

# Displacement and asylum

*This module explores current asylum policies in Europe and the historical development of the international refugee regime. Through the experiences of three refugees from Germany, Syria and Ukraine, the module compares past and present refugee movements to and from Europe. It highlights differences and similarities in their flight trajectories and their legal treatment across Europe.*

## Learning objectives and outcomes

### GENERAL LEARNING OUTCOME

Examine the development, scope and limitations of the international refugee regime and European asylum policies

### SPECIFIC LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Grasp the development of the 1951 Refugee Convention and current European asylum policies

Understand the difference between legal categories for displaced people and their lived realities

Compare refugee movements in the past and the present

## Class structure and timeline

### Preparation before class

- Watching three refugee testimonies: Who is a refugee 1.0? (30 min)

### Development in class

- Activity 1: Quiz: Facts and figures about displacement and asylum (20 min)
- Activity 2: Experiencing displacement in Europe (15 min)
- Activity 3: Plenum discussion: Who is a refugee 2.0? (10 min)

### Optional homework

- Act as advisor for a refugee organization (120 min)

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## ↘ Background information for teachers

This briefing:

1. discusses different definitions related to displacement and asylum
2. explains the historical development of the international and European refugee regime
3. elaborates on recent policy responses, including efforts to shift responsibility for refugee protection to non-European countries

The **modern international refugee regime** – the body of international law that guarantees people displaced across international borders protection from persecution – has its origins in European modern history. International organisations and conventions dealing with refugees originally developed to deal with the massive displacement across Europe after the Second World War. In 1945, 30 million people were uprooted in Europe – soldiers and displaced people who did not want or could not return home because of border changes, including more than twelve million ethnic Germans who were expelled from the USSR (Barnett, 2002: 5). Before the Second World War, **no internationally accepted, legal definition of refugees existed**. In 1948, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) was established as a temporary agency to find a solution for refugees across Europe, providing relief, repatriation, resettlement, and legal protection for the most difficult cases. When the international community recognized that displacement was not temporary, the **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1951** as a permanent body and the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees (what became known as the **Geneva Convention**) was signed in July 1951. It regulated the status of refugees and set out a series of rights and obligations.

Article 1 of the 1951 Convention provided the **first universal definition** of a refugee as: *“Any person who owing to well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”* The 1951 Convention recognizes **refugees’ right to remain** and **right to return**, the **right of asylum**, and the fundamental **principle of non-refoulement**. Non-refoulement forbids a country to return asylum-seekers to a country in which they would be in danger of persecution.

Yet, the 1951 Convention **does not recognise everyone who is displaced**.

Displacement refers to people who have been displaced within a country or across borders due to violent conflict, war, and persecution, natural or man-made disasters, or the effects of development projects (Martin, 2012). The Geneva Convention only includes people who have crossed an international border. This means that it excludes people who have sought refuge inside their country but also people who were displaced because of climate change or development projects. Furthermore, in many cases, refugees fleeing war do not only flee because of conflict but their reasons for fleeing are intertwined with other motives, such as the economic situation, perceptions about political freedom and political rights, family, or educational opportunities. A substantial body of academic literature demonstrates that the legal definition of a refugee does not match the lived experiences of those who are displaced. Such research shows that dominant legal refugee definitions fail to capture the complex relationship between political, social and economic drivers of migration or their shifting significance for individuals over time and space (Shacknove, 1985; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018).

Because of the specific historical context in which it developed, the Geneva Convention was initially **very Euro-centric**: It had **temporal and geographic limitations**, meaning that it only covered refugee movements provoked by events that occurred before January 1951, and that it gave host countries the option to limit the Convention’s application to refugees from Europe. In 1967, UNHCR implemented the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which waived the temporal and geographic limitations to allow a more universal application. Given the flaws in the UN’s refugee definition, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) adopted an expanded definition in 1969, seeing refugees as: *“Every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or*

*nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality.”*

Today, the Geneva Convention’s refugee definition is **one of the most widely accepted international norms around the globe** and is the reference point for national asylum policies in Europe. Since the 1950s, the international refugee regime has been **progressively enshrined in national asylum policies in Europe**. While the Convention guarantees refugees the right to seek asylum, it does not grant the right to obtain such asylum. Translating the Geneva Convention into concrete national asylum policies – which included the question of how to grant asylum – has therefore remained a strictly national responsibility. In some situations, host countries have decided to grant *prima facie* protection (a group-based status based on circumstances in their country of origin without needing to prove individual persecution) to people fleeing conflict and war, for example in the case of Hungarian refugees in 1956 or Ukrainian refugees in 2022. In most cases in Europe, however, asylum-seekers (people who have filed an asylum application but have not received a decision yet) have to go through lengthy individual asylum procedures before a decision on their refugee status is taken. This was for example the case for Afghanis or Syrians who have sought refuge in the European Union. The convention does also not prevent host countries to implement measures that could deter potential asylum-seekers – such as border control, tougher screenings of asylum applications, or the extent of social assistance for recognized refugees. National asylum policies have also often remained **racialised**, with differential treatment for displaced people from Europe compared to those displaced from the Middle East, Africa and Asia (Pszczółkowska, 2022). In the context of **increasing numbers of asylum applications** from the mid-1980s to 1992, European countries tightened their asylum policies through these measures. As a result, in Western Europe, the rate of recognition of refugees decreased from the 1980s to the 1990s (Barnett, 2002: 13). While recognition rates went considerably up from 2000 onwards, in the period between 2015 and 2018, the rate of recognition of refugees in Western European countries fell sharply by 20%, especially after 2016 (Hatton, 2021: 5).

Asylum policies in Europe were also affected by the **European Union’s (EU) move to harmonize immigration policies** since the 1990s, with a general trend to relax internal border controls and to reinforce external border controls. In this context, the EU signed the **Dublin Convention in 1990** which sought to prevent asylum-seekers from making asylum claims in more than one EU country. According to the Dublin Convention and the treaties that followed, asylum-seekers are obliged to make their **asylum application in the first country of entry in the EU**, putting a disproportionately high responsibility on EU countries situated geographically at the external border of the EU. The Dublin Convention also established the **‘safe third country’ principle** to determine whether an EU state is even responsible for reviewing an asylum application, or whether the person in question already transited through another ‘safe’ country on their way to Europe in which they could have applied for asylum (NRC, 2016; AIDA, 2022). In 2015, the EU also introduced the so-called **“hotspot approach”**. “Hotspots” were initially intended to allow people to claim asylum in a secure environment. In practice, however, the “hotspots” on the Greek islands, including the largest refugee camp Moria, resulted in overcrowding and unsafe, dire living conditions (Guérin, 2021). These different legal developments led to what scholars call the **externalisation of migration controls** (e.g. Wunderlich, 2012; Reslow and Vink, 2015), whereby European countries evade the obligations of the international refugee regime by shifting the responsibility for border control and for providing asylum seekers protection to other non-EU states. As asylum policies in Europe require asylum-seekers to be present on national territory to file an asylum application, the externalisation of migration control makes it in practice impossible for many displaced people to legally enter a European country and seek asylum, despite seeking asylum being a human right. This also explains in part why developing countries today host 85 per cent of the world’s refugees (UNHCR, 2022): most displaced people never make it to the Global North but stay geographically close to their countries of origin.

In this module, we first want students to understand the development of the 1951 Refugee Convention and to grasp the legal situation displaced people face in Europe. Through the experiences of Jewish, Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Europe, the module seeks to address common assumptions about refugees, to create an awareness for similarities between the past and the present, and to highlight differences in the legal treatment of people fleeing from and to Europe.

## Activities: Assignments, explanations and answers



Preparation before class

# Watching three refugee testimonies: Who is a refugee 1.0?



### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students compare refugees' testimonies in Europe in the past and the present



### MATERIALS

- Smartphones
- Three short videos:
  - Testimony 1: Yitzak, a young Jewish man fleeing Germany to Switzerland in 1944 (Video 1 (9:21)), © Zeitzeugenportal  
[https://www.zeitzeugen-portal.de/themen/der-holocaust/videos/i\\_V-gbd7Mw8](https://www.zeitzeugen-portal.de/themen/der-holocaust/videos/i_V-gbd7Mw8)
  - Testimony 2: Rasha, a young Syrian woman on her way to Germany in 2015 (Video 2 (4:21)), © Sky News  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78e3c-EWpC4>
  - Testimony 3: Natasha, a Ukrainian woman fleeing to Portugal via Romania in 2022 (Video 3 (3:27)), © UNHCR  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mzm2W-ggrc>
- Text 1: Transcriptions of three refugee testimonies (see student worksheet)



**LENGTH: 30 MIN.**



### EXPLANATION ACTIVITY AND DIDACTIC SUGGESTIONS

- Ask the students to watch the three testimonies (transcriptions available in the student worksheet).
- Encourage students to take notes about the following questions:
  - What connects these stories?
  - What is different between these stories?
- Ask students to write down five words that come to their mind when they hear the word refugee. Tell students that this reflection is just for themselves, they don't need to share their notes but should keep it until the end of the class.
- *Note: This preparatory activity is necessary for activity 2. The preparation can also be done in class if the module is taught across two lessons.*



# Quiz: Facts and figures about displacement and asylum



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students address and revise common assumptions about refugees
- Students understand the historical development of the international refugee regime
- Students learn about legal categories around displacement and asylum in Europe



## MATERIALS

- Smartphones
- Internet connection
- Projector



## LENGTH: 20 MIN.



## EXPLANATION ACTIVITY AND DIDACTIC SUGGESTIONS

- The teacher prepares a quiz on Kahoot at home (ca. 10 min preparation):
  - Open the website <https://create.kahoot.it/auth/login>
  - Sign up as a teacher (email address and password needed)
  - Log in, click on “create”
  - Choose “true-false question”, then enter the following true-false statements with 20 seconds time limits:
    1. Today, most refugees worldwide live in Europe. **FALSE**
    2. Most migrants in Europe are refugees and asylum-seekers. **FALSE**
    3. When there is a conflict in a country, most people flee across international borders. **FALSE**
    4. The first international convention dealing with displaced people was originally developed for European refugees after WWII. **TRUE**
    5. From a legal perspective, a refugee is someone who fled their country of origin because it is a dictatorship. **FALSE**
    6. Receiving countries have the right to return refugees back to their country of origin. **FALSE**
    7. EU countries have adopted the same national legislation for refugees. **FALSE**
    8. People who want to seek asylum in Europe today can choose in which EU country they want to do that. **FALSE**
    9. It is quite easy for asylum seekers to enter Europe legally today and apply for asylum. **FALSE**
    10. The majority of asylum seekers reaching Europe today are men. **TRUE**
- Share the link with students.
- Tell students to click on “play” at the top of the page, insert the password of the quiz, and type their names.
- Ask them to indicate for each statement if they think that it is true or false.
- After displaying the right answer of each statement, provide them with additional information based on the suggested answers and provided material below. You can also prepare a short PowerPoint presentation. You can also limit the quiz to eight questions to have more time for explanations.

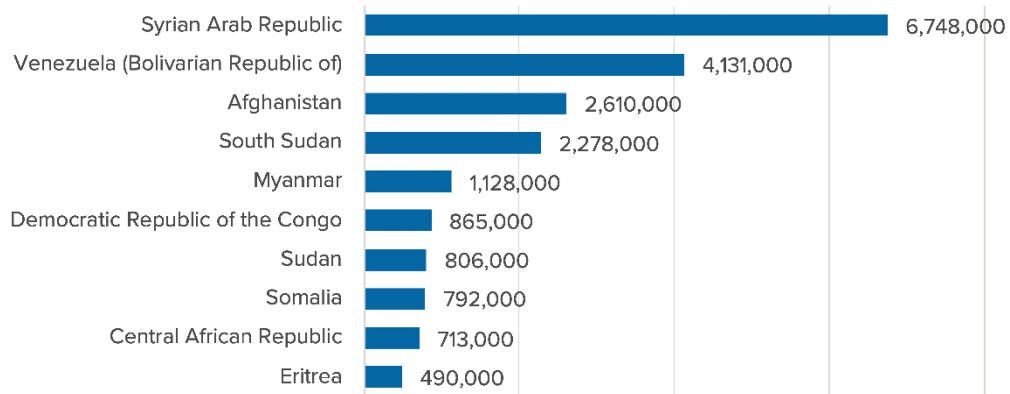
## SUGGESTED ANSWERS

### 1. Today, most refugees worldwide live in Europe. FALSE

Developing countries host 85 per cent of the world's refugees, while European countries host a minority of the world's refugee population (UNHCR 2021, UNHCR 2022). In 2021, for example, Turkey, Colombia, Uganda and Pakistan hosted the largest number of refugees, with Germany following in the fifth spot. Around one fourth of refugees worldwide originate from the Middle East, one fourth from Asia, one fourth from Africa; 12% from Europe and 8% from Latin America.

#### Graph 1: People displaced across borders by host country, mid-2021

(Source: UNHCR 2021, *Mid-Year Trends 2021*, [see link here](#))

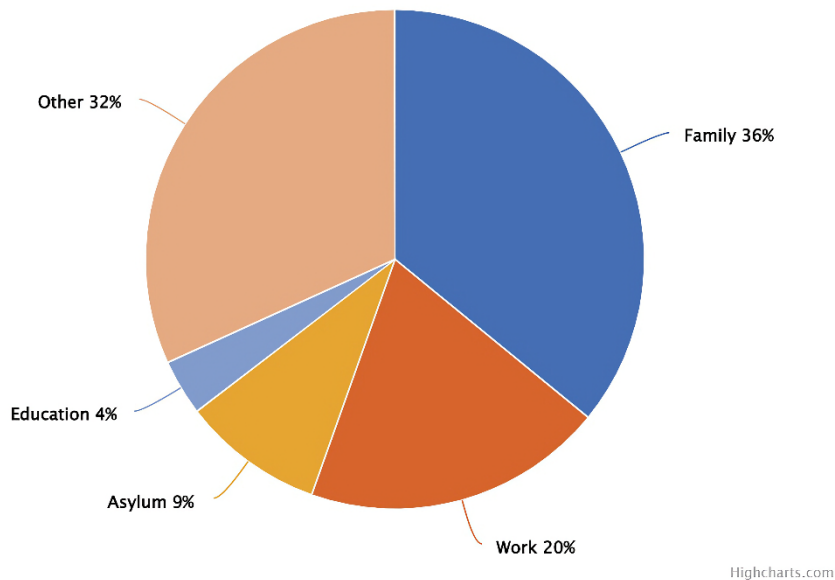


### 2. Most migrants in Europe are refugees and asylum-seekers. FALSE

Most migrants in Europe are family or labour migrants and not refugees.

#### Graph 2: All valid residence permits by reason in European countries, 2020

(Source: Eurostat 2020, [see link here](#))



Note: 39% family (medium blue), 17% work (red), 9% asylum (orange), 3% education (light blue), 32% other (beige)

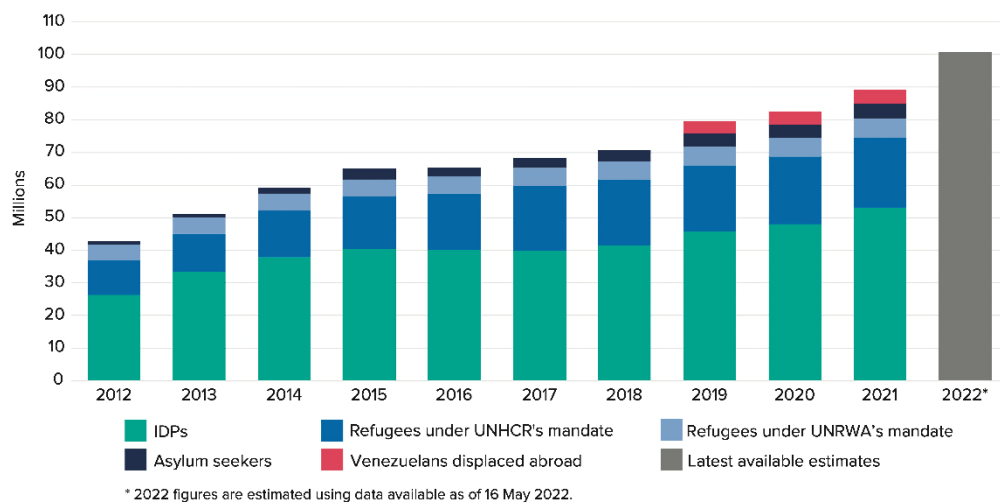
### 3. When there is a conflict in a country, most people flee across international borders. FALSE

When there is a conflict in a country, most people are either internally displaced or remain where they lived before (UNHCR 2022). Those who manage to flee across

international borders have normally more economic resources and networks than those who are internally displaced, as fleeing further away requires more money and connections.

### Graph 3: People forced to flee, 2012-2022

(Source: UNHCR 2021, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2021*, [see link here](#))



Note: Internally displaced person = turquoise, refugees under UNHCR's mandate = medium blue, refugees under UNRWA's mandate = light blue, asylum seekers = dark blue; Venezuelans displaced abroad = pink, latest available estimates = grey. Refugees under UNRWA's mandate refer to Palestinian refugees. Venezuelans displaced abroad are categorized separately in the graph because they do not directly fall into the mandate of the UNHCR.

### 4. The first international convention dealing with displaced people (Geneva Convention 1951) was originally developed for European refugees after WWII. TRUE

In 1945, 30 million people were uprooted in Europe – soldiers and displaced people who did not want or could not return home because of border changes, including more than twelve million ethnic Germans who were expelled from the Soviet Union. The map shows the border changes: the former parts of Germany which became Polish (white with grey lines); the former eastern parts of Poland which became part of the Soviet Union (grey with white lines); the movement of 3.3 million Germans as well as 3.6 million Poles who were displaced in Eastern Europe between 1944 and 1948.

### Map 1: Displacement and expulsion in Eastern Europe

(Source: Kneip & Mack 2017, [see document here](#), p. 12)

### Picture 1: Displaced persons in Germany in 1945

(© Sanna Dullaway, [see link here](#)).

Note: Displaced persons cross a bridge on the River Elbe at Tangermünde, blown up by the German army, to escape the chaos behind German lines caused by the advance of the Russians on May 1, 1945.

In 1951, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established because the international community realised that displacement was not a temporary phenomenon and needed international coordination. That same year, the UNHCR signed the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees (also known as the Geneva Convention). This was the beginning of the so-called international refugee regime – the body of international law that guarantees people displaced across international borders protection from persecution.

### 5. From a legal perspective, a refugee is someone who fled their country of origin because it is a dictatorship. FALSE

According to the Geneva Convention, a refugee is someone who fled their country because of being afraid to be persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, and/or membership of a particular social or political group. In the beginning, the convention only



applied to Europeans fleeing in the context of WWII. In 1967, UNHCR implemented the so-called Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees which removed these conditions.

In 1969, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) adopted a different – broader – definition which included more reasons for seeking asylum, such as external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, natural disasters or events that disturb the public order in the whole country or part of it. However, this definition is not as widely accepted as the Geneva Convention. The Geneva Convention does not include people displaced because of natural disasters or climate change or internally displaced people (IDPs).

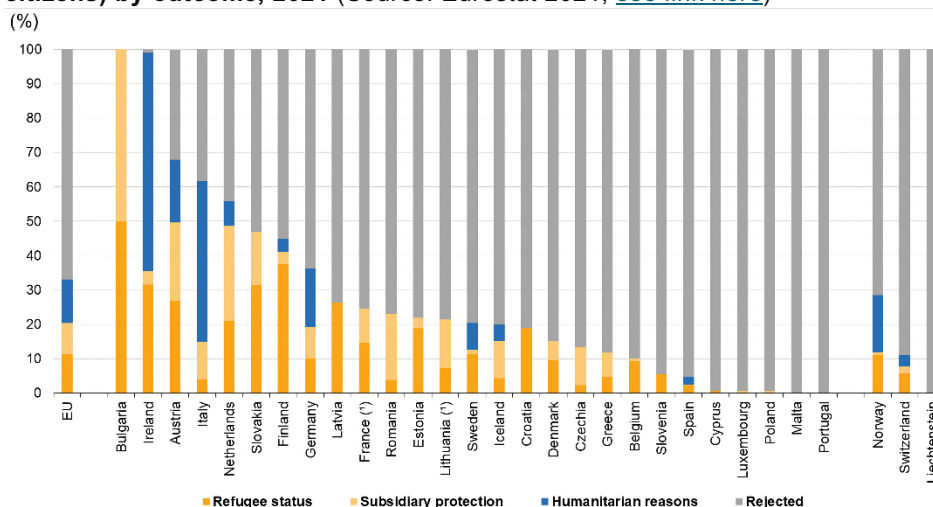
## 6. Receiving countries have the right to return refugees back to their country of origin. FALSE

The 1951 Convention guarantees the fundamental principle of “non-refoulement”. Non-refoulement forbids a country receiving asylum-seekers to return them to a country in which they would be in danger of persecution. However, there have been international efforts to prepare refugees for return to Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and other countries despite the widespread prevalence of human rights abuses. Some host countries also indirectly force refugees to return by reducing assistance and limiting access to legal stay and the labour market.

## 7. EU countries have adopted the same national legislation for refugees. FALSE

Since the 1950s, the norms of the Geneva Convention have been introduced in national legislation in European countries via their asylum policies. The convention does not prevent host countries to implement measures that could deter potential asylum-seekers – such as border control, tougher screenings of asylum applications, or the extent of social assistance for recognized refugees. This is why national asylum policies are not the same across the European Union. As a consequence, so-called ‘recognition rates’, i.e. the final positive decisions on asylum applications, can vary a lot across EU countries.

**Graph 4: Distribution of final decisions on asylum applications (from non-EU citizens) by outcome, 2021** (Source: Eurostat 2021, [see link here](#))



(\*) 2020 data.

Note: based on original (not rounded) figures. No final decisions in Hungary.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: migr\_asydcfina)

eurostat

Note: Refugee status = dark orange, subsidiary protection = light orange, humanitarian reasons = blue, rejected = grey.

## 8. People who want to seek asylum in Europe today can choose in which EU country they want to do that. FALSE

In 1990, the EU signed the Dublin Convention. According to this convention and the treaties that followed, asylum-seekers are obliged to make their asylum application in the first country of entry in the EU. This means, for example, that displaced people who arrive in Italy but would like to apply for asylum in the Netherlands can be rejected and sent back to Italy.



**9. It is quite easy for asylum seekers to enter Europe legally today and apply for asylum. FALSE**

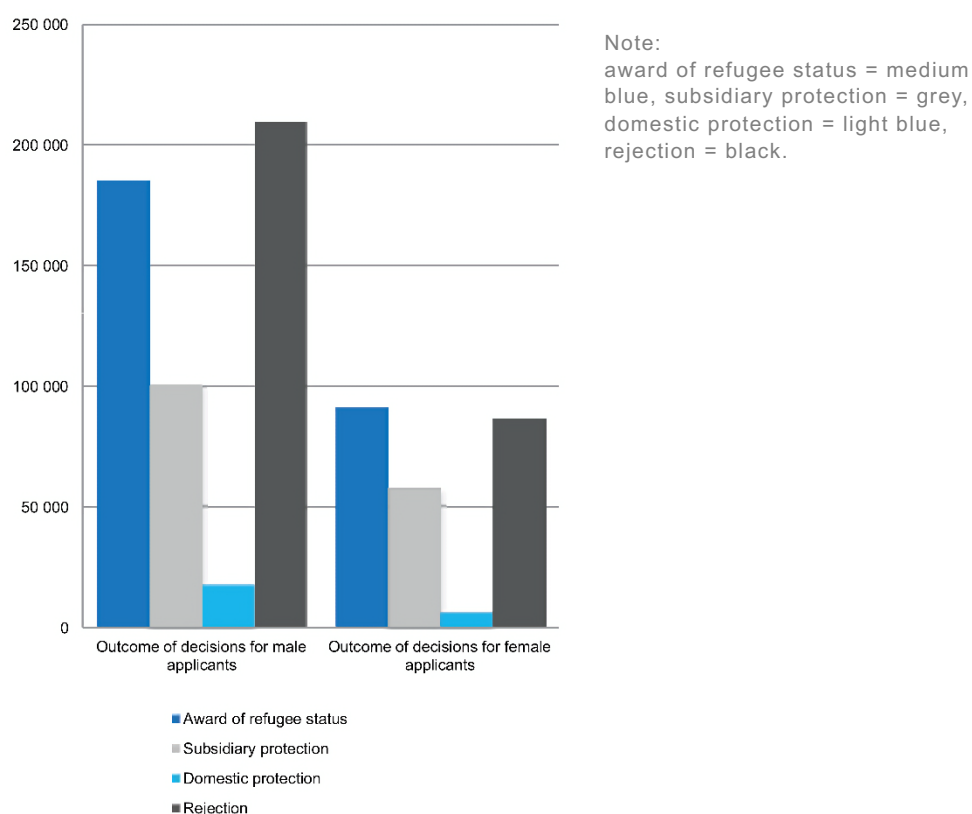
In the context of increasing numbers of asylum applications from the mid-1980s to 1992, European countries tightened their asylum policies. As European asylum policies require asylum-seekers to be present on European territory to file an asylum application, this makes it often impossible for displaced people to legally enter a European country and seek asylum.

**Picture 2: Operation of the European Border Agency Frontex in the Mediterranean**  
(© Tagesschau 2021, [see link here](#)).

**10. The majority of asylum seekers reaching Europe today are men. TRUE**

According to the UN, women and children are exposed to an extremely high risk of sexual exploitation, violence and abuse on their route from a conflict zone to a safe country. In many societies, young men are therefore considered more able to handle a dangerous and risky trip than women and children. This is partly why more men than women apply for asylum in Europe. However, male asylum-seekers have also higher rejection rates than women.

**Graph 5: First instance decisions by EU-28 in respect of extra EU-28 asylum applications in 2016 by outcome by number**  
(Source: UN Women 2017, [see link here](#))





Development in class | **Activity 2**

# Experiencing displacement in Europe



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students find similarities between different refugees' flight experiences in Europe in the past and present
- Students reflect on differences in legal treatment between different groups of refugees



## MATERIALS

- Printed student worksheets



**LENGTH: 15 MIN.**



## EXPLANATION ACTIVITY AND DIDACTIC SUGGESTIONS

- Students form three groups for the three testimonies and read the printed transcriptions of "their" video (see student worksheets).
- Let students discuss answers to the following questions based on their preparatory homework and the transcriptions (5 min):
  - Why did the person flee?
  - What obstacles did s/he face when fleeing?
  - What resources did s/he need to be able to flee?
  - Which responsibilities for other people did/does s/he have?
  - Which legal status does/did s/he have?
- Each group briefly presents their character and their answers to the plenum (5 min).
- Facilitate a discussion about similarities and differences between these experiences (5 min).



## SOLUTIONS AND SUGGESTED ANSWERS

### Testimony 1: Yitzak from Germany

- Reasons to flee: persecution as a Jewish person (talks about people being shot in Poland and his fear from the Gestapo, the official secret police of Nazi Germany)
- Legal status: Crossed German-Swiss border irregularly with forged documents; received protection in Switzerland
- Obstacles on the journey: crossing Germany, crossing German-Swiss border
- Resources needed: helpers to get forged documents
- Responsibilities: does not talk about responsibilities or his family

### Testimony 2: Rasha from Syria

- Reasons to flee: war in Syria, siege, lack of food, fear for children, future aspirations (education)
- Legal status: Rasha does not have a passport, crossed borders irregularly, wants to apply for asylum in Germany
- Obstacles on the journey: leaving Syria, entering Turkey, entering Europe, within Europe

- Resources needed: money to cross borders
- Responsibilities: mentions responsibility towards her daughter

### Testimony 3: Natasha from Ukraine

- Reasons to flee: violence in Ukraine as a result of the Russian invasion, fear for her child and her family's safety
- Legal status: refugee status in Portugal; does not talk about difficulties to cross the border, apply for asylum or receive assistance
- Obstacles on the journey: journey facilitated by UNHCR and the Portuguese government rather than restricted; Natasha and her daughter could cross Ukrainian-Romanian border, take a flight and receive humanitarian protection.
- Resources needed: not mentioned
- Responsibilities: mentions responsibility towards her daughter, emotional hardship to be separated from her husband who had to stay in Ukraine because of military conscription

### Similarities

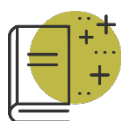
- Experience of violence / fear in the place where they lived
- Other reasons of fleeing: insufficient food, lacking (educational) services
- Difficulties to cross borders, necessitates money (not everyone can flee), lack of documents
- Sacrificing one's life for someone else's (husband for wife; mother for daughter), hope for a new, safe life

### Differences

- Ease (Natasha) vs. difficulty to cross borders (Rasha and Yitzak) and receive asylum / protection

### Other points to mention or highlight

- Legal definitions often do not completely capture the lived experience of displacement. Fear of persecution and violence is often intertwined with other factors for fleeing one's country – family reasons, employment, education. Some factors can also change over time.
- People who are internally displaced share similar characteristics as people who flee across borders in terms of reasons for fleeing but are not recognised as refugees in the international refugee regime.



Development in class | **Activity 3**

## Plenum discussion: Who is a refugee 2.0?



### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students reflect on legal categories
- Students create a more nuanced and inclusive definition of a refugee



### MATERIALS

- Sticky notes

- Pencils
- Coloured markers



**LENGTH: 10 MIN.**



### **EXPLANATION ACTIVITY AND DIDACTIC SUGGESTIONS**

- First, let students reflect individually: Who is a refugee in your opinion? Tell students to try and find a new definition based on what they have learned in class and compare this definition with their initial reflection they did at home.
- Second, let students present their reflections to the plenum and compare their definitions.
- Third, provide different existing legal definitions and compare their definitions with those.



### **SOLUTIONS AND SUGGESTED ANSWERS**

Legal definitions

- A refugee is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (1951 Refugee Convention).
- A refugee is every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality (1969 OAU Convention).
- An internally displaced person (IDP) is a person who has been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border (UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement)
- An asylum-seeker is a person who has left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but who hasn't yet been legally recognized as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim (Amnesty International).  
→ Highlight that legal categories are not sufficient to completely capture the experiences of displaced people.

A possible alternative definition

- A refugee is a person who is not protected by his/her state of origin and found protection elsewhere.



Homework

# Act as advisor for a refugee organization



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students learn to research and critically analyse existing asylum policies in their local environment
- Students learn to formulate alternative solutions in teams



## MATERIALS

- UNHCR Refugee Data Finder: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>
- Asylum statistics of Eurostat: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/migration-asylum/asylum>
- Website of the Asylum Information Database (AIDA): <https://asylumineurope.org/>
- Laptops



**LENGTH: CA. 120 MIN.**



## EXPLANATION ACTIVITY AND DIDACTIC SUGGESTIONS

- Students form groups of three.
- Ask each student to research (i) the current number of asylum-seekers and recognised refugees in their country and how these numbers relate to overall displacement numbers across the world, (ii) the current legal situation for refugees in the country in which they live in terms of their rights regarding access to the labour market, education, health, and social assistance during the asylum procedure and in case asylum is granted. Students should summarise their research in approximately one page.
- For their research, student should use the following resources:
  - UNHCR's Refugee Data Finder
  - Asylum statistics of Eurostat
  - a recent country report from the Asylum Information Database (AIDA) as resources

*Students can use Google Translate for their research.*

- Then ask students to exchange their findings in the group and use them to do one of the following activities:
  - **Option 1 Letter**  
Imagine that there will be a new national organisation set up dealing with refugees in your country. Write a one-page letter to this organisation explaining your opinion with regards to which rights should be improved for asylum-seekers and refugees and on which work areas the organisation should focus on based on your research and explain why.
  - **Option 2 Logo**  
Imagine that there will be a new national organisation set up dealing with refugees in your country. Design a logo reflecting what values should be respected in your opinion to ensure humanitarian protection for refugees based on your research.

## ➤ Materials and worksheets for students

### **Text 1: Three refugee testimonies**

#### **TESTIMONY 1: YITZAK SCHWERSENZ FLEEING GERMANY DURING WORLD WAR II © ZEITZEUGENPORTAL**

[https://www.zeitzeugen-portal.de/themen/der-holocaust/videos/i\\_V-gbd7Mw8](https://www.zeitzeugen-portal.de/themen/der-holocaust/videos/i_V-gbd7Mw8)

- 1 *World War II officially started in 1939 and ended in 1945, during which an estimated 11*  
2 *million people were systematically persecuted and killed by the Nazi regime. Especially*  
3 *people who were considered racially inferior by the Nazi regime were deported to*  
4 *concentration camps with the goal to kill them through various methods, of which gas*  
5 *chambers were the most infamous. The majority of those persecuted were Jewish*  
6 *(approx. six million), yet, another five million of Romani, homosexuals, handicapped*  
7 *people, communists, and resistance fighters were also persecuted by the Nazi regime.*
- 8 *In the following testimony, Yitzak Schwersenz, a teacher and Jewish resistance fighter,*  
9 *narrates his escape as a young man from Nazi Germany in 1944 to Switzerland. He was*  
10 *supported by two helpers who were later severely punished for helping him to escape.*  
11 *Before his flight, he had lived underground in Berlin for two years because he was*  
12 *threatened with deportation to a concentration camp.*
- 13
- 14 **Escape under a false identity**
- 15 To escape you needed helpers, you can't walk across borders in wartime. You needed  
16 helpers.
- 17 We then found two wonderful ones, besides all the helpers who gave us, who gave us  
18 food and whom I had spoken of, I think, never enough, but.... we found two more  
19 wonderful helpers, a sergeant of the German Air Force, Herbert Strunck, he made us  
20 members of the German Air Force, unbelievable, earlier I said, humans can do more than  
21 they think, it is still true for me today, basically, impossible to believe that this was  
22 possible, Mr Strunck worked in Starken, that was a military area at that time, the airport,  
23 in the office, so he had the possibility to get to, directly to the identity cards, so-called  
24 military passports, which he could fill out, new copies, which he could fill out according to  
25 his wish, and I became... one could laugh, if it hadn't been so serious, official German Air  
26 Force, with the name Werner Obst, because such a person was in Starken and he issued  
27 me a new passport with his name but with my picture, engineer of the Air Force I  
28 became....
- 29 and a Mrs. Berta Meier... knew farmers on the border, that was a holiday stay, went to  
30 them and arranged with them that if she sent them refugees, she would announce them  
31 by telephone, of course, with code words, that someone would send them books or  
32 something, that they would pick them up at the station in Singen, that's in Baden  
33 Württemberg, not far from the Swiss border, Singen am Hohentwiel, at the station and  
34 bring them to the border at night, where they thought it was safe. Mrs Meier did that and  
35 so I was paired up with a Mrs Herta Wachsmann, who also lived in hiding, with a Berlin  
36 shoemaker, as a domestic servant, was paired up with her by Mr Strunck, for the escape.  
37 I also admire this older woman, then already 60 years old, both sons and her husband  
38 were shot during the Polish action... If you know about the Polish action, summer 1938,  
39 the woman still had the courage to go on living and even to escape...
- 40 Yes, we went to Singen am Hohentwiel, the train journey with the controls in the train...  
41 went well, the controls were not easy, you were not allowed to tremble when handing  
42 over your identity card. We know today, or learned later, that there were people who had  
43 a good identity card, who trembled when handing it over, which you have to understand  
44 when a Gestapo man dressed in black, who was doing the check, stood in front of them,  
45 how I managed, that I could reach out my identity card, with a firm hand, also a miracle in  
46 my eyes....



47 We came to Singen, the farmers were there, I was always afraid, the whole journey....  
48 What do we do in Singen, at the border, if the farmers are not there? The farmers were  
49 there, but the farmers said we can't cross tonight either, fresh snow has fallen and our  
50 footsteps on the way back can give us away, besides, we have to get you white sheets to  
51 cover yourselves with against the background. You'll have to spend the night here.

52 That was bad news: spending the night at the border and we had to do that. Herta  
53 Wachsmann spent the night in Singen. I myself thought, better I spend the night  
54 somewhere else, if one of us gets caught, that the other doesn't get caught too.... I drove  
55 to Radolfzell on Lake Constance, stayed at the Hotel To the Sun; it was a nice name, we  
56 hoped to see the sun again. And that was the hardest night of my life, or at least the  
57 hardest night of the two years in the underground, two years in the underground, the  
58 hardest night...

59 In the middle of the night, suddenly... knock knock knock. The Gestapo doesn't knock on  
60 the door like a decent person, they want to scare you, bummer on the door, Gestapo!  
61 Open up! In this way... Here, too, I didn't see how I could do it, I don't know, forces came  
62 over me... Because otherwise I am not such a brave person, I would like to say from my  
63 life experience... But I got up, pushed the briefcase in which my photos were, the photos  
64 I wanted to save and the documents I wanted to save, pushed the briefcase under the  
65 bed, opened the door, not hesitatingly, this inspiration also came to me, not as slowly as  
66 one might normally open the door in the night, in the middle of it, fearfully. The right  
67 inspiration came to me, I pulled the door open and again with "Heil Hitler", I was a  
68 German officer, I had to disguise myself, my identity card was in order, they had it in their  
69 hand, you had to hand in your identity cards there at that time, downstairs, at the  
70 reception. "What are you doing here?!" And fortunately for us, Frau Meier had also  
71 prepared us for this question. She had told us before we left, when you are asked at the  
72 border what you are doing, you say, our family in Berlin has been bombed out, we are  
73 looking for accommodation here in the country with farmers for our families, that's exactly  
74 what I told them and it was accepted, went through and they left, they left. Of course, I  
75 had to stay calmly, I couldn't run away.

76 Until the next night, we met again the next day, unharmed. How we spent the day, there  
77 in Singen, in the cinema among other things. I don't remember what I saw. We had to  
78 spend the day there until night and at night, the farmers took us to the border and  
79 miraculously, we passed the border crossing without a hitch.

80 I often visited this place again, with my students in Switzerland. I was in Switzerland ten  
81 years after my escape, and every year I visited this place with the students, where we  
82 could go from death to life, and showed them this crossing. Yes, I also photographed it  
83 and show it today in my lectures, I have a series of slides that I show, that I  
84 photographed at that time, I continued to take photos, also in the hidden time.

## TESTIMONY 2: RASHA FLEEING SYRIA TO HUNGARY IN 2015

© SKY NEWS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78e3c-EWpC4>

1 *In 1945, the Republic of Syria obtained its independence after four centuries of Ottoman*  
2 *rule and after a brief period as a French colony. However, the post-independence period*  
3 *was not politically stable due to several military coups until 1971. From 1971 to 2000,*  
4 *Hafez al-Assad ruled the country and since 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad has been*  
5 *president of Syria. During their rule, Syria has been condemned and criticised for serious*  
6 *and systematic human rights violations, including executions of citizens and political*  
7 *detainees, and massive censorship of the freedom of expression. In early 2011, in*  
8 *parallel with other political uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, Syrians*  
9 *rebelled against Assad's regime, calling for socio-economic reforms and a political*  
10 *change. The Syrian regime confronted the opposition with repression and weapons, and*  
11 *the uprising turned into an armed conflict with foreign interventions. In 2022, five*  
12 *countries maintained military forces or regularly operated in Syria: Russia, Iran, Turkey,*  
13 *Israel, and the United States – in addition to transnational militia groups such as the*  
14 *Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah. The armed conflict in Syria resulted in over 5.6*  
15 *refugees and asylum-seekers in neighbouring countries and Europe, while more than 6.7*  
16 *million people were internally displaced in 2022.*

17 *In this interview at the Hungarian border, Rasha, a young Syrian English teacher and*  
18 *mother, talks about her displacement journey with her family from al-Yarmouk Camp*  
19 *close to the Syrian capital Damascus to Europe in 2015. She explains the reasons why*  
20 *she fled from Syria, the risks on the road and the challenges Syrian refugees face in*  
21 *Europe.*

22

### 23 **Take my kid to Germany**

24 **Interviewer:** This is Rasha, she's from Syria, an English teacher. Can you tell me how  
25 long do you plan to stay here?

26 **Rasha:** Plan...?

27 **Interviewer:** Yeah.

28 **Rasha:** We're supposed to leave now, we can't stay here more. We will stay till they open  
29 the door. There is no plan, okay? I'm shocked from the Hungarian police. Why? We just  
30 want to pass and go to any other safe country. That's what we want, okay? To pass  
31 safely, it's very cold here. It's very cold. We don't have clothes; we don't have change. I  
32 have a kid. I don't know what will happen, but we will stay until they open. That's what we  
33 know.

34 **Interviewer:** Will you try and cross illegally? I know that's something, that some people  
35 are considering doing that, illegally.

36 **Rasha:** Illegally?

37 **Interviewer:** Yeah, illegally, as in through the fence.

38 **Rasha:** No no no! How? There is no way, we want to pass. We want them to open the  
39 door and all of us pass.

40 **Interviewer:** Where did you come from originally? You came from Syria.

41 **Rasha:** From Syria to Turkey, illegally to Turkey because we don't have the Syrian  
42 passport, okay? To Turkey, to Greece and to Serbia, and now here. All of our trip is  
43 illegally, yes.

44 **Interviewer:** And how long has the journey taken you?

45 **Rasha:** 10 days.

46

47 **Interviewer:** And how much does it cost you?

48 **Rasha:** Cost? Till now we paid per person 2,000 EUR, per person. Per person! And we  
49 don't have money now.

50 **Interviewer:** There's no money left.

51 **Rasha:** No no no we want you to pass even if we have to walk. We have to pass. If they  
52 don't want to take us, take our kids. Ok, take my kid and put her in Germany or in any  
53 other safe place. It doesn't matter. I want to go for my kid. All of them want to go for their  
54 kids, not for themselves. Take our kids to Germany, no problem, and I will come back to  
55 Syria. I don't want... my right to live a safe life, I don't want this right. I want it for my kid  
56 to go to school. It's a simple right, yeah?

57 **Interviewer:** Tell me about the area of Damascus that you've come from. What is the  
58 situation there at the moment?

59 **Rasha:** Very bad. I came from Yarmouk Camp, from Damascus. It's very bad; no food, no  
60 money, no bread, okay? It's war!

61 **Interviewer:** It's war. And you said you have no money left. How are you managing to  
62 cope now? How are you surviving?

63 **Rasha:** Me... like the others; we don't have money. We don't have food, really. I don't  
64 have food. I don't know how what I'm going to eat and to feed my daughter.

65 **Interviewer:** And your daughter's name is...?

66 **Rasha:** Alma.

67 **Interviewer:** How old are you?

68 **Rasha:** How old are you? Tell him!

69 **Rasha:** Six years old! What we want is to open the door and all of us pass safely. We  
70 don't want to stay in the Hungarian country. No. The other door, they take our  
71 fingerprints, okay? and stuck... the people, the families who took their fingerprint. They  
72 are stuck there and they can't. We don't want to stay in Hungary, okay? No, and we don't  
73 want to go to another country just to take money and sit, no, no. We want to work, okay?  
74 I am a teacher. I can work. I can teach but not in Hungary. I don't want to stay there.

75 **Interviewer:** So how long do you think you can just simply stay here for?

76 **Rasha:** It's very difficult for us to stay more than other night. It's very very difficult. Look,  
77 look, look at our bed. That's our bed, okay? So, it's very difficult for us. We want them to  
78 open the door quickly because we will die, really. But we will stay. How many nights?  
79 How many days? I don't know.

### TESTIMONY 3: NATASHA FLEEING UKRAINE TO PORTUGAL IN 2022

© UNHCR

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mzm2W-ggrc>

1 In February 2022, the Russian army entered Ukraine, triggering the first armed conflict in  
2 Europe since the war in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. After Russia's attack on Ukraine,  
3 large numbers of Ukrainians started leaving the country, mainly fleeing to Poland and  
4 Romania but also to Moldavia, Hungary and Slovakia. By May 2022, around 6.5 million  
5 Ukrainians had fled the country, while around 8 million were internally displaced. This war  
6 did not come out of thin air. It is a continuation of a conflict that began in 2014 and is  
7 linked to the breakup of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union broke up in the early  
8 1990s, Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, had the third largest atomic arsenal in the  
9 world. The United States and Russia worked with Ukraine to denuclearize the country in  
10 exchange for security assurances that protected it from a potential Russian attack –  
11 efforts which were ultimately in vain. In November 2013, pro-European mass protests  
12 erupted when Ukraine's pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich announced not to sign  
13 a political association and free trade agreement with the European Union (EU), instead  
14 choosing closer ties to Russia. These protests ultimately toppled Viktor Yanukovich in  
15 spring 2014. Pro-Russian protesters in the eastern Donbas region, however, did not  
16 recognise the overthrow of Yanukovich. Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine and  
17 annexed the Crimean Peninsula, backing pro-Russia separatists. This sparked the so-  
18 called Donbas War, the creation of the self-proclaimed breakaway states in Donetsk and  
19 Luhansk and culminated in Russia's invasion in 2022.

20 In this interview in Lisbon in 2022, a young Ukrainian woman, Natasha Vladimirova, talks  
21 about her displacement with her daughter from Kharkiv to Portugal via Rumania, while  
22 her husband had to stay behind at the Ukrainian border. She explains why she left their  
23 hometown Kharkiv, how they crossed the border to Romania and reached Portugal with a  
24 humanitarian flight organized by the Portuguese government. She also talks about the  
25 support she and her daughter received in Portugal. They are currently hosted by a local  
26 family in Lisbon, receive language classes and schooling, and Natasha feels supported in  
27 her search for a job.

28

#### 29 **Natasha Vladimirova, a Ukrainian refugee in Portugal**

30 We left Kharkiv, me, my husband, daughter and I, on the 24th of February, when the war  
31 started. It's a very dangerous city, it's like the epicentre of this war. Near the Ukrainian  
32 border, I asked some men if it's possible for my husband to leave the country. My  
33 husband said, "You can leave me here and you leave Ukraine". "How is that possible? I  
34 love you, I can't leave".

35 [Natasha's husband stayed behind at the Ukrainian border]

36 I understood that I don't want my daughter to know about war. We arrived in Romania via  
37 car. When we went through the border, I thought, "What must we do? We don't have any  
38 contacts". We asked for help from these people [UNHCR], and they called someone and  
39 found us a place to stay for the night. We were in Romania for four days, and then we  
40 flew to Portugal.

41 [Natasha and her daughter boarded a Portuguese government humanitarian flight to  
42 Lisbon.]

43 Now my biggest fear is that I, I can't meet my husband. It's a very emotional day today,  
44 for me. Because we, because it's been one month since I have seen our apartment, our  
45 clothes.

46 [In Lisbon, they were placed with a family that opened their home to refugees.]

47 Maria is a beautiful and kind person. She always helps us to find a job, to find lessons,  
48 Portuguese lessons, find information about how we can find a school for the baby. My  
49 daughter, she knows about the war. But now, when we go for a walk, she says, "Mom, I  
50 want to be here. It's a great place. I don't want to go back."

## ↘ Further Resources

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### Data

UNHCR's Refugee Data Finder

<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

Eurostat Data Explorer on Migration and Asylum

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/migration-asylum/asylum>

## ↘ Links and additional material

### BOOKS

**Arendt, Hannah.** 1943. **We Refugees.** *Menorah Journal* 31 (1): 69–77.

An essay (in English) by Hannah Arendt reflecting on why refugees do not like the term refugee, published briefly after her arrival in New York in 1943.

Link to the full text in English:

<https://www.jus.uio.no/smr/om/aktuelt/arrangementer/2015/arendt-we-refugees.pdf>

### MULTIMEDIA VIDEOS

**Syrian Conflict explained** (2018, in English)

5min animation produced by the Explainity Educational Project explaining the Syrian conflict. <https://youtu.be/mv6AcnwnBhM>.

## INTERACTIVE WEBSITES

**Ukraine conflict: Simple visual guide to the Russian invasion** (2022, English)  
BBC's visual guide to the Russian invasion to explain the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60506298>

## *In other languages*

### BOOKS

**Feuchtwanger, Lion.** 1956. **Exil.** Wartesaal-Trilogie. Volume 3. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag Berlin.

Excerpt (in German) of Feuchtwanger's novel describing his life as a Jewish refugee living in Paris. <https://we-refugees-archive.org/archive/truebe-gaeste/>

**Shakine, Esther.** 2020. **Exodus.** Munich: Klinkhardt & Biermann.

A graphic novel (in German) narrating the flight from Hungary to Israel during the Holocaust through the eyes of a Jewish girl.

<https://www.klinkhardtundbiermann.de/titel-1-1/exodus-2034/>

**Carrot, B.** 2020. **Alle dagen ui.** Arnhem: Soul Food Comics.

A graphic novel in Dutch, narrating the story of Saied, who decides to apply for asylum in the Netherlands and ends up in a detention center at the airport for one year.

[http://www.soulfoodcomics.nl/store/p25/Alle\\_dagen\\_ui.html](http://www.soulfoodcomics.nl/store/p25/Alle_dagen_ui.html)

### DOCUMENTARIES AND FILMS

**Her stories** (2021, Arabic with English subtitles)

A documentary directed by Abd Alkader Habak, telling the story of three women – Weam Ghabash, Malake Harbliya, and Fatma Al Humeid – who managed to break cultural barriers during the Syrian conflict and become someone they never thought they could be before the revolution. <https://vimeo.com/568526486>

**For Sama** (2019, Arabic with English subtitles)

A documentary of the female experiences of war, produced and narrated by Waad Al-Kateab (co-directed with Edward Watts), telling her life as a young mother in Aleppo, Syria, during the uprising and the war.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsvBqtg2RM0>

### MULTIMEDIA VIDEOS

**Syrian Refugees: A Human Crisis Revealed** (2016, no language)

National Geographic's 2min short clip by filmmaker Lior Sperandeo about Syrian refugees reaching Greece by sea in 2015.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiujzFNgHcE&ab\\_channel=NationalGeographic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiujzFNgHcE&ab_channel=NationalGeographic)

**Greece: Syrian Refugees Struggle** (2013, English, Greek and Arabic with English subtitles)

A 3min video produced by UNHCR documenting the struggles Syrian refugees face in Greece. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkj2rDUphIc>

### INTERACTIVE WEBSITES

*Testimonies about the Holocaust*

**Fliehen vor dem Holocaust** – learning app (in German)

<https://www.erinnern.at/app-fliehen>

**Zeitzeugen-Portal** (website in German)

<https://www.zeitzeugen-portal.de/themen/der-holocaust>