The Invisible Luggage of the Displaced: Emotions, Trauma and Public Diplomacy

Dr Alina Dolea, Bournemouth University, UK

Abstract

All displaced people, be it refugees, migrants, or expatriates, experience a sense of loss and trauma. Ukrainians crossing the border to take refuge across Europe carry with them this emotional luggage that shapes their identity and influences their integration in their new host places. Yet, the consequences of this invisible luggage have been rarely scrutinized in depth in public diplomacy and even in diaspora diplomacy scholarship. I draw on the psychoanalytical work of Vamik Volkan to shed some light on the psychology of Ukrainian refugees and the reactions of Romanians as host population. I argue a greater engagement with studies of emotions in international relations and political psychology could shape a research agenda that addresses the role of emotions and trauma in a world shaken by many crises.

Keywords Emotions, Trauma, Diaspora diplomacy, Russia–Ukraine war, Ukraine, Romania, Refugees, Migrants

Moving images of Ukrainian women carrying their belongings and children bracing their teddies in search of safety quickly became one of the iconic visual representations of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine from February 24, 2022. Ukrainians fleeing their homes and leaving behind their life as they knew it, were taking with them not only physical objects, but also a heavy invisible luggage – the emotional luggage that all displaced people carry.

Watching these images, I remembered Bruno Catalano's series of bronze sculptures, *Les Voyageurs* (The Travelers),[1] that depict ordinary individuals without a central part of their body

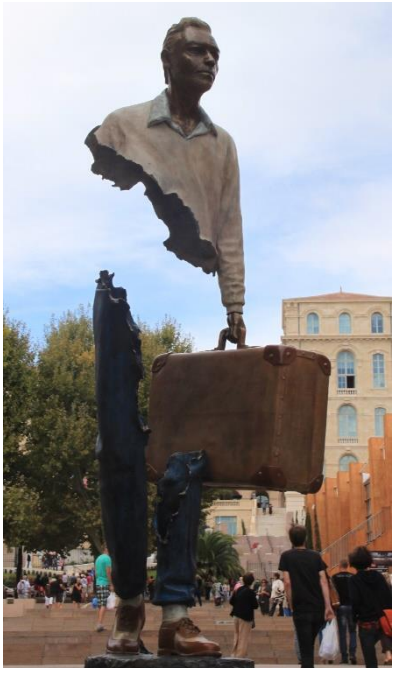

Image 1. Marseille, près du vieux Port, Le Voyageur, sculpture de Bruno Catalano. Photo credit: Jeanne Menjoulet, https://www.flickr.com/photos/jmenj/10775477066/in/photostream/. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

[1] https://brunocatalano.com/sculpture-bronze/bruno-catalano-monumentales.php

but holding a suitcase in one hand: it is only the suitcase that keeps together the fragmented body and makes the connection between the upper part with the head and the lower part with the feet frozen in motion (Image 1). I was struck by how accurately Catalano captured what is left behind and lost by those who are displaced. *Les Voyageurs* series is all the more powerful as it places the viewers in the position of filling the gaps, of interpreting and relating to the displaced in this form of communication through art between newcomers and hosts.

Migration, be it forced or voluntary, is recognised as a phenomenon that has a great impact on contemporary society and a key issue in public diplomacy and international relations. However, the medium- and long-term consequences of the emotional luggage that shapes the identity and influences the integration of displaced people in their new host places have been rarely scrutinized in depth in public diplomacy and even in diaspora diplomacy scholarship. In fact, emotions in general are marginally discussed by public diplomacy scholars, with few notable exceptions such as the key role of emotions in influence and persuasion (Graham 2014), emotions and identity in digital diplomacy strategies (Duncombe 2019), the use of humour (Manor 2021), or the institutionalization of fear and empathy in public diplomacy (Di Martino 2021). The marginality of emotions in the field is all the more surprising because the topic has become a rapidly growing field of inquiry in international relations, with two recent forums published on theorizing emotions in world politics (Bleiker and Hutchison 2014) and one on discourse, emotions and international relations (Koschut et al 2017). One possible explanation for the absence of emotions in public diplomacy research might be that the field has been significantly influenced by rational actor models that have previously dominated International Relations research as well (Hutchinson and Bleiker 2014).

This essay calls for integrating the study of emotions in public diplomacy and diaspora diplomacy research in order to: (1) explore the breadth and depth of psychological processes that turn individual emotions into group emotions, and (2) understand the potential of emotions to enable or disrupt engagement. I argue that interdisciplinary research, which engages with political psychology[2] approaches that look at emotions, affect, and trauma, will provide new analytical insights into the inner worlds and lived experiences of the displaced, as well as into the emotions that shape representations, attitudes and behaviours of both newcomers and hosts. Such insights are much needed in designing policies aimed to support displaced groups and ease their integration and adaption in host countries. They can also contribute to more inclusive and positive public discourses about migrants and refugees.

After a brief reflection on the current climate of war and "refugee fatigue," I draw on the psychoanalytical work of Vamik Volkan[3] in order to shed some light on the psychology of newcomers (in this case Ukrainian refugees) and the reactions of a host population

[2] Political psychology is an interdisciplinary field of study that looks at psychological processes applied to politics and includes cognitive approaches, behavioural approaches, psychosocial/ psychoanalytical perspectives, evolutionary psychology and neuropsychology.

[3] Vamik Volkan has written extensively on what psychoanalytical concepts can bring to the field of diplomacy, especially in ethnic group conflicts, ethnic terrorism, unofficial diplomatic dialogue and negotiations, emphasizing the value of psychoanalytically informed diplomatic strategies to reduce ethnic tension. His work is part of psychosocial studies on emotions that bring to the fore the inner world of individuals (their emotional and unconscious experiences) connected with external political, social and cultural contexts.

(specifically, Romanians). I will conclude by discussing implications for the field of public diplomacy and suggestions for future research.

From an Outpouring of Solidarity to 'Refugee Fatigue'

As the news of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine broke and circled the globe almost instantaneously, people took to news media and social media for updates and expressions of shock and disbelief. In 21st century Europe, which still bears the marks of two devastating world wars, the outbreak of a new war was somehow unbelievable, as if happening in a hyperreality of Hollywood or Netflix productions. Yet, bombarded cities, casualties and large groups of people queuing for hours to flee Ukraine were very real and generated an immediate wave of emotional support and an outpouring of solidarity. In countries neighbouring Ukraine, citizens, NGOs, and governments mobilized to provide immediate humanitarian assistance at the border and convoys of food, medical supplies, and equipment into Ukraine.

Six months later, in September 2022, over 7 million refugees from Ukraine were estimated to reside across Europe (of whom over 4 million registered for temporary/national protection schemes or refugee status). Another nearly 7 million are internally displaced within Ukraine (UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe, 2022). As months went by, the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine are gradually being felt by Europeans, confronted with rises in energy prices, inflation, and an overall cost of living crisis. Over the summer, media reports warned of "refugee fatigue" as support for Ukrainian refugees was waning across Central and Eastern Europe and especially in the neighbouring countries.[4] In August 2022, World Vision (2022) published a report on the rising tensions towards Ukrainian refugees, especially in Poland, Romania, and Moldova, arguing that important lessons can be learnt from case studies of host countries in the Global South that hosted refugees. The report also signalled the rise in disinformation and misinformation about the refugees, as well as perceptions of unfairness regarding the allocation of more resources towards refugees than towards local populations.

Ukrainian Refugees as Newcomers: Loss, Mourning, Prejudice, Chosen Trauma and Chosen Glories

Ukrainians crossing the border to take refuge across Europe become newcomers and experience a profound sense of loss. Volkan's work on immigrants and refugees is particularly useful in understanding the multiple levels of loss experienced by newcomers: "loss of family members and friends; loss of ancestors' burial grounds; loss of familiar language, songs, smells, food, in one's environment; loss of country; loss of previous identity and its support system" (2017: 4). The ability to mourn or resist mourning processes in response to major losses is key to understanding dislocation experiences. While dislocation and displacement are taking place on a spectrum from forced to voluntary immigration, refugees face pressure to prove themselves worthy of the mercy received, an urgency to assimilate and adapt, a rage against what was left behind, and a guilt towards those who were left behind (Volkan 2017).

[4] Minder, R. and Erling. B. August 14, 2022. Poland's army of volunteers flags as Ukraine 'refugee fatigue' sets in. *Financial Times.* https://www.ft.com/content/5af8ac1a-2310-41ea-bdd7-d5573b6144d5

Volkan also proposes the concepts of large-group identity, chosen trauma, chosen glories, and psychological border. *Large-group identity*, be it tribal, ethnic, national, religious, or ideological, refers to the sameness shared among thousands or millions of people unknown to each other as individuals (Volkan 2018) being shaped by a mixture of myths and realities of the past. Mental representations of heavily mythologized past events and heroes, and shared triumphs become *chosen glories* and are passed on through transgenerational transmissions and partaking in rituals and ceremonies (Volkan 1999). In turn, *chosen traumas* are mental representations of events that "caused the large group to face drastic losses, feel helpless and victimized by another group, and share a humiliating injury" (Volkan 1999: 50). Volkan explains how this "reflects a group's unconscious "choice" to add a past generation's mental representation of an event to its own identity" (*Ibidem*). Similarly, the memory of trauma and the sense of lost security are transgenerationally transmitted, can change function (e.g., they can support the group identity in one generation as victims, in another generation as avengers), or remain dormant. It is in contexts of existing or perceived threats to large-group identity, that a physical border also becomes a psychological border (Volkan 2018), with refugees perceived as newcomers, the Others who damage the host group's psychological border and identity.

Understanding the complex psychology, loss, emotions, and trauma of displacement is essential in diaspora diplomacy. It is necessary for theory building in order to develop analytical frameworks and research questions that link psychological processes with engagement and disengagement. In terms of practice, it can inform medium- and long-term policies of support and integration of refugees in host countries. Developing programs and encouraging grassroots initiatives aimed to increase multi-cultural awareness, communication and collaboration between newcomers and host populations is critical. Increased communication towards host publics is also needed in European countries especially because previous waves of migration and refugees have been instrumentalized in exclusionary, divisive political discourses that contribute to social anxieties, fears, and phobias towards newcomers. Psychoanalytical approaches can shed light on the psychological processes that make illiberal, populist, and extremist discourses effective as they instrumentalize *chosen traumas* and *chosen glories*.

Host Reactions to Newcomers: Romanians and the Ukrainian Refugees[5]

"We all know how it [Soviet invasion] feels like." As the shock of Ukraine's invasion by Russia propagated throughout the world, this statement, and several variations of it emerged repeatedly on Romanian social media, as well as within the transnational Romanian digital diaspora. While at the border with Ukraine Romanian individuals and organizations were mobilizing to offer first aid responses (Anghel and Trandafoiu 2022), the collective solidarity and activism of Romanian diaspora reached a new high. In a matter of days, countless transnational initiatives and partnerships were put in place by networks of diaspora NGOs, embassies and Romanian local councillor in diaspora in order to support Ukrainian refugees, but also Romanians who were volunteering at the border (Image 2).

[5] This section offers a brief snapshot and collage of tropes that emerged in Romania to illustrate some of the hosts' reactions. These discourses should be studied further in a more systematic way.

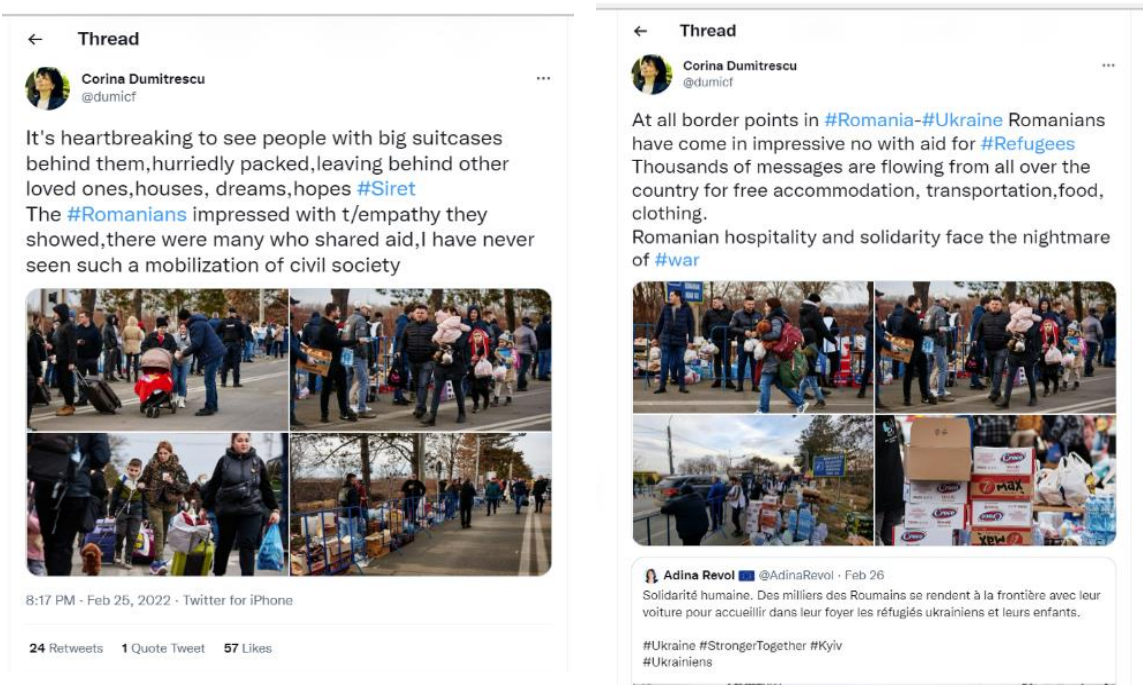

Image 2 https://twitter.com/dumicf/status/1497304817018064901; https://twitter.com/dumicf/status/1497626012976398346

Appeals to emotions are commonplace in discourses aimed at generating engagement with donation campaigns and volunteering. In this context, the solidarity discourse was constructed around a *chosen trauma* for Romanians: the "trauma of Soviet occupation", "post-soviet trauma", and the "horrors of Soviet occupation" were explicitly used to invoke a responsibility to act, to volunteer or to donate. Journalists, representatives of NGOs and charities in Romania and in the diaspora, informal leaders, who have gradually become diasporic micro-influencers with their own online communities, took to Facebook to share personal stories of their own families or of other families who went through horrific experiences during the Soviet invasion. The transgenerational transmission of *chosen traumas* and the large-group identity of a *traumatized generation* were invoked to strengthen the discourse of a "duty" to help, to donate, to do something, including to expose the past, to talk openly and publicly about the consequences of suffering and pain, and thus to contribute to a collective healing process.

Another discourse circulating in social media and among the diaspora in the first days after the invasion was the emergent re-claiming of a collective lived experience and belonging to a common post-communist space. This was an unexpected development given that Romania and other Central-Eastern European countries have fought hard to counter stereotypes associated with this region (e.g. the stereotypes of the Polish plumber and Romanian unskilled workers) and to get rid of the post-communist label. Now, this very history appeared to place them in a position that allows them to understand best the geopolitical, cultural, and social realities on the ground. The past Soviet invasion, life under communism, and post-communism were some lenses through which the war in Ukraine was discussed.

The West was gradually Othered and placed symbolically in a position of not being able to fully grasp the nuances and consequences on the ground. A discourse to delegitimize the West was articulated around key statements such as "the West does not get this," "they don't and

can't understand us," and "the EU and NATO are weak." This Othering of the West and delegitimation of the EU and NATO were fuelled also by pro-Russian propaganda in Romania,[6] giving platform to nationalist and extremist viewpoints and allowing them to gain traction and capitalize on Romanians' fears of war escalation, including a possible invasion. There were also some voices who argued that Romania has strained relations with Ukraine and therefore the government's support for Ukraine was questioned and criticised. Once more severe sanctions were imposed on Russia by the EU and more political decisions were issued to strengthen the Eastern border of NATO, these discourses lost traction, but did not completely disappear.

As more Ukrainian refugees arrived in Romania, the reactions of Romanians have become more diverse. After an initial wave of enthusiasm and warm welcome, Romanians have started to notice the relative affluence of the refugees – their expensive cars, top brand clothes, and an overall unexpected appearance. Ukrainians did not look like refugees! Indeed, as Volkan (2017) also observed in other cases, the images of these well-off refugees clashed with the expectations of the host Romanian population that refugees are "suffering" people.

Six months later, Romania continues to be one of Ukraine's neighbours with some of the highest border crossing - over 2 million people; over 74,000 refugees registered for protection in October 2022, of which over 38,000 are children (Romania's response to the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis 2022). Romania, a country of emigration with a quarter of its population in diaspora (Dolea 2022), is more of a transit country for Ukrainian refugees who have preferred to continue their journey to other European countries. Nevertheless, anti-refugee narratives have emerged, articulated mainly around the allocation of government resources towards refugees instead of poor Romanians. As Romania is hit by inflation and braces for a harsh winter with a steep rise of the cost of living, more negative attitudes can be expected (World Vision 2022).

From Stirring Emotions to Studying Emotions and Trauma

There is a global emotional climate of uncertainty, with compounded effects of the war in Ukraine, an energy and cost of living crisis, after a pandemic that heightened loneliness worldwide. With migration forecasted to amplify due to climate change, public diplomacy scholars can no longer ignore emotions and their role in social life. Paradoxically, emotions have always been part of public diplomacy as they are linked to the objectives of many campaigns. Obtaining a favourable climate of opinion, generating support and influence through strategic narratives is ultimately about creating attitudinal or behavioural outcomes with intrinsic emotional layers. The mantra of "whose story wins" is emblematic of the symbolic contest over the emotions of audiences. However, public diplomacy research needs to shift from emotions as an outcome to emotions as an object of study. This will expand the field beyond collaborative and relational approaches and will highlight tensions, power struggles, and disruptions in public diplomacy.

[6] https://pressone.ro/6-naratiuni-ale-propagandei-putiniste-despre-razboiul-din-ucraina

Some questions to explore would include: Whose emotions should we study in public diplomacy? Can the behaviours of states and organizations be shaped by emotions and, if so, how? How do populist leaders instrumentalize emotions in foreign policy? How do emotions factor in the construction of domestic, transnational, and global publics? How do emotions and trauma shape the identities of displaced communities and diasporas? How do they trigger engagement and disengagement with home and host countries?

We also need to recognize that emotions are discursive and that discourses construct and reproduce relations of power. Public diplomacy needs to move beyond quantitative descriptions of emotions in text, talk, and visuals and engage with critical discourse perspectives in order to explore the discursive construction of emotions by different actors. A greater engagement with studies of emotions in IR and political psychology could bring answers to such questions and shape a research agenda that addresses the role of emotions and trauma in a world shaken by many crises.

References

Anghel, R. G., Trandafoiu, R. 2022, March 8. A glimpse of humanity: How Romanians have mobilised to help Ukrainian refugees. *LSE Blog*. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/03/08/a-glimpse-of-humanity-how-romanians-have-mobilised-to-help-ukrainian-refugees

Bleiker, R., Hutchison, E. 2014 Forum: Emotions and World Politics. *International Theory* 6(3): 490–594.

Di Martino, L. 2021. Fear and empathy in international relations: Diplomacy, cyber engagement and Australian foreign policy. *Place Brand Public Diplomacy*. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-021-00211-9.

Dolea, A. 2022. Transnational diaspora diplomacy, emotions and COVID-19: the Romanian diaspora in the UK. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 18: 12–14.

Duncombe, C. 2019. Digital Diplomacy: Emotion and Identity in the Public Realm. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14 (1–2): 102–116. https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-14101016.

Graham, S. E. 2014. Emotion and Public Diplomacy: Dispositions in International Communications, Dialogue, and Persuasion. *International Studies Review* 16(4): 522–539.

Hutchison, E, Bleiker, R. 2014. Theorizing Emotions in World Politics. *International Theory* 6(3): 491–514.

Koschut, S., Hall, T.H., Wolf, R., Solomon, T., Hutchison, E., Bleiker, R. 2017. Discourse and Emotions in International Relations. *International Studies Review* 19: 481-508.

Manor, I. 2021. The Russians are Laughing! The Russians are Laughing! How Russian Diplomats Employ Humour in Online Public Diplomacy, *Global Society* 35 (1): 61-83. https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2020.1828299

UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe. September 2022. Lives on hold: intentions and perspectives of refugees from Ukraine. Regional Intentions Report #2. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/95767

Volkan, V. D. 2018. Refugees as the Other: Large-group identity, terrorism and border psychology. *Group Analysis* 51(3): 343–358. https://doi.org/10.1177/0533316418784714

Volkan, V. D. 2017. *Immigrants and Refugees: Trauma, Perennial Mourning, and Border Psychology*. London: Karnac.

Volkan, V. D. 1999. Psychoanalysis and Diplomacy Part I: Individual and Large Group Identity. *Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 1: 29-55.

World Vision International. August 2022. *Warm Welcomes, Lurking Tensions*. https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Host%20tensions_final.pdf.

*** October 2022. *Status Report. Romania's response to the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis*. Prime Minister Chancellery. Government of Romania.

Alina Dolea is Associate Professor in Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy in the Faculty of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University, UK. Her research is situated at the intersection of public diplomacy, migration, media and communication studies, with a focus on discourse. She is particularly interested in the role non-state actors have come to play in public diplomacy, reproducing, but also contesting and disrupting the state's strategic communication. Her current work focuses on diasporas and emotions, exploring the opportunities as well as the consequences of their transnational existence for public diplomacy as 2022-2024 Research Fellow of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy.