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We need to reject the UK government's bespoke approach to refugees

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As I was writing this article yesterday, I watched the UK government announce in Parliament yet another change of policy towards Ukrainians fleeing their country.

The Médecins du Monde network, of which Doctors of the World is a member, has operated in eastern Ukraine since 2015, just after the conflict started in 2014. When the current hostility broke out, we had to ensure the safety of our doctors, support staff, and vital medical supplies, as well as reassess how we can continue to support the country as it descends further into war. This will include supporting refugees who are fleeing to the neighbouring nations that will provide safe refuge for the majority.

This latest change in the UK's policy came after the government had previously suggested, among other things, that people fleeing for their lives should apply for seasonal work visas, such as to pick fruit in the UK, or that to qualify for sanctuary in the UK, they had to meet a very restrictive definition of joining family members.

While the latest changes, which were announced on 1 March, are certainly welcomed, they do not match either the rhetoric or the effort put in place by Ukraine's EU neighbours to welcome refugees fleeing the conflict.

The UK government is asking people who have fled their homes in Ukraine for fear of their lives to go through a lengthy bureaucratic process to apply for a visa to join family members in the UK, when what would be needed instead is to prepare the machinery of government to welcome every Ukrainian refugee who wants to come here in search of safety.

These latest policy decisions come with the backdrop of the Nationality and Borders Bill, which is still going through Parliament. As Lord Kerr rightly said in a debate on the bill in the House of Lords, which saw the government repeatedly defeated, the bill, if already in place now, would disqualify the large majority if not all the Ukrainians seeking sanctuary in this country. It would do so by using a very twisted view of the "first safe country" and "regular or irregular" means of entry in the country. Both of which are not part of the Refugee Convention, signed shortly after World War II.

As my colleagues and I have previously argued in *The BMJ*, the bill would massively increase the government's use of institutional accommodation and temporary refugee status.¹ Both of which, our experience shows, lead to worse health and wellbeing outcomes for people seeking sanctuary in the country.

More broadly, and even more importantly, the government's approach to Ukrainian refugees represents a dangerous view of the refugee system. One that Priti Patel, the home secretary, states will

in the intention of the government be "bespoke" to the situation at hand.²

As colleagues from Refugee Action have rightly said, the refugee system that was built after the Second World War and the Holocaust wasn't built with the ability for nations to decide which specific group of refugees a nation should welcome, and which one it was allowed to reject.³ The Refugee Convention was built on the key principle of universality, of being available to everyone fleeing violence or persecution.

The latest conflict in Ukraine proves that a bespoke system such as the one that the government wants to build, will never be able to adapt to a world in which conflicts, violence, or oppression are sadly still too diverse to be predictable. Such a system would undermine one significant step of progress that emerged following the shame and horror of the Holocaust and would represent a step backwards at a time of greater uncertainty on the world stage.

This proposed bespoke approach is a direct result of allowing the "hostile environment" to penetrate and influence the Government's asylum policies and principles over the past decade. This has had deleterious impact on the efficacy and speed in which asylum seekers' applications are processed. The "hostile environment" broke, or at least makes significantly worse, the asylum system and the latest statistics published in the last week prove this key point once again.⁴

Compounding all of this has been a continuous reference and narrative around "genuine" vs "non genuine" refugees or "refugees" vs "economic migrants." This narrative seeks to sow divisions and suspicions in our communities and implies doubt regarding the person living next door or the patient entering our surgeries and our hospitals.

That is a narrative that, as we see every day at Doctors of the World, undermines people's health and wellbeing and pushes them to the margins of society. A narrative that, as the pandemic has shown, does not represent good public health or basic humanity.

We need to continue lobbying our elected politicians to stop this bill in its tracks, but also continue to evidence how with this bill the government is failing at its own test while further undermining the health and wellbeing of people seeking sanctuary in the UK.

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1 Besana M, Ciftci Y, Makuyana T. The UK's immigration plans threaten the health outcomes of asylum seekers and refugees. *BMJ* 2022;376:o165. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o165. PMID: 35058241

2 Twitter Priti Patel. @priti Patel. https://twitter.com/pritipatel/status/1498679345170288644?s=20&t=laoygzod_a4lwKXdj4RhQ

- 3 Omar M. Britain's solidarity with Ukrainian refugees is undermined by the government's Borders Bill. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/britain-ukrainian-refugees-borders-bill-b2025652.html>
- 4 How many people do we grant asylum or protection to? <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-december-2021/how-many-people-do-we-grant-asylum-or-protection-to>