

# Some Refugees Welcome? Frame Disputes between Micro-Cohorts in the Refugee Solidarity Movement<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *The transformation of social movement collective identity—the members shared understanding of the movement’s purpose, goals and means—is a central concern of movement scholars. A main driver of such transformations is disputes over framing the movements’ purpose, which arise due to the entrance of new micro-cohorts of activists with different views than those of the veteran cohorts. This paper provides unique insight into the rarely studied process of such frame disputes by studying the entrance into the refugee solidarity movement of a new micro-cohort of activists mobilized in response to the 2022 war in Ukraine. While united in the endeavor to assist the victims of the war in Ukraine, veteran activists and newcomer activists strongly disagree on whether other groups of refugees should be entitled to the same relatively high level of help offered to the Ukrainian refugees. Online ethnography of movement activity on the social media of Facebook allows us to access the framing disputes as they unfold. While major ideological differences exist between the veteran and newcomer cohorts, frame disputes are rare. Rather than the expected clash between cohorts, we find that the contentious and humanitarian practices were compartmentalized into different Facebook fora.*

## Introduction

Katrine: “Ukrainian refugees have been received with goodwill, a provisional law, and open arms. That is how it should be, in my opinion. However, refugees from other wars in the world have in the last couple of years been received with distrust, populist legislation, and closed doors, and that is unacceptable from our side.”

Peter: “Those that come from Ukraine have a wish to come home as fast as possible. They are also in jobs quickly; they recognize our way of living in this country. They become a part of the society they live in. The others [Ed: foreigners] do not want to work. They just want. They do not recognize our way of living.”

Martin: “@Peter: What are you doing here? Long live racism.”

Dan: “@Martin: What are you doing here yourself.”

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<sup>1</sup> This research received funding from SODAS and the Department of Political Science’s emergency grant on the Ukrainian war, the Carlsberg Foundation (Grant number: CF17-0199) and European Research Council (Grant number: 834540) as part of the DISTRACT project.

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The above quote is from a Facebook group where activists organize help for Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion of their homeland. Four activists clash over the status of Ukrainians vs. refugees from other countries outside Europe. While united in the endeavor to assist the victims of the war in Ukraine, they strongly disagree on whether other refugees should be entitled to the same help and care from Denmark and Danish citizens. Human worth is at stake (Boltanski 1999; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Joas 2013; De Coninck 2022). One veteran activist of the refugee solidarity movement, Katrine, maintains the universal dignity and entitlement to help all human beings irrespective of their national, ethnic, religious, political, sexual, and other characteristics. The other newcomer activist, Peter, draws a clear distinction between the worth of Ukrainian refugees and other refugees. The newcomer's view is that Denmark, being a European country, is first and foremost obligated to help refugees from its own culture who understand and adapt to "our way of living," whereas refugees from other regions of the world are not entitled to the same access to help and protection in Denmark because "they just want." Yet, despite their heated exchange, they still share the goal of helping Ukrainian refugees, and they participate in the same informal social movement organization. However, considering the apparent open conflict over the ideational basis for solidarity with refugees, one cannot help but doubt the durability of the organization if these questions are not settled. Social movement theory holds that, to be able to operate, motivate, and channel the energy of the activists, a shared understanding of what unites them must be established (Snow, Rochford Jr., et al. 1986; Melucci 1989, 1995; McAdam 1999; Tilly 2005; Passy and Monsch 2020, 2023). However, will the members succeed or fail in negotiating a collective identity capable of sustaining the movement?

The formation, endurance, and change of a movement's collective identity—the movement members' shared understanding of their purpose, worldview, motives, and means defined in relation and often opposition to other groups and actors—is a central question for movement scholars (Melucci 1989; Tilly 2005; Tarrow 2011). Collective identity is always in flux, being re-confirmed and re-defined through ongoing negotiations (Melucci 1995). However, when facing major events related to the movement's goals and ideology, the collective identity might be contested due to diverging views of the need for adapting the movements' goals, which Robert Benford (1993) has conceptualized as frame disputes. Nancy Whittier argues that a main driver of such processes is the entrance of new micro-cohorts of activists whose views of the issues salient to the movement are shaped by recent events, different from the formative events and resulting views of the veteran cohort (Whittier 1997). Thus, when a cohort of newcomers enters the movement with a different view of the movement's goals than that of the veteran members, the scene is set for frame disputes. The mobilization of new volunteers and activists in the refugee solidarity movement in relation to the 2022 war in Ukraine constitutes precisely such an event and a potential case of frame

disputes between a newly mobilized cohort of volunteers and the veteran cohort mainly recruited in relation to the recent mobilization of solidarity with refugees predominantly from Syria in 2015 (Carlsen, Gårdhus, and Toubøl 2022).

This study contributes by providing unique insight into the rarely studied phenomenon of micro-cohort structured frame disputes driving the transformation of social movement collective identity and ideology (Benford 1993; Melucci 1989; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Whittier 1997), thereby developing our understanding of the eventfulness of such transformations and how such framing disputes are enabled and constraint by the central moral principles of the movement (Abbott 1995; Goffman 1983; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014; Sevelsted and Toubøl 2023a). These insights are derived from studying one of the most salient movements in Western societies over the last decades, the refugee solidarity movement (Carlsen and Toubøl 2022; Della Porta 2018; Feischmidt, Pries, and Cantat 2019). We study the frame disputes as they unfold in situ when a new cohort of refugee solidarity activists entered the movement mobilized by the 2022 war in Ukraine and challenged the veteran cohort's collective identity and framing of the issue of refugee solidarity. We first describe the major ideational difference between the veteran and new cohort. The veteran cohort was highly critical of the government's differential treatment of refugees. Arguing on the basis of common humanity, they criticized the Danish government for implementing discriminatory and racist refugee policies. In contrast, parts of the new cohort were in support of the differential treatment of refugees. The new cohort deploys a set of deservingness arguments (De Coninck and Matthijs 2020; Oorschot 2006) to justify the differential treatment: One set of arguments focuses on the difference in situation, another on the difference in regional proximity, and lastly, a third set of arguments focuses on the difference in the type of refugee fleeing. Then we show that while there are major ideological differences between the veteran and the new cohorts, frame disputes were rare. Thus, rather than a clash between cohorts, we find that the contentious and humanitarian practices were compartmentalized into different fora. The critique of differential treatment of refugees was mainly articulated in veteran groups not central to the coordination of humanitarian aid.

While the above-sketched theoretical understanding of the process of collective identity transformation appears plausible, we lack empirical studies investigating such dynamics. The main reason for the lack of studies is the difficulty in getting access to the in situ negotiations of such frame disputes due to the ephemeral nature of social movement mobilizations making the formation of new micro-cohorts difficult to predict and reach (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015; Carlsen, Toubøl, and Ralund 2021a). When movement scholars realize that events have sparked the transformation of movements, the initial entrance of a new micro-cohort and accompanying frame disputes have often already been settled. Then, evidence is accessible only through retrospective sources hampered by recollection bias and post hoc justifications or meeting minutes in cases of formalized movements if such are available and sufficiently detailed to contain information on these micro-level negotiations. However,

given most movements' informal character, such detailed written records rarely exist. Still, with the advent of social movements organized on social media, we get better access to negotiations of collective identity and frame disputes (Carlsen 2019; Carlsen, Toubøl, and Ralund 2021a). Since the 2015 refugee crisis, the Danish refugee solidarity movement has predominantly been organized online in groups on the social media of Facebook (Toubøl 2017). We take advantage of this feature and use online ethnography to access the framing disputes as they unfold, enabling us to analyze how these negotiations develop over time and how their dynamics shift in relation to events sparked by state actors and the public debate in news media.

Our case under study is the internal dynamics of the Danish refugee solidarity movement. This movement has century-old roots, but its modern history began in relation to the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary and the civil efforts to help Hungarian refugees resulting in the formation of the movement's major NGO, Danish Refugee Council (Danish: Dansk Flygtningehjælp) (Fenger-Grøn and Grøndahl 2004). After a humanitarian political hegemony in Danish politics in the decades after WWII, during the last thirty years, the movement has increasingly been pushed on the defensive. Today, Danish politics on immigration and refugees are among the most restrictive in Europe, accompanied by a strong nationalist hegemony in the political discourse (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008; Siim and Meret 2019). The movement experienced an unexpected revitalization in relation to the 2015 "Syrian" refugee crisis resulting in a massive mobilization (Agustín and Bak Jørgensen 2018; Toubøl 2015, 2017). As fewer and fewer refugees came to Denmark, the movement's level of activity steadily decreased; however, only until the recent events in relation to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The War in Ukraine has sparked a new, massive mobilization of volunteers who, not exclusively but predominantly, focus on helping the refugees fleeing the Russian invasion of their homeland (Carlsen, Gårdhus, and Toubøl 2022). As we shall unfold in much more detail in the analysis below, the political approach to the Syrian and Ukrainian refugees diverges dramatically. Most of the political spectrum viewed the Syrian refugees as an unwelcome burden whereas Danish political leaders wholeheartedly welcome the Ukrainian refugees. This resulted in a provisional law exempting the Ukrainian refugees from crucial parts of the otherwise very restrictive Danish immigration and refugee regulation. As we shall analyze in depth below, the different public issue definitions appear to influence the activists' justifications for their engagement.

In what follows, we first develop our theoretical apparatus drawing on pragmatic and interactionist theories. We then unfold our empirical approach and argue for the suitedness of social media sources for studying the rank-and-file micro-level negotiations underpinning frame disputes and collective identity formation. The following analysis is two-fold: First, we develop the historical background, characterizing our case, the refugee solidarity movement. We also summarize the recent political developments in relation to the 2015 and 2022 crises, which constitute the backdrop of the online negotiations in the movement. Secondly,

we turn to analyzing the frame disputes in the movement. Finally, we discuss and conclude with the findings, including considerations of the findings' potential indication of a shift toward conditional moral justifications for humanitarian engagement, replacing the hitherto dominant universalist humanitarianism of the movement (Boltanski 1999; Joas 2013).

### **The eventfulness of micro-cohort structured frame disputes**

In this section, we first detail why analyzing the continuity and change of collective identity and movement frames are important. Then we turn to the importance of micro cohorts in explaining continuity and change in social movements' collective identity. Drawing on Benford (1993), we then point to the importance of frame disputes settling, fracturing, or ultimately undermining social movement mobilization. While collective identity theorists assume that collective identity needs to exist and are active within micro cohorts (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Whittier 1997), we argue that critical events, where internal movement differences cannot be ignored, create sites of difference where different and new collective identities emerge (Abbott 1995). Following critical events is the period where we are most likely to witness frame disputes that may result in a clash between the cohorts, transformation of the movement's overall collective identity or a replacement of the old cohort by the new. However, theories and studies focusing on the within-group interaction point to potential constraints on frame disputes within group settings due to the moral expectations and investments in a given setting (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Goffman 1974, 1983). Following this line of thought, we argue that a competing scenario to frame disputes between micro cohorts resulting in a clash, transformation, or cohort replacement is a scenario of compartmentalization (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014). In this scenario, the critique of differential treatment of refugees will be compartmentalized to other movement fora less vital to the coordination of humanitarian relief and help. This is done to avoid jeopardizing the humanitarian operation central to the movement which would violate the central moral cause of the movement, helping the refugees they solidarize with (Fernández G. G. 2023; Toubøl 2017).

Prominent theories hold that collective identity is necessary for collective action and social movement (Klandermans et al. 2002; Melucci 1989; Tilly 2005). Without a collective identity, that is, a shared understanding of the challenges at hand, their historical origin and why certain actions can overcome the challenges and create what is perceived as a better future, collective action cannot be achieved as the expression of the collective goals, aspirations, and visions of the movement (Melucci 1995). Thus, developing a collective identity is an ongoing core task of any movement involving micro-level negotiations (Taylor and Whittier 1992), framing the movement (Benford and Snow 2000), and creating shared narratives (Coley 2015; Ganz 2020; Polletta 1998). The collective identity is constantly renegotiated among the movement members, revitalizing and stabilizing the movement and creating the condition for persistent collective action (Passy and Monsch 2020).

However, the opposite focus, why collective identity changes, is just as important. Nancy Whittier (1997) argues that collective identity changes when new micro-cohorts are mobilized. These micro-cohorts have a different collective identity than the veteran cohorts. The reason for this is that their political outlook is created in a different experiential present. She further argues, “When changes occur in the contexts that shape cohorts’ collective identities, recruits who enter the movement at different times have different politicising experiences and hence construct different collective identities” (Whittier 1997:763). Every cycle of mobilization within a certain movement has its respective central issues, conflict, and surrounding political context, collectively making out different politicization experiences. These experiences become defining for the identity of the cohort that mobilizes for the first time in a given movement. If you are already active—a veteran in the movement—any given future cycle is less likely to impact your political identity (Carlsen, Toubøl, and Ralund 2021b). A supplementary explanation is that not only does the present issue and political experience shape new cohorts’ outlook differently than the outlook of veteran cohorts, but the present political situation might also mobilize different segments of the population with very different values than the veterans. Thus, the political and moral composition of the movement might change dramatically because the present political situation’s definition of the issue has the power to mobilize different parts of the population for the seemingly same cause as the one that earlier mobilized the veterans.

Although not central in her theoretical model, frame disputes are a part of Whittier’s empirical analysis. Different micro cohorts of feminists have different views of important avenues of furthering the feminist course, resulting in internal movement disputes. Benford (1993) uses the concept of frame disputes to get closer to the actual negotiations and disputes within a movement. Movements are composed of many different organizations; even within organizations, there are many different groups and scenes (Lichterhan and Eliasoph 2014). While they might share an overall goal, in our case of helping refugees, they are likely to disagree regarding specific objectives and strategies. Framing disputes do not necessarily need to have a social group representing the different sides of the dispute, yet when this happens, disputes can generate movement fractions with emerging competing collective identities.

Whittier’s investigation starts from where each cohort has already developed distinct and active collective identities. However, prior to this, the difference between the collective identities and varying frames must be articulated, and for that to happen, they need events or situations where the differences become relevant, and the cohorts’ collective identities are constituted as distinct as opposed to one cross-cohort covering collective identity. Andrew Abbott claims that events, or sites of difference, create boundaries that might stabilize into different things, in our case, collective identities (Abbott 1995). In other words, activists might have different moral standpoints and different politics, but as long as these are not consequential for the coordination of movement action, there are no disputes and no reasons

for different collective identities to take shape. In the words of Boltanski and Thévenot (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), there needs to be some critical situation where activists cannot set their differences aside and have to engage in a dispute. It follows that recurrent frame disputes in critical situations might lead to the formation and stabilization of different collective identities and fractions within a movement, potentially resulting in a split, dissolution, or transformation of the movement.

This motivates our final question: Can a movement with different collective identities but shared practice and pragmatic goals exist? According to theories of social movements that see social movements as defined by their collective identity, the answer is clearly no (e.g. Della Porta and Diani 2006). Different collective identities are more plausible in theories that define social movements in terms of a loosely organized network or group of actors who organize and act in concerted ways to achieve some political or social goal or change (e.g. Snow 2013; Turner, Killian, and Smelser 2020). Concepts such as movement coalitions and alliances have been utilized to capture that often cooperation and organized collective action toward a shared goal is achieved without the presence of a strong collective identity or well-developed framing of the movement (McCammon and Moon 2015; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010).

For such a compromise to be efficient, certain arrangements or shared understanding must be in place to avoid a situation where clashes between cohorts take up all the movement's attention, rendering it inefficient. Elisaoph and Lichterman (2014) have conceptualized such a situation as the compartmentalization of different scene styles. That is, different scenes' interactional styles allow for different forms of critique and issues to be voiced within the movement. Each cohort may have scene styles that allow and encourage voicing their views and understanding of the situation, including political critique, which are at odds with the collective identity of the other cohort. However, in the scenes where the cohorts collaborate to reach the goals that they agree on, the interaction style does not allow for voicing concerns and views that may create tension and division. The compartmentalization of frames and forms of engagement is especially relevant in the refugee solidarity movement due to its dual commitment to direct humanitarian action and contentious politics (Carlsen and Toubøl 2022).

Given these theoretical considerations, what are the empirical scenarios we can expect when a new crisis occurs and a new group of refugees needs help, potentially resulting in the mobilization of a new micro-cohort of activists with different views of the issue? We hypothesize four scenarios: The first three build upon a strong requirement of unison collective identity. The fourth allows for more flexibility. 1) *Clash* between cohorts resulting in frame disputes and the rise of movement factions related to the different standpoints on the deservingness of refugees. 2) *Transformation* of collective identity, possibly in the aftermath of a conflict. Negotiation and compromise construct a new collective identity within the

movement. 3) *Cohort-replacement* is when the collective identity changes because the veteran activists simply stop being active and leave the movement to the new cohort of activists whose values become dominant. 4) *Compartmentalization* is when the movement continues to collaborate, across different cohorts, despite their sustained differences in collective identity, due to the compartmentalization of voicing their conflicting framings.

## **Data and method**

The data used in this paper stems from ongoing online fieldwork in the refugee solidarity movement. The data collection and observation sites have primarily been refugee solidarity groups that organize in Facebook groups. This has, in many crisis situations, been the favored mode of organizing in Danish informal civil society—evident in the refugee crisis in 2015, the COVID-19 crisis, and the current Ukrainian refugee crisis (Carlsen, Gårdhus, and Toubøl 2022; Carlsen, Toubøl, and Brincker 2021; Carlsen, Toubøl, and Ralund 2021b). The collection of refugee solidarity groups on Facebook has been made in two different iterations, one in 2016 and one in 2022, with compatible yet distinct sampling strategies.

The 2016 sampling sought to cover a large sample of Facebook groups mobilizing to provide support (both humanitarian and political) for refugees. We used an extensive keyword search and manually snowball sampled through the groups. This provided 165 groups (Carlsen, Toubøl, and Ralund 2021a; Toubøl 2017). The 2022 sampling strategy differed in that we were interested in the groups that emerged particularly to support the refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. Observation of our 2015 sample of groups confirmed that much of the activity around the refugees from Ukraine was happening in groups dedicated toward this more limited subset of refugee solidarity groups, many of them emerging in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, we searched for Ukrainian solidarity groups using two types of searches: one general and one locational, using the Facebook search function. The general search targeted national groups that sought to help Ukrainian groups. For this search, we simply searched for "ukraine help" (Danish: "ukraine hjælp"). The locational search targeted locale groups and searched for Ukraine and a list of locations (all places with a postal code), resulting in 581 different queries. Many of the same groups were returned from each query, and we located approximately 800 different groups, of which 128 were Ukraine help or solidarity groups (Carlsen, Gårdhus, and Toubøl 2022). Our qualitative observation from the recent Ukrainian refugee mobilizations stems from the more central groups in terms of members and coordination of relief efforts.

Key to the current analysis is 1) text data on the articulation of different frames and 2) information revealing which cohort the individual members are a part of. Facebook groups' data provides rich information on the former. We have access to the internal group interaction, including posts, comments, comments-to-comments and reactions. As mentioned in the introduction, a provisional law was passed in parliament on very short notice to exempt the Ukrainian refugees from crucial parts of the otherwise very restrictive Danish immigration



legislation. No such law was passed or even considered in the case of Syrian refugees. In fact, the Syrians were faced with stricter regulations, including the infamous jewelry law (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2017). Thus, as we shall discuss in more detail below, the provisional Ukrainian refugee law was seen as in stark contrast to the hitherto restrictive approach to refugees. For our research design, we exploit the provisional law as a critical event that provokes different responses from the activists and clarifies the different moral positions. Similar sampling strategies are found in controversy analysis (Venturini 2010), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1996), and French pragmatism (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), all of which see controversy and conflict as fruitful cases for studying morality in social life. Searching for the posts and comments containing the term provisional law (Danish: "særlov") allowed us to effectively locate moral disputes that were otherwise rare in the data. Posts and comments containing critique or justification of the differential treatment of refugees were analyzed in-depth when located. The analysis focused on the arguments constituting the framing of the situation of the Ukrainian refugees. Knowledge of cohort membership is more challenging. We inferred this either from membership in veteran groups or from the members' own stories of past activism.

Our observations stem only from publicly available information. The publicness of the data increases the chances of re-identification. To decrease the possibility of re-identification, we altered the names and presented the quotes only in a translated and slightly altered fashion. The latter is done while preserving the most important aspects of content to give the reader the best conditions for evaluating our interpretations of the empirical material.

### **Historical Background - 2015 refugee crisis and the xenophobic political turn**

The political reception of the Ukrainian refugees constitutes a stark deviation from contemporary Danish immigration and refugee politics. From being among the first to sign the UN 1951 Refugee Convention and being celebrated as the most humane immigration regime in the world, the shifting Danish government, social democratic and conservative-led ones alike, introduced still stricter regulations of immigration. Today Denmark has some of the strictest regulation of immigration in the EU (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008; Siim and Meret 2019).

This shift was also evident when thousands of Syrian refugees arrived in Denmark in what has become known as the 2015 refugee crisis. While Denmark historically has been willing to receive large numbers of refugees and implement provisional regulations to accommodate the urgent needs of refugees in such crisis situations, as in the case of refugees fleeing the civil wars in Ex-Yugoslavia 1992-1999, this was not the case in 2015. Mainstream politicians did not welcome the refugees; they pursued a politics of deterring refugees from coming to Denmark. Prominent examples are lodging refugees in former prisons and tent camps or the so-called "jewelry act," implying confiscation of all valuables in excess of c. 1,500 €, including personal belongings and heirlooms (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2017).

These policies did not represent a large part of the population which mobilized in solidarity with the refugees and formed one of the largest movements in Danish history, with chapters in all municipalities and more than 100,000 members on social media (Agustín and Bak Jørgensen 2018; Gundelach and Toubøl 2019; Siim, Krasteva, and Saarinen 2019). Symptomatic of the dramatic shift in Danish immigration politics over the last forty years, the highly contentious political context implied that the refugee solidarity movement had explicitly to justify its humanitarian approach to the Syrian refugees (Toubøl 2017). Engaging in relieving the plight of refugees was no longer uncontroversial and required an explanation which was coined as follows by the dominant faction of the movement, The Friendly People:

We do not consider why the asylum seekers are here or IF they should be here. We relate to THE FACT that they are here. So we leave it to the authorities to assess IF they have the right to be here. Until this decision, we are friendly and welcoming to them—this, we believe, is to show ordinary humanity and decency.

There is not only a need to justify humanitarian involvement, that being “friendly and welcoming to them” is “ordinary humanity and decency,” but also explicitly position themselves as non-political and refrain from taking a position on “IF they [refugees] should be here.” This movement frame lacking any political connotations or references to, for example, human rights or anti-fascism, bears witness to the humanitarian movement’s decline from a hegemonic position in the aftermath of World War II to being in a defensive position, fighting to salvage what is left of its values and principles in Danish institutions (Boltanski 1999; Joas 2013). This approach of de-politicization was also evident from many of the movement’s Facebook groups banning political and contentious discussion and hence crowding out any critique directed towards xenophobic and anti-immigrant politicians, regulations and sentiments in the population. One of the reasons for not engaging in critique was to enable a broad humanitarian effort, and the movement’s de-politicized framing was explicitly molded to handle a very hostile political environment and enable mobilization, in which it succeeded (Toubøl 2015).

The political situation around the Ukrainian refugee is completely different. While the estimated number of refugees arriving in Denmark is manifold larger than the number of Syrian Refugees, comprising an enormous task for Danish welfare institutions, politicians, and the population almost unanimously welcome the Ukrainian refugees. This positive attitude toward the Ukrainian refugees has already had institutional consequences in the form of the passing of a provisional law granting Ukrainian far better conditions and rights than other

groups of refugees, including suspending the controversial jewelry act for Ukrainian refugees<sup>4</sup>. The law was passed in parliament with support across the political spectrum.

This radical change in the political systems positioning toward the refugee has consequences for the refugee solidarity movement, which mobilized similarly back in 2015. While in itself a political move toward the movement's demands of a more humane refugee politics, the fact that the law covers only Ukrainian refugees, who then are treated significantly better than refugees from other parts of the world, makes the law constitute a dilemma in the movement: Should discrimination be tolerated because it is better that some receive a more humane treatment than others compared to the alternative of all groups of refugees receive, what the movement perceives as the same inhumane treatment? The value of universalism is at stake (Joas 2013). This dilemma is underlined by the law being motivated by an argument delimiting Ukraine as being part of the regional area that Denmark has a special obligation toward and Syrian not being close enough to Denmark. Some politicians even go as far as to suggest that it is justified because Ukraine is a Christian nation and Syria is not (e.g. Andersen 2022).

Finally, this also alters the composition of the movement because the novel discourse and perception of the Ukrainian refugees mobilize new segments of the population that believe the Ukrainians do deserve special treatment compared to other non-European groups of refugees, as we observe in the analysis below. Thus, the dilemma is a source of tension between the movement and politicians and a source of controversy within the movement between different cohorts of activists. How is this dilemma handled within the refugee solidarity movement, which tensions does it create, and what with consequences? In the next section of the analysis, we draw on ongoing fieldwork in the refugee solidarity movement and seek to conceptualize the tensions sparked by the arrival of the Ukrainian refugees.

### **Online ethnography of the micro-cohorts' frame disputes**

We begin by detailing the veteran cohort responses to and evaluation of the provisional law. We find a core frame around the principle of universal and equal rights captured by the phrase *a refugee is a refugee*. The provisional law is, by this frame, judged to be highly discriminatory, even racist, in its differentiation between groups of refugees. We then turn to the newcomers' frame. Some newcomers openly seek to justify the provisional law and the differential treatment of refugees. We deem this a deservingness frame in that the newcomers use deservingness criteria to justify why Ukrainian refugees should have better treatment than refugees from other areas. Here, access to help is not equal and universal but conditional. This frame stands in stark opposition to that of the veteran cohorts. The ideological difference provides grounds for a frame dispute between the cohorts. We end by reporting on the extent

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<sup>4</sup> Law nr. 324 of 16/03/2022, "Law on temporary residence permit for persons displaced from Ukraine": <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lt/2022/324>

to which this is the case and find nearly no traces of framing disputes within the Ukrainian refugee solidarity groups. Most of the veteran cohort critique is happening in different groups than the ones central to the current mobilizations' coordination of support. Thus, we find that instead of a clash, transformation, or cohort replacement, the scenario is one of the compartmentalization of frames. Finally, we discuss various reasons why the activists do not articulate their frames in the groups of coordination of support for the Ukrainian refugees and thereby seem to avoid frame disputes.

#### *The veteran cohort's framing—the critique of the Ukraine privilege*

Many from the veteran cohort, both in terms of single individuals and groups active before the 2022 mobilization, are critical of the state's differential treatment of refugees, evident from the harsh critique they launched against the provisional law.

Initially, there was a hope that the Ukrainian refugee situation would create a political opportunity to change the Danish asylum law because the Ukrainian refugees unveiled all the most problematic features of both Danish and EU asylum policies. Actors in the movement were quick to emphasize this agenda. For instance, one of the most central NGOs, Refugees Welcome, stated, “The current crisis situation clearly demonstrates that there is a need for a decent Danish asylum policy, more convergence in rules in the EU, and an effective and fair distribution key.”<sup>5</sup> To begin with, it also seems likely that many new Danish refugee activists would turn toward a critique of the asylum system and the government because the regulation undermined their humanitarian efforts. In the early phase, before the provisional law, Refugees Welcome sent out a pamphlet entitled “How would Ukrainians' situations be in Denmark? The short answer is: bad,”<sup>6</sup> warning Ukrainians against coming to Denmark due to the country's particularly restrictive regulation. The pamphlet lists various legal reasons why Ukrainian refugees would be worse off in Denmark compared to other EU countries. This created uncertainty in many groups and a growing sense of the regulation being too restrictive. However, the provisional law displaced this critical situation that could unite large parts of the population in a collective critique of the reigning asylum politics. After the government announced their plans for a provincial law, volunteers referred to this extensively to provide certainty for activists that they would be able to ensure proper conditions for the Ukrainian refugees.

The provisional law partly undermined the political opportunity for contentious mobilization, and this was the case because it supported many in their immediate humanitarian efforts and ensured much better conditions for the Ukrainian refugees. Instead of uniting the

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<sup>5</sup> “Den nuværende krisesituation viser med al tydelighed, at der er behov for en anstændig dansk asylpolitik, mere ensartede regler i EU, og en effektiv og fair fordelingsnøgle.” <https://www.facebook.com/refugeeswelcomedenmark/posts/7172446619492161>, visited 2023-01-03

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/refugeeswelcomedenmark/photos/a.782330581837162/7154069487996541>, visited 2023-01-03

cohorts, the provisional law created a split within the refugee solidarity movement between the veteran cohort of refugee solidarity activists mobilized and shaped in relation to prior waves of refugees in the context of a radically different and very hostile political climate, and the new cohort of refugee activists dedicated to helping Ukrainian refugees here and now enjoying the widespread support from leaders across the political spectrum and the general population's positive attitude (Hedegaard and Larsen 2022).

Many veteran activists were appalled by the new provisional law. As one activist stated: "Today, politicians voted for Apartheid in Denmark." Another activist from a veteran group sarcastically wrote that "there are refugees who get a train ticket and are allowed to keep their wedding ring, and then there are refugees that have to deliver their wedding ring and walk on the motorway," under one of the iconic pictures from the 2015 refugee crisis where refugees are walking on the Danish motorways and with reference to the infamous jewelry law.

The core principle guiding many from the veteran cohort was frequently expressed by the phrase "a refugee is a refugee," suggesting that the rights of refugees are universal, and all refugees should be treated with the same dignity and care. The fact that European, Christian, and light-skinned refugees had more political support than refugees with a darker skin tone, Muslim faith, and origin in the Middle East or Africa violated many of the veteran cohort's universal humanitarian ideals. Thus, their framing of the situation around the provisional law articulated accusations of racism and discrimination on the basis of the principle of common humanity, which had been replaced by differential treatment of refugees making access to help and protection conditional on their origin.

#### *The newcomer cohort's framing: Justifying the differential treatment*

For the newcomers, the provisional law's first and most prominent justification is that it enables refugee support in times of crisis. Yet, this is a limited justification of the law, pertaining more to planned action where actors are concerned with reaching a specific goal and not justifying the moral logic underpinning the law. The more principled justification revolves around three overall arguments: 1) a difference in situation, 2) a difference in regional proximity, and lastly, 3) a difference in the type of refugee.

The first set of arguments concerns the difference in the situation between the war in Syrian and the war in Ukraine. This argument holds that 1) the antagonist is more pronounced in the war in Ukraine, where the State of Russia represent a unified, easily identifiable perpetrator, compared to the complex civil war in Syria. 2) Ukraine and Western countries are allied in the conflict against Russia, where Ukrainians carry by far the highest costs and therefore deserve support. As one member puts it, responding to a critique of the provisional law privileging refugees from Ukraine: "Russia attacked Ukraine; it's not a civil war. If Russia wins it, they will likely continue to Poland....Ukraine is fighting for the other nations that do not dare to go to war." In a later comment, the same member states, "If it was a civil war

in Ukraine, no one would help, just as in Syria.” These comments are not merely an analysis of the political situation but arguments that seek to justify the Ukrainian privilege because they occur as responses to the critique of Ukrainian privilege. They function as modes of disarming critique.

A second argument concerns the geographical proximity of Denmark and Ukraine. The Social Democratic government clearly saw the provisional law as a natural extension of their principle that humanitarian relief for refugees should happen in the local region. This justification was also used when implementing policies to keep refugees away from Denmark in the the Syrian refugee crisis. Some activists in the Ukrainian refugee solidarity groups also took up the geographical argument. As one activist argues in response to a critique of discrimination:

The critique underlines the tasteless and historical ignorant tendencies in the debate about foreigners. Especially those who think we give special treatment to Ukrainians, because they are Christian, white, or European. No, what we are doing is to take responsibility in our local region.

According to this activist, those who critique the discrimination behind the Ukrainian privilege have misunderstood the situation. Privileging Ukrainians has nothing to do with religion, race, or European identity but simply geographical proximity. Another activist argues: “It is fine that people fled from the war back then [the war in Syria]. But there are many regional countries that can help better locally. Just like we now do locally. That is why I call it neighborhood help.” The justification of the Ukrainian privilege differs in the intensity of their counter-critique; sometimes, the counter-critique is very strong (“tasteless and historical ignorant tendencies”) and other times less harsh, yet insisting on justifying the difference.

Lastly, there is the justification of Ukrainian privilege that refers to a difference in the type of refugees. Many of the criteria used to justify discriminating between Ukrainian and other refugees, especially Middle Eastern, can be described with reference to the central criteria in deservingness theory, namely *control* (less control, more deserving), *need* (the greater the need, the more deserving), *identity* (the closer to ‘us,’ the more deserving), *attitude* (the more compliant, the more deserving), and *reciprocity* (the more reciprocation, the more deserving) (Oorschot 2000, 2006). In addition, some arguments go beyond these criteria and stress the loyalty and bravery of the Ukrainian people.

With regard to the *need* of the refugees, activists refer to the age and gender of the refugees. Ukrainian refugees are women and kids, whereas other refugees typically are men traveling ahead to secure routes and destinations for their families. Another set of arguments regards the difference in *attitude*: “The Ukrainians show great gratitude and don’t want to be a burden. The others demanded and demanded and did not want to conform. They might now learn that it would help them to have another attitude.” Another activist activates the identity criteria of cultural proximity to assert the *undeservingness* of the Syrian refugees compared

to the Ukrainians when writing, “Their [the Syrian refugees] religion might fit in in the middle east, but not here.” One might suspect that a hostile attitude toward Muslim refugees is a highly peripheral position in the groups. However, judging from both the number of critical comments of other refugees and the distribution of likes between those who critique discrimination and those who justify it, it seems that this position is not a marginal position within the groups of Ukrainian refugee solidarity activists. A last contrast that is drawn between especially Syrian and Ukrainian refugees is that the latter men have stayed and are fighting against the Russian invasion, while the Syrian men fled from the war. As one member put it: “The Ukrainian men stayed home and fought👍👍; the Syrian men did not👎.” On multiple accounts, the perceived Ukrainian loyalty and bravery were used to justify privileging this group of refugees.

The new cohort's justification of the differential treatment did not have the same unity in its frame as the veteran cohort. However, it does seem to draw upon logics of responsibility—the Danish population is responsible for refugees only in its geographical region—and logics of deservingness—not all refugees are equally deserving of our help. Both these logics have seldom been activated in the veteran cohort to justify helping some and not other refugees; hence, it seems to constitute a shift in the framing of the refugee solidarity movement.

#### *Why so little frame dispute? Compartmentalizing the refugee solidarity movement*

Despite the sample of critical and justificatory from which the above quotes are drawn, to our surprise, such exchanges were rare within the Ukrainian refugee solidarity groups. As clarified above, theoretically, we should expect frame disputes: There are two different cohorts with very different values and framings of the refugee issue. In addition, we have major political events (the passing of the provisional law), which precisely attenuated the cohorts' differences and the likelihood of a clash. However, we see very few frame disputes. Why?

The most obvious reason is that very little of the above critique of the provisional law and discrimination were not expressed in the newly formed groups to help Ukrainian refugees. Instead, this happened in veteran groups formed during the 2015 mobilization of solidarity with Syrian refugees. These groups, however, were not central to the organization of support for Ukrainian refugees in 2022. This means that there were few occasions for frame disputes because the new cohort was not active in the veteran groups. From our online ethnography, it seemed that quite a few from the veteran cohort were active in the newly formed Ukrainian support groups, yet, in many cases, they did not express their critique in these groups. In the Ukrainian support groups, the same people could detail how the provisional law would deal with many of the concerns associated with helping Ukrainian refugees and, in other fora, write long and fundamental critiques of the law as racist. What Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014 refer to as the compartmentalization of different scene styles was clearly happening.

One exception to this compartmentalization was when the provisional law was celebrated within the Ukrainian refugee groups without any practical context. A short celebratory statement around the law sparked a critical situation where critiques and justifications of the law emerged. One activist writes in a comment, “Very good for the Ukrainians. Very bad for our refugees from the Middle East who AGAIN have to experience that they are the lowest ranked humans in Denmark.” The comment critiques Denmark in a rather explicit manner for discriminating against refugees coming from the Middle East. This critique sparked debate. One reaction was that the activists should celebrate this victory and work to extend the law to more groups of refugees. Others justified the differential treatment of the refugees.

A third reaction critiques the critique and clarifies the dilemmas of critiquing asylum politics in the Ukrainian refugee crisis. This latter critique of critique illuminates why many from the veteran cohort might refrain from articulating a critique in the settings central to coordinating humanitarian relief. A common critique of critique during humanitarian crises is that the critic is exploiting the situation for self-interested political reasons (Boltanski 1998). This critique of critique arguably has a stronger position when activists seek to critique asylum politics generally, which refers to other refugees who are comparatively worse off. In response to the above critique of the provisional law, an activist writes: “Stop using unfortunate Ukrainian women and children to promote your own political standpoint!” This statement clearly seeks, in Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) language, to particularize critique and unveil it as self-interestedness. The critique, instead of helping, takes advantage of the situation to push its political agenda, namely the alleged injustice of the general Danish asylum and immigration policies to which all other groups of refugees are subjected. This, however, implies a shift of focus from one group of unfortunates to another, which is not in any obvious way a part of the crisis situations that activists are trying to deal with here and now. Hence, they both have to shift the attention from one situation to another and shift the mode of engagement from humanitarian relief action to contention. Furthermore, they must do this in a crisis that calls for immediate humanitarian action. Although the comparison between the Ukrainian refugees and the Syrian refugees, in principle, provides an advantageous position for the critique of discrimination, the simultaneous switch in both forms of engagement and situation is hard to accomplish. The temporal criticality in the humanitarian situations seems to overrule the moral-logical injustice of the lack of equality between groups of refugees because relieving the suffering here and now takes precedence.

In addition to these situational constraints to critique in the current situation, the fundamental moral principle guiding much humanitarian activism—the sacredness of the suffering human (Durkheim 1975; Joas 2013)—also constraints critique. Refugee solidarity activism is tied to the well-being of particular refugees, and caring for the refugees is the most central component of the movement's collective identity, its *raison d'être*. Thus, a major moral transgression is to sacrifice the well-being of concrete refugees for a greater political cause (Toubøl 2017). While many other movements are engaged in political contestation



against the political insiders seeking to provoke policy change, the refugees' solidarity movement is also directly engaged in humanitarian relief efforts. This arguably constraints frame disputes because these disputes are always bordering on an illegitimate divergence from the relief efforts; they risk shifting the focus, as we discussed above concerning the critique of the critique.

One empirical manifestation of this principle is the constant qualification used together with the critique of discrimination. This qualification states that the activists naturally should help Ukrainian refugees as much as possible and then criticize the differential treatment of refugees. The quote opening the paper is an example of this. The comments start with a qualifier that seeks to preempt critique of ignoring the suffering humans here and now for the long-term political goals and interests: "Ukrainian refugees have been received with goodwill, a provisional law, and open arms. That is how it should be, in my opinion." It then turns to the critique of the way other refugees have been treated: "But refugees from other wars in the world have in the last couple of years been received with distrust, populist legislation and closed doors, and that is unacceptable from our side." This is not a critique of helping Ukrainian refugees but of the lack of support of other refugees, an attempt to extend the compassion and solidarity afforded Ukrainian refugees to compassion and solidarity with all refugees. Thus, cautious attempts to argue for the value of universalism must assert unconditional care and compassion for the Ukrainian refugees as deserving if their arguments universalizing this compassion to all refugees is to have any weight and are not simply dismissed as an irrelevant distraction from the matter at hand—helping refugees—and thereby as a transgression of the fundamental group norms.

To wrap it up, we hypothesize that frame disputes do not arise as expected but are, compartmentalized due to situational and moral constraints on critique. This point toward more research into the constraints to frame disputes within movements and the alternatives to voicing critique that activists turn to, including the potential of compartmentalization. We touch upon these perspectives in our discussing and concluding remarks below.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this article, we have detailed the different cohorts of activists in the refugee solidarity movement's responses to the Danish state's differential treatment of refugees fleeing the 2022 war in Ukraine by showing how moral constraints on critique shape framing disputes between micro-cohorts (Benford 1993; Melucci 1989; Snow, Rochford, et al. 1986; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Whittier 1997), thereby also adding to our understanding of the importance of morality to social movement dynamics (Sevelsted and Toubøl 2023a, 2023b). We have focused on the veteran and new cohorts' differences in evaluation of the provisional law. Using data from online Facebook solidarity groups, we found clear differences in the moral position of the two cohorts. On the one hand, the veteran cohort was highly critical of the differential treatment, in many cases critiquing Danish policies for discriminating against

Muslims and refugees of color and being systematically racist. Some parts of the new cohort, on the other hand, justify the differential treatment with reference to either 1) the difference in the situation (the war in Ukraine is different from the one in Syria), 2) a difference in regional proximity, and 3) a difference in the type of refugee, arguing that Ukrainian refugees are more deserving than refugees from other regions. The new cohort uses deservingness arguments to justify helping some refugees and not others, thereby introducing conditionality of who deserves help and protection, which is in direct opposition to the hitherto dominant value of universalism in the refugee solidarity movement. The simultaneous presence of different cohorts with very different moral positions should make us expect frame disputes within the movement. However, despite these favorable conditions, we found few frame disputes within the movement. To a large extent, the veteran cohort kept their critique of the government's discriminatory policies outside of the Ukrainian refugee support groups. We interpret this as compartmentalization within the refugee solidarity movement, where critique is left out of the humanitarian relief settings and voiced in other fora like their own profiles or older groups only inhabited by members of the veteran cohort. We, furthermore, show examples of the difficulty of critiquing under these conditions: The moral grounds for criticizing the differential treatment of the refugees are overruled by the movement's central moral *raison d'être*; to alleviate the suffering of refugees. Internal conflict over the issue of differential recruitment might disrupt operations to this end and are therefore morally unacceptable, leading to the compartmentalization of critique into fora where such critique can be voiced without endangering the humanitarian operation.

Our results stem from ongoing online qualitative fieldwork, and there are several drawbacks to our approach:. One mainly qualitative critique concerns our lack of interview data which could have been used to strengthen our understanding of both cohorts and their experience of the situations. This is especially relevant for understanding the lack of critique from the veteran cohort in the Ukrainian support groups and shedding light on the reasons driving the compartmentalization. A second limitation concerns our within-case generalization. We are generalizing to a large mobilization with over 200,000 posts and comments from our qualitative reading of what might amount to thousands of posts and comments in specific groups. This naturally poses a threat to the representativity of our findings. To counter this critique, we have systematically searched for posts and comments mentioning the provisional law to find—in a sense, to overestimate—frame disputes, yet even in these circumstances, we found very little.

Of the scenarios for how the simultaneous presence of two competing frames tied to two different micro-cohorts of activists might play out proposed in the theory section (clash, frame transformation, cohort replacement, and compartmentalization), we did not investigate cohort replacement. This requires a study spanning a longer period. However, if we think of Hirschman's (1970) classical proposition of voice, exit, or loyalty, we could easily imagine various types of exit outcomes. Given the lack of possibility to voice a critique, the veteran

activist might leave the 2022 mobilization or refugee solidarity with Ukrainian refugees altogether. Future research should address this question by following veterans' activism in the new groups before and after the introduction of the provisional law to determine the choice to leave the groups.

From the point of view of the moral underpinnings of the humanitarian movement, aspects of these justifications pose an important research question, namely, if we are witnessing a move toward domestic moral evaluations guiding humanitarian efforts both on a national political level, but also in parts of the refugee solidarity movements? According to Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), the domestic moral regime is concerned with proximity and relatedness, which conditions who receives help and support. This is opposed to the abstract rights and values of universalism detached from relations and traditions. As such, the domestic moral grammar provides a justificatory logic that supports many of the arguments made by Danish politicians and the frame of the new cohort of refugee solidarity activists. This constitutes a major break in the dominant moral position of the refugee solidarity movement, which hitherto has been based on the humanitarian values that became universal and hegemonic in the post-WWII period (Joas 2013) but during the last decades increasingly have been challenged and marginalized by in-group chauvinistic moral positions (Boltanski 1999).

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