

They are ‘civilised’ and ‘look like us’: the racist coverage of Ukraine

*Are Ukrainians more deserving of sympathy than Afghans and Iraqis?
Many seem to think so*



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While on air, CBS News senior foreign correspondent Charlie D’Agata stated last week that Ukraine “isn’t a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades. This is a relatively civilized, relatively European – I have to choose those words carefully, too – city, one where you wouldn’t expect that, or hope that it’s going to happen”.

If this is D’Agata choosing his words carefully, I shudder to think about his impromptu utterances. After all, by describing Ukraine as “civilized”, isn’t he really telling us that Ukrainians, unlike Afghans and Iraqis, are more deserving of our sympathy than Iraqis or Afghans?

Righteous outrage immediately mounted online, as it should have in this case, and the veteran correspondent quickly apologized, but since Russia began its large-scale invasion on 24 February, D’Agata has hardly been the only journalist to see the plight of Ukrainians in decidedly chauvinistic terms.

The BBC interviewed a former deputy prosecutor general of Ukraine, who told the network: “It’s very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blond hair ... being killed every day.” Rather than question or challenge the comment, the BBC host flatly replied, “I understand and respect the emotion.” On France’s BFM TV, journalist Phillipe Corbé stated this about Ukraine: “We’re not talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Putin. We’re talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives.”

In other words, not only do Ukrainians look like “us”; even their cars look like “our” cars. And that trite observation is seriously being trotted out as a reason for why we should care about Ukrainians.

There’s more, unfortunately. An ITV journalist reporting from Poland said: “Now the unthinkable has happened to them. And this is not a developing, third world nation. This is Europe!” As if war is always and forever an ordinary routine limited to developing, third world nations. (By the way, there’s also been a hot war in Ukraine since 2014. Also, the first world war and second world war.) Referring to refugee seekers, an Al Jazeera anchor chimed in with this: “Looking at them, the way they are dressed, these are prosperous ... I’m loath to use the expression ... middle-class people. These are not obviously refugees looking to get away from areas in the Middle East that are still in a big state of war. These are not people trying to get away from areas in North Africa. They look like any.” Apparently looking “middle class” equals “the European family living next door”.

And writing in the Telegraph, Daniel Hannan explained: “They seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking. Ukraine is a European country. Its people watch Netflix and have Instagram accounts, vote in free elections and read uncensored newspapers. War is no longer something visited upon impoverished and remote populations.”

What all these petty, superficial differences – from owning cars and clothes to having Netflix and Instagram accounts – add up to is not real human solidarity for an oppressed people. In fact, it’s the opposite. It’s tribalism. These comments point to a pernicious racism that permeates today’s war coverage and seeps into its fabric like a stain that won’t go away. The implication is clear: war is a natural state for people of color, while white people naturally gravitate toward peace.

It’s not just me who found these clips disturbing. The US-based Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association was also deeply troubled by the coverage, recently issuing a statement on the matter: “Ameja condemns and categorically rejects orientalist and racist implications that any population or country is ‘uncivilized’ or bears economic factors that make it worthy of conflict,” reads the statement. “This type of commentary reflects the pervasive mentality in western journalism of normalizing tragedy in parts of the world such as the Middle East, Africa, south Asia, and Latin America.” Such coverage, the report correctly noted, “dehumanizes and renders their experience with war as somehow normal and expected”.

More troubling still is that this kind of slanted and racist media coverage extends beyond our screens and newspapers and easily bleeds and blends into our politics. Consider how Ukraine’s neighbors are now opening their doors to refugee flows, after

demonizing and abusing refugees, especially Muslim and African refugees, for years. “Anyone fleeing from bombs, from Russian rifles, can count on the support of the Polish state,” the Polish interior minister, Mariusz Kaminski, recently stated. Meanwhile, however, Nigeria has complained that African students are being obstructed within Ukraine from reaching Polish border crossings; some have also encountered problems on the Polish side of the frontier.

In Austria, Chancellor Karl Nehammer stated that “of course we will take in refugees, if necessary”. Meanwhile, just last fall and in his then-role as interior minister, Nehammer was known as a hardliner against resettling Afghan refugees in Austria and as a politician who insisted on Austria’s right to forcibly deport rejected Afghan asylum seekers, even if that meant returning them to the Taliban. “It’s different in Ukraine than in countries like Afghanistan,” he told Austrian TV. “We’re talking about neighborhood help.”

Yes, that makes sense, you might say. Neighbor helping neighbor. But what these journalists and politicians all seem to want to miss is that the very concept of providing refuge is not and should not be based on factors such as physical proximity or skin color, and for a very good reason. If our sympathy is activated only for welcoming people who look like us or pray like us, then we are doomed to replicate the very sort of narrow, ignorant nationalism that war promotes in the first place.

The idea of granting asylum, of providing someone with a life free from political persecution, must never be founded on anything but helping innocent people who need protection. That’s where the core principle of asylum is located. Today, Ukrainians are living under a credible threat of violence and death coming directly from Russia’s criminal invasion, and we absolutely should be providing Ukrainians with life-saving security wherever and whenever we can. (Though let’s also recognize that it’s always easier to provide asylum to people who are victims of another’s aggression rather than of our own policies.)

But if we decide to help Ukrainians in their desperate time of need because they happen to look like “us” or dress like “us” or pray like “us,” or if we reserve our help exclusively for them while denying the same help to others, then we have not only chosen the wrong reasons to support another human being. We have also, and I’m choosing these words carefully, shown ourselves as giving up on civilization and opting for barbarism instead.

- ***Moustafa Bayoumi*** is the author of the award-winning books *How Does It Feel To Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America* and *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror*.