

The UK and the Conflict in Ukraine

Robert Hudson

Professor honoris causa, University American College Skopje, North Macedonia
Emeritus Professor in History and Cultural Politics, University of Derby, UK

ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper will be on the role played by post-‘Brexit’, ‘Global Britain’ in the face of the continuing conflict in Ukraine. Emphasis will be placed upon the background of public opinion and the current political climate in the UK and on how Britain’s role on the international scene has changed significantly since the ‘Brexit’ referendum of 2016 whereby, for some commentators, the conflict in Ukraine has even provided the UK government with a rare opportunity and success in foreign policy, especially in the aftermath of the chaotic withdrawal from Kabul in August 2021.

KEYWORDS: *Ukrainian refugees, UK public opinion, Post-‘Brexit’ foreign policy, and Homes for Ukraine.*

INTRODUCTION

The UK's pro-Ukrainian response to Putin's Russia has been bullish. The UK has been widely praised for its support of Ukraine in that country's war with Russia, following the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces on 24 February 2022. Whilst he was still in office, the former UK prime minister visited President Zelensky in Kyiv three times since the invasion. Meanwhile, Zelensky gave a speech via electronic media to the House of Commons on 8 March which received a standing ovation from all the assembled parliamentarians. Otherwise, the UK has continuously been providing military and humanitarian aid, whilst working with international partners in supplying vital weapons to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, including thousands of anti-tank weapons, anti-air missiles, multiple launch rocket systems, armoured vehicles, artillery, small arms, and weapons training (Gov UK website). It has also played a significant role in providing reassurance and support for NATO allies in central and eastern Europe, especially the deployment of UK troops in Estonia and Poland.

However, for today's presentation I have decided not to focus on the UK's military support to Ukraine and the heavy sanctions that have been imposed upon Russia and Belarus, but rather on the post-'Brexit' Britain vision of 'Global Britain with regard to the War in Ukraine, as well as providing you with a snapshot of public attitudes to the war in Ukraine, by focusing on the UK government policies and public attitudes towards the migration and settlement of Ukrainian Refugees in the UK.

THE POST-'BREXIT' VISION OF A 'GLOBAL BRITAIN'

Britain's role on the international scene has changed significantly since the 'Brexit' Referendum of 2016. For some commentators, such as Bronwen Maddox, Director and CEO of the international think tank Chatham House, commenting in the *Washington Post* last week on the passing of the Queen, 'We are moving into a point where Britain is less sure of its role in the world.' Others, by contrast paint a different picture. One political risk and intelligence analyst Alexander Brotman has commented that: 'In extricating itself from the EU, the UK has been able to view Ukraine solely through the prism of defence and security on bilateral terms', whilst an editorial in *The Financial Times* on 11 April 2022 commented on how the Ukraine has been a rare success for UK foreign policy. Whilst Britain's policy on refugees remains a mess, its military aid has been a great success. The FT admits that since the 'Brexit' referendum the country's politicians have struggled for coherence on foreign policy, whilst the austerity measures introduced by the Cameron government under Chancellor George Osborne had sapped the capabilities of UK institutions, and that the state had increasingly been run from the 1980s on a just-in-time basis that made it fragile to shocks. By contrast, came the conflict in Ukraine, and suddenly, the UK government saw an opportunity in which 'the stars had aligned' and there was a political consensus which reached across all major parties. For whilst:

British foreign policy towards the EU is tied up in knots because that is the only way to square domestic politics. On arming Ukraine, the position is crystal-clear and granite solid. (*Financial Times*, 11 April 2022).

The FT went on to argue that the war had saved Boris Johnson 's premiership from any likely leadership challenge over 'partygate'. However, as all readers will know, *The Financial Times* was to be proven wrong, at least on that score.

So, to take up on Brotman's analysis we can see British sovereignty in action without the country's security and defence policy being dragged down by EU conformity, delays and restrictions. The argument runs that in supporting Ukraine in its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, the UK has not only been able to rehabilitate its own image but also to gain the respect and admiration of other states through its leadership in the conflict. Certainly, President Zelensky and other members of the Ukrainian leadership have consistently expressed their appreciation of Boris Johnson, the UK government and Great Britain in general for the consistent support Ukraine has received in terms of military support, military training and humanitarian aid. At the same time the UK has reinforced its own sense of sovereignty now that the country has been freed of the 'European yoke'. The UK's foreign and defence policy is no longer shackled with the EU's mission of economic and political integration. So, the UK government can see itself as playing an enhanced role in supporting Ukraine and its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Furthermore, it could even be said that the UK is now demonstrating its true commitment to NATO and the European continent as a whole, and not just the EU, in its foreign and defence policy in the aftermath of 'Brexit'. Witness the significant role played by the UK in providing reassurance and support for NATO allies in central and eastern Europe, especially the deployment of UK troops in Estonia and Poland.

However, the UK general public has a rather mixed attitude to this new so-called 'Global Britain', given the bitter division that surrounded the 'Brexit' referendum of 2016 and its aftermath, which continues to fester beneath the surface of political discourse to this day.

Marion Devine, Senior Researcher for The Conference Board think tank, has commented that a recent poll found that 36 per cent of the general public believed that being outside the EU has actually strengthened the UK's response to the Ukraine crisis. By contrast, 26 per cent thought that 'Brexit' had weakened the British response. Whilst critics of Johnson also noted that whenever tensions worsened over 'party gate' or any of the other scandals facing his leadership, Johnson was constantly 'nipping off' to Kyiv to meet Volodimir Zelensky or to some other international conference to avoid the opprobrium back home.

POLICIES AND PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN THE UK

The first thing that one can observe in the UK is that there has been an incredible outpouring of emotional and practical support for Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict in February. In many parts of the country, Ukrainians who have settled in the UK have often been referred to as 'guests' rather than refugees. Indeed, it can be said that the level of kindness shown to Ukrainian migrants by members of the public in the UK is almost unprecedented in recent British history (Clancy), and this has occasionally been contrasted with the often less sympathetic attitudes towards migrants from other benighted countries, such as Syria and Afghanistan and especially the frustration that has often been expressed more recently towards the number of asylum seekers crossing the English Channel in small boats over the last nine months; estimated in this period alone as being as many as 25,000.

Travelling across the United Kingdom, you will find Ukrainian flags flying from many buildings, private and public; and, in peoples' gardens. You will see Ukrainian flags and stickers on cars and people wearing ribbons, pin badges or articles of clothing in the Ukrainian national colours of blue and yellow.

One particular cultural example of the emotional support for Ukraine was demonstrated by the Ukraine Freedom Orchestra playing in the Promenade Concert (the Proms) in the Royal Albert Hall, London; hosted by the BBC and featuring on BBC Radio 3 and the BBC television channels on Sunday 31 July. The orchestra, conducted by Keri-Lyn Wilson, had been rapidly assembled from professional Ukrainian musicians in Ukraine and from across Europe, including male musicians released from military service to come and play in London. The high moment of the concert was when Wilson turned to the crowd and yelled ‘*Slava Ukraini*’ (‘Glory to Ukraine’). The audience cheered and waved Ukrainian flags and then Wilson led an arrangement of the Ukrainian national anthem *Ukraine has not perished yet* (1992). There were roars of delight and not a dry eye left in the house. The BBC commentator Petroc Trelawny made the point that this event was: ‘A testament to the power of music and to the endurance of the human spirit’ and added that: ‘Music stands proud and defiant.’

Another example of the generosity of spirit towards Ukraine is demonstrated by the fact that in just one week, the UK made a new Guinness World Record by raising £61 million in an online campaign organized by the UK Disasters Emergency Committee. By the end of May this had risen to £300 million.

How then do we account for this seemingly nation-wide expression of sympathy? Perhaps it could be seen as the traditional British respect for the underdog, and support for any nation that stands up to a better-armed aggressor and invader. This is how the British like to portray themselves. Witness, for example, the British public’s attitude towards Belgium and ‘splendid little’ Serbia during the First World War. Certainly, there has been a lot of Churchillian rhetoric over the last seven months, as Russia’s actions in Ukraine have often been seen through the prism of the Second World War. Furthermore, public attitudes following the Queen’s recent passing have made the sacrifices and stoicism of the wartime generation even more poignant. Our former prime minister Boris Johnson has been particularly extravagant in his use of Churchillian delivery; for example, in one of his speeches in his final days as the occupant of No. 10 Downing Street, he emphasized that: ‘This is Ukraine’s finest hour that will be remembered for generations to come;’ thereby portraying the kind of flourishing Churchillian rhetoric that is so redolent in Johnson’s style of delivery.

Another explanation of British support for Ukrainian refugees has been how the British like to congratulate themselves on their country as having always provided a safe haven for refugees fleeing persecution abroad. In the previous century one only has to think of the role Britain played in receiving Jewish children from pre-war Nazi Germany on the *Kindertransporten*, or the reception of the Asian refugees who came to the UK from Idi Amin’s Uganda in 1972. This particular migration of refugees has been much discussed recently, in this the fiftieth anniversary year. Yet as a historian, and also as someone who actually lived through this event as a schoolboy, I have to admit that in reality the UK public might not have been quite as generous in their attitudes and spirit towards those Ugandan Asians in the 1970s as they might like to portray matters today. Otherwise, in the last few years, consider the UK’s reception of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Hong Kong. Although, the level of sympathy towards these migrants fleeing conflict and internal oppression bears little resemblance to that expressed toward the Ukrainian mothers and their children that came these shores.

One other explanation for the support of the UK public for Ukrainian refugees might well be the gradual deterioration of UK-Russian relations since Putin came to power in