applying a double standard in Europe is not unusual; rather, it is an application of universal values by Europe itself.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of double standards is widely circulating among academics and practitioners regarding the handling of refugees from Ukraine and Syria in Europe. The various responses of European nations to the crises that occurred in mainland Europe and in other regions—in this case, the Middle East—demonstrate this. This difference in response shows that solidarity within the European region is higher than universal human values, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, and so on. The implementation of the standardization of refugee management in the Geneva Conventions through various regional regimes does not make universal human values truly “universal” without any limitations. This proves that humans cannot generalize all cultures with the same concept. Thus, Europe's inability to apply universal standards in handling

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refugees does not mean that Europe has a different perception regarding universal concepts; instead, these universal values are reduced to cultural values and the times in which they are defined.

Universal humanism is just a tool for empowering or strengthening the West's imperialism, i.e., Europe. As Wallerstein exposed, Europeans arranged the term universal humanism and created a single definition of universal itself based on European culture and knowledge. This definition did not meet the other definition. Therefore, the chronic crisis of refugees and asylum was not considered a factor of practical humanism in Europe; Europeans tend to consider regional solidarity and face it as a common enemy, even though the chronicle of the Ukraine war is far below the Syrian war. As we mentioned earlier, the regional solidarity of Europeans exceeds the humanitarian impulse that is valued as universal humanism. Additionally, humanitarian impulses—which are also based on the regional threat chronicle—rule out the chronicle of crisis.

As for policy recommendations, the EU should infiltrate the universal humanism value not only structurally but also culturally. The media also play a crucial role in spreading these values. This also creates challenges for the EU to provide undifferentiated news for Europeans. The historical background of colonialism should not determine the superiority of Europeans. For upcoming research recommendations, it is necessary to conduct further research regarding how the historical superiority background of Europe deepens the gulf of differentiation between humans. As a result, policymaking and people are not separate topics in the discussion of universal humanism; therefore, universal humanism should be applicable vertically as a regional organization and horizontally as a human being.

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