

Global Opinions

## Opinion: Coverage of Ukraine has exposed long-standing racist biases in Western media

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By H.A. Hellyer

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Ukraine coverage critiqued

News organizations are facing criticism for the casual racism used to compare the conflict in Ukraine with others in the Middle East and Africa. (The Washington Post)

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“This isn’t a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades,” Charlie D’Agata, a CBS correspondent in Kyiv, told his colleagues back in the studio. “You know, this is a relatively civilized, relatively European — I have to choose those words carefully, too — city where you wouldn’t expect that or hope that it’s going to happen.”

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Putin’s criminal invasion of Ukraine has generated an inspiring wave of solidarity around the world, but for

many — especially non-White observers — it has been impossible to tune out the racist biases in Western media and politics.

D’Agata’s comments generated a swift backlash — and he was quick to apologize — but he was hardly the only one. A commentator on a French news program said, “We’re not talking about Syrians fleeing bombs of the Syrian regime backed by Putin; we’re talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives.” On the BBC, a former deputy prosecutor general of Ukraine declared, “It’s very emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blond hair ... being killed every day.” Even an Al Jazeera anchor said, “These are not obviously refugees trying to get away from areas in the Middle East,” while an ITV News reporter said, “Now the unthinkable has happened to them, and this is not a developing, Third World nation; this is Europe.”

British pundit Daniel Hannan joined the chorus in the Telegraph. “They seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking. War is no longer something visited upon impoverished and remote populations. It can happen to anyone,” he wrote.

The implication for anyone reading or watching — particularly anyone with ties to a nation that has also seen foreign intervention, conflict, sanctions and mass migration — is clear: It’s much worse when White Europeans suffer than when it’s Arabs or other non-

White people. Yemenis, Iraqis, Nigerians, Libyans, Afghans, Palestinians, Syrians, Hondurans — well, they are used to it.

The insults went beyond media coverage. A French politician said Ukrainian refugees represent “high-quality immigration.” The Bulgarian prime minister said Ukrainian refugees are “intelligent, they are educated. ... This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people we were not sure about their identity, people with unclear pasts, who could have been even terrorists.”

It’s as if, in our anger and horror at the scenes of Russia’s aggression, we are incapable of recognizing a simple fact: We’ve seen this before.

A Vanity Fair special correspondent denied precisely that in a tweet: “This is arguably the first war we’ve seen (actually seen in real-time) take place in the age of social media, and all of these heart-wrenching images make Russia look utterly terrible.”

The tweet was erased — like the experiences of many who have documented the horrors of war in recent decades on social media and beyond.

Putin’s military also intervened ferociously in Syria, backing a murderous regime. That war unleashed a level of mass death, suffering, destruction and displacement not yet seen in Ukraine — but the West’s response was far less empathetic. The same can be said of the U.S.

invasions and military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq; the catastrophic Saudi-led war in Yemen; the Israeli occupation of the Palestinians.

This double standard is so evident in how we as Westerners engage in international relations. Far too often, we dehumanize non-White populations, diminishing their importance, and that leads to one thing: the degrading of their right to live in dignity.

Beyond the moral and ethical imperatives, there are geopolitical ones — by engaging with suffering in this myopic way, we embolden other Putins. They realize that the checks against them will be mostly weak and ineffectual, as long as the so-called civilized world is left alone.

It's true that states often intervene to protect their own interests. For all the talk of "values," it's usually cold pragmatism that informs decisions. But it is also true that our "interests" are informed, tremendously, by our values. When our values stipulate that there is a civilizational ladder, where a population is on one end of it and everyone else is far below, then we lose the moral high ground.

Solidarity with the brave people of Ukraine has reminded us all what is possible when empathy is really felt, but it will be bittersweet if our solidarity is really just skin-deep. Our media has a big role to play to avoid

this. Many do an excellent job, but too many need to do a lot better.

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