On Monday, the British government introduced its new ‘Homes for Ukraine’ scheme which is presented as a ‘step up’ in Britain’s generosity towards refugees. However, the scheme is merely a continuation of Britain’s restrictive politics of asylum and immigration. Specifically, it draws on two key principles of recent immigration legislation - sponsorship and everyday bordering - which limit the rights of people who move to the UK and individualize responsibility for asylum.

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, neighbouring countries such as Moldova, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, and even Hungary opened their borders and waived visa requirements to make escape routes more manageable. These and other European countries have since received 3 million people displaced by the war. As this number is expected to rise to 4 million, we are beginning to hear pleas for greater solidarity from Europe’s West – especially from small and socio-economically deprived countries such as Moldova.

While offering public reassurance that Britain is prepared to offer support, the UK Government’s approach has been particularly reticent. Initially the British government suspended its visa services in Ukraine and limited visa entitlements to relatives of Ukrainians already living in the UK. At this point, Home Office Minister Kevin Foster invited displaced Ukrainians via twitter to apply to Britain’s seasonal work scheme. Home Secretary Priti Patel highlighted that stringent security checks were necessary to stop Russian agents or terrorists smuggling themselves into the UK. Many displaced people reported difficulties with having their visa applications processed, and several hundred Ukrainians found themselves stuck in Calais awaiting a UK visa. Only 300 visas had been granted via the family scheme by March 7th (and 5500 by March 17th). Accused of misjudging its population’s solidarity, the government declared that biometric data
could be provided upon arrival in the UK and launched a new sponsorship scheme. Titled ‘Homes for Ukraine’, the scheme is introduced as follows: ‘The UK is one of the most generous nations in the world and the British public are now being asked to go one step further and open their homes to those fleeing the war in Ukraine’. People in Britain can apply to receive £350 a month to offer free accommodation to a refugee from Ukraine. When applying, they have to name the beneficiaries, who then have to undergo ‘light touch security checks’. **Within 24 hours, 100,000 people had applied to act as sponsors.**

So, is the sponsorship scheme the most recent culmination of Britain’s generosity towards refugees? And is it a ‘step up’ in Britain’s immigration policy?

I suggest that it is neither. The most obvious point has been made numerous times – the scheme is exclusively available to Ukrainians, while safe routes to asylum have been severely restricted for people fleeing conflict and war elsewhere, such as Afghanistan or Syria. Ukrainians can assert their Whiteness as press coverage positions them as ‘of Europe’. At the same time, however, as one commentator put it, they are seen as only ‘relatively civilized, relatively European’. The figure of the ‘Eastern European’, as I argue in an article that is under review with the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, has been ambiguously racialized in the Western imagination. Accordingly, representatives of British government, as cited above, spontaneously imagined displaced Ukrainians as potential fruit pickers or security threats. These representations are not mere rhetoric, as I elaborate in the mentioned article, but have contributed to justifying restrictions to rights and mobilities within the emergent pre- and post-Brexit border regime.

The ‘Homes for Ukraine’ scheme reflects two key principles of this evolving immigration regime – sponsorship and everyday bordering – which exacerbate the precarity and disposability of people who move to the UK, and individualize the responsibility for asylum.

Firstly, sponsorship is a key pillar of the restrictive post-Brexit immigration regime. The 2020 immigration law introduced novel requirements for labour migration to the UK – including sponsorship by a prospective employer, evidence of language skills and the meeting of a minimum salary threshold. The latter does not apply to visa applicants who come to work in shortage sectors, such as care or seasonal work. The idea of sponsorship renders workers dependent on their employers’ specific requirements and preferences at any given time – and makes them more disposable.

Rebranding the idea by extending it to private homes, the government has now introduced the rationale of sponsorship into the asylum system. This increases displaced people’s dependence on individual good will – but also their precarity and disposability. Having escaped the trauma of war, they are entirely reliant on their sponsor’s mood or even financial need to host them in their private space. This reliance significantly reduces their autonomy in extremely challenging personal circumstances. Sexualized representations of ‘Eastern European’ women, moreover, may invite transgressions and exploitations for domestic, care or sex work.

The sponsorship scheme, secondly, reinforces another key principle of Britain’s immigration policy – the individualisation of responsibility for the management of Britain’s borders. Immigration laws that introduced the so called ‘hostile environment’ from 2014 onwards require landlords, health care practitioners,
educators or employers to ascertain a person’s legal right to be in the UK. The governments ‘Prevent’ agenda has put front-line staff and ordinary citizens in charge of preventing political radicalisation. Effectively, the responsibility to detect illegalized border crossers, and prevent terrorist attacks, has thereby been attributed to individual members of society. In a similar move, the sponsorship scheme individualises the state’s public responsibility to offer asylum and puts the onus on individual citizens to deliver Britain’s international legal obligations. The appeal to individual generosity, even if it practically extends the number of people who can receive sanctuary in this instance, further erodes the human right to asylum.

The British public should be lauded for its welcoming attitude towards Ukrainians displaced by war. This solidarity, unfortunately, has been hijacked by a government that has no intention to meet its international human rights obligations. Countries in Europe’s East, in turn, should be lauded for waiving visa requirements – but also reminded that the right to asylum is universal and carries the same obligations towards globally displaced people.

Available at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/migration/research/publications/migrationblog