The Diverse Experiences of Refugee Groups in Northeast Asia

Ilhong Ko

Due to the sensitive geopolitical situation of Northeast Asia, the borders of its respective nation-states are difficult to cross unless authorized by the government. Cross-border flows not sanctioned by the government, such as the movement of North Korean refugees or illegal migrant workers, have nevertheless been a visible aspect of human migration in the region since the turn of the millennium. However, recent conflicts in places located beyond Northeast Asia have led to a previously unwitnessed type of human movement into the region, involving displaced people from Yemen, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Russia. Due to a series of circumstances – some of which are historical and path-dependent, and others of which are purely of chance – it is in South Korea that these displaced people have found refuge; the number of those who have settled in the other nation-states of Northeast Asia is negligible.[1]

The contributions to this issue of *News from Northeast Asia* address the diverse experiences of refugee groups in South Korea. In "It's Taking a Whole Village to Raise Children: A Focused Study on the Afghan Refugees in Ulsan, South Korea," Gi Yeon Koo of Seoul National University Asia Center presents the case of the Afghan 'people of special merit.' Koo notes how the lessons learned from the public's reactions to Yemeni refugees were considered in the process of accepting refugees from Afghanistan. Presenting a stark contrast to the case of the Afghan refugees is that of the refugees from Ukraine, who are mostly ethnic Koreans. Their experiences are examined in detail by Ka Young Ko of Seoul National University Asia Center in "The Hospitality and Limitations of South Korea for the Ukrainian Refugees." Finally, the issue of "Why Don't Russian *Relokants* (War Immigrants) Choose South Korea as their Place of Permanent Residence?" is addressed by Vadim Slepchenko of Seoul National University Asia Center. The contents of, and issues raised by, these pieces can be used to understand the wider socio-political and socio-economic outcomes and consequences that can occur for refugees across Northeast Asia.

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Notes

1 The exception being Russian *relokants* in Mongolia.

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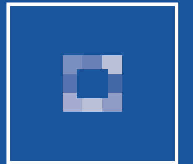

The Seoul National University Asia Center (SNUAC) is a research and international exchange institute based in Seoul, South Korea. The SNUAC's most distinctive feature is its cooperative approach in fostering research projects and international exchange program through close interactions between regional and thematic research programs about Asia and the world. To pursue its mission to become a hub of Asian Studies, SNUAC research teams are divided by different regions and themes. Research centers and programs are closely integrated, providing a solid foundation for deeper analysis of Asian society.

It's Taking a Whole Village to Raise Children: A Focused Study on the Afghan Refugees in Ulsan, South Korea

Gi Yeon Koo

In the first five months of 2018, 552 Yemenis, mostly men, claimed asylum on Jeju Island. This was an unforeseen result of a visa-waiver program intended for international tourists who would otherwise have needed visas to enter the Korean mainland.[1] The sudden increased inflow of Yemeni refuges to the island was heavily covered by Korean media outlets, and the so-called "Yemeni refugee issue of 2018" became a wake-up call for Korean society, highlighting the fact that South Korea could receive a large influx of refugees at any time. Four years later, after the fall of Kabul, South Koreans witnessed the influx of another group of refugees into the country, this time from Afghanistan. However, the experiences of these Afghans, as well as the Korean public's reaction to them, differed greatly from the case of the Yemeni refugees.

Fig. 1: The largest number of Afghan students were enrolled in Ulsan Seoboo Elementary School. At the end of 2022, Afghan students put together a classroom book called "Shiny Jewelry Box." This is one of the stories included in this book. The text beneath the picture says "There were a lot of people at the airport. There were so many cameras. They all said "Welcome to Korea." And we all got pretty dolls. It was so, so pretty." (Image courtesy of Ulsan Seoboo Elementary School)

공항에 많은 사람 있었어요.
카메라가 정말 많았어요.
모두 말했어요.
"welcome to KoREA"
"한국에 오신 걸 환영 합니다."
그리고 우리는 모두 예쁜 인형을 받았어요.
너무 너무 예뻤어요.

On August 26, 2021, 391 Afghans who had worked for years at the Korean embassy in Afghanistan, at Korean hospitals, and at vocational training centers run with Korean support arrived in Korea with their families on a flight chartered by the Korean government "in search of lasting peace." Upon arrival, they were granted special status by the Korean government as "special people of merit" rather than "refugees." The news reports and scenes of their evacuation from Afghanistan – which was dubbed "Operation Miracle" – were broadcast in real time by the Korean media, acting as a reminder that South Korea was a responsible member of the international community. In addition, the public discourse on these Afghan "special people of merit" was noticeably different from the perception of refugees that had emerged in the years following the "Yemeni refugee issue of 2018" in that the universal human value of humanitarianism was strongly acknowledged in the case of the Afghan refugees.

Indeed, it can be said that the success and positive perception of "Operation Miracle" was the result of the various resolutions and (sometimes heated) discussions that took place within the religious, academic, media, political, and governmental sectors of Korean society that occurred in the years following the Yemeni refugee issue of 2018. It is of particular interest to note that, rather than being perceived as Muslim refugees, the Afghan refugees were seen as the agents of development and progress following the US invasion of Afghanistan. The term "special people of merit" – as opposed to "refugees" – also played an important role in granting them an identity distinct from the Yemeni refugees.

Although there were many concerns and controversies during the initial immigration and settlement process of the Afghan refugees, their main settlement area in Ulsan is now transforming into a space of hospitality for Muslim immigrants in Korean society. On February 8, 2022, 157 Afghan refugees, about 40% of the total arrivals, settled in Dong-gu, Ulsan. Twenty-nine heads of households were employed at companies cooperating with Hyundai Heavy Industries, and a total of 85 students were integrated into the public education system in Ulsan: 21 children were assigned to kindergartens, and 64 students were assigned to elementary, middle, and high schools. The Ulsan Office of Education's multifaceted approach to Afghan students was crucial during this settlement process. A total of five consultations were held before enrollment began, and in the process, the Ulsan Office of Education applied the motto of "education that does not give up on a single child" to persuade local Korean parents who opposed the enrollment of Afghan children.

It has been said that the issue of Muslim refugees in Korea, which arose with the Yemeni refugees, became internalized within Korean society with the case of Afghan refugees. The settlement process of these Afghan refugees is a seminal example demonstrating how Muslim immigrants were able to smoothly settle within Korean society through the multifaceted hospitality and policy support of the Ulsan Metropolitan Office of Education, the city government of Dong-gu District Office, Hyundai Heavy Industries, and the citizens of Ulsan. It is highly possible that this case of 'hospitality' towards Muslim immigrants in Ulsan may become a precedent for resolving conflicts in a multi-cultural society, which is a reality South Korea is inevitably headed towards. The diverse subjects and directions of hospitality displayed during the Ulsan settlement process for Afghans will undoubtedly remain a key example in South Korea, and indeed, in Northeast Asia more broadly.

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Notes

1 The visa-waiver program was introduced on May 1, 2002 as a part of a special government act to develop Jeju Island into a 'international cosmopolitan city.'

The Hospitality and Limitations of South Korea for Ukrainian Refugees

Ka Young Ko

On February 24, 2022, contrary to the assumption of the majority of experts, Russian troops crossed the Ukrainian border. Bombings were carried out in large cities throughout Ukraine, including the capital Kiev, Lviv in the west, Kharkiv in the east, and Odessa in the south. Russia called this blunt beginning of the war a ‘special military operation.’ This was a reference to the operation that was being conducted to protect Russian citizens who were faced with threats in the eastern region. Although the war was expected to be a short one, it has been on-going for over two years. Whether the cause of the war was NATO’s eastward advance, Russia’s desire to reorganize the US-centered international order, or the East-West conflict within Ukraine, the bottom line is that it is the people living in Ukraine who suffer from the war, not the rulers of the United States and Russia. One of the consequences of the war is that a large number of Ukrainians have had to seek refuge. According to the UNHCR’s data as of March 14, 2024, there are 6,486,000 refugees abroad (5,982,900 in Europe and 503,100 outside of Europe), and the number of displaced people within Ukraine adds to 3,689,000. A small number of these Ukrainian war refugees came to South Korea. They are estimated to be about 1200 to 1500 people.

The characteristics of Ukrainian war refugees who came to South Korea are as follows. Most of the ethnic Koreans *(Koryein)* living in Ukraine have found their way to Korea. Before the Crimea incident in Ukraine in 2014, approximately 30,000 *Koryeins* lived in Ukraine. When the current war broke out in 2022, the number of *Koryeins* living in Ukraine was officially estimated to be about 12,000, though the actual number is believed to be around 20,000. *Koryeins* left the Korean Peninsula in the late 19th century to move to Primorsky Krai in Russia; from Primorsky Krai they moved again to Central Asia, this time due to Stalin’s forced migration policy in 1937. It is the *Koryeins* who voluntarily immigrated from Central Asia to Ukraine after Stalin’s death who are now returning to the Korean Peninsula as war refugees. However, most of these people did not enter the country as refugees, but rather by receiving a visa for Overseas Koreans (H2, F4).

There was no support from the Korean government for the Ukrainian refugees. Unlike for the 391 Afghan refugees who arrived in Korea on a chartered special flight in August 2021 and were provided with settlement support, the South Korean government did not provide any support for the Ukrainian refugees. However, through private NGO fundraising, airline tickets were sent to *Koryeins* staying in Poland and other nearby countries. Moreover, initial funds for the settlement of Ukrainian refugees who came to Korea were also acquired through private means. A representative NGO that has carried out these activities is *Koryein* Village, based in Gwangju, which is a non-profit incorporated association. Since 2002, *Koryein* Village has been running the *Koryein* Support Center to help *Koryein* migrant workers. It is equipped with a systematic infrastructure to help *Koryeins* find jobs, provide medical support and legal counseling, and operate educational institutions for their children. Using this infrastructure, *Koryein* Village provided 876 Ukrainian *Koryein* refugees with airline tickets for South Korea; after their entry, *Koryein* Village provided initial settlement funds and medical support (including medical treatment surgery) to about 160 people in poor health.

However, as these aid efforts were conducted purely at the private level, the limitations of the situation have become apparent in the past two years. In particular, it has become increasingly difficult for these refugees to acquire Korean nationality or to secure jobs in Gwangju. Because of this, about 40 percent of the refugees are relocating to the larger cities around Seoul or have gone back to Ukraine. The lack of government-level support – contrasting to the situation of the Afghan special people of merit – has inevitably led to difficulties in the settlement procedure.

Lastly, *Koryein* Village activists, who have a good understanding of Korean society’s negative views on refugees, do not refer to *Koryein* refugees from the Ukrainian war as “refugees” but rather as “compatriots who escaped the Ukrainian war.” Rather than accepting war refugees from the perspective of universal human rights, the approach has been to help these compatriots who have suffered due to the war. This incident reveals some of the limitations of Korean society regarding universal human rights. However, all societies appear to have issues with the notion of *universal* human rights, as was revealed when Europe, which ostracized Syrian refugees, welcomed Ukrainian refugees due to racial and religious affinities. Improving the awareness of refugees and their rights remains a task that South Korean society, and indeed the societies of Northeast Asia, must work towards.

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Fig. 1: Members of the ‘autonomous crime prevention unit’ run by *Koryein* Village. The blue building in the background is where the headquarters of *Koryein* Village is located; the ground floor houses the “*Koryein* Support Center.” Due to their activities, knife crimes in the area are the lowest nationwide among districts with a high concentration of residents from Central Asia. (Photo courtesy of Lee Cheon Young)

Why Don't Russian *Relokants* (War Immigrants) Choose South Korea as their Place of Permanent Residence?

Vadim Slepchenko

Following the start of the war in Ukraine, many Russians began leaving Russia en masse. One of the main reasons for this situation was the desire to avoid military conscription. Essentially, these migrants chose visa-free countries – e.g., Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, etc. – as their new place of residence. A significant number of highly qualified personnel that evaded mobilization are IT specialists who were able to work remotely. This migration wave had a positive impact on the economy of the receiving countries. For instance, in Armenia, 4000 Russians have registered as individual entrepreneurs since the beginning of the Ukrainian war. Additionally, among the top 20 IT companies recently established in Armenia, several have ties to Russia. Additionally, Russian *relokants* (war immigrants) have a positive impact on the economy of the host country solely by residing there. They receive a good salary in Russia and spend it in their new place of residence. South Korea also allows visa-free entry for Russian citizens. However, the number of Russians who permanently relocate to Korea is very low. This is due to several factors.

Russians are only permitted to stay in South Korea for a maximum of 60 days at a time, with a total of 90 days allowed within a six-month period. After this period has passed, it can be difficult to re-enter the country through the 'visa run' procedure (temporary exit from the country to a neighboring country and subsequent re-entry). Russians can visit other countries briefly and return to Korea after the visa expires, but the re-stay period is limited to one month. To re-enter the country again, a waiting period of three months is required. Due to these restrictions, it is nearly impossible for Russian citizens to stay in Korea for an extended period without a visa.

Additionally, South Korea has one of the lowest refugee acceptance rates globally, with a recognition rate of only 1.3 percent in 2021, the second-lowest among G20 countries. Furthermore, evading conscription is not a legal basis for refugee recognition in Korea. Therefore, even if Russians who evade enlistment apply for refugee status, the likelihood of being granted asylum is quite low. For instance, three Russians who lived in the terminal of Incheon International Airport in Korea for over a year and applied for refugee status were rejected by the Korean government, as reported by Korean media. All three individuals arrived in Korea in October 2022 and stated upon entry that they wished to remain in Korea due to their reluctance to serve in Russia's military. They attempted to seek refugee status at the airport, but their applications were denied by the Korean Ministry of Justice, which stated that evading military service alone does not qualify them as refugees. According to data from the Korean Immigration Service, a record number of Russians (5750 people) requested political asylum in South Korea in 2023. This is 5.5 times more than in 2022, and more than the total number of Russian asylum applications in Korea from 1994 to 2019. However, it is very likely that only a tiny number of applicants will receive refugee status.

Another deterrent is the electronic authorization system for entry into Korea. K-ETA (Electronic Travel Authorization) is a system designed for citizens of countries who can enter Korea without a visa. In accordance with this, citizens of 112 countries, including Russia, must obtain a special electronic permit before traveling to Korea. The probability of refusal when obtaining this permit is typically very low. However, after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, many Russian men were frequently denied this permit. The K-ETA system has complicated the entry of Russians into Korea. In October 2022, four yachts carrying 23 Russians fleeing military service attempted to enter the ports of Ulleungdo Island and Pohang in Korea. However, Korean authorities only allowed two Russians to enter, denying the rest due to a lack of prior electronic travel authorization. On October 11, two yachts carrying 15 Russians departed from Korean ports. The Russians who sailed from Ulleungdo informed the coast guard that they intended to return to Vladivostok. The other two yachts traveled to Thailand.

Although Russian *relokants* prefer other countries over South Korea due to the above restrictions, the number of those who have made their way to the other countries of Northeast Asia is even lower. This is because although Russia and China share a border, there is no visa-free travel agreement between the two countries (at present). Japan also does not allow visa-free entry for Russian citizens. A reconsideration of its migration policy by the Korean government may help attract high-quality human resources from Russia, including IT specialists, and this in turn may bring about a change of perceptions towards Russian *relokants* in the wider Northeast Asian region.

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Fig. 2: Ceremony for the unveiling of a statue of General Hong Beom-do, a Korean independence fighter who led Korean forces in Manchuria but later sought refuge with his forces in the Soviet Union. He was among the approximately 171,781 ethnic Koreans forcibly relocated to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan by Stalin, many of whom had fought for Korean independence. Due to this legacy, the *Koryein* communities of Central Asia tend to be regarded favorably by the South Korea public as the descendants of independence fighters, and the *Koryein* community in South Korea, in turn, utilizes this cultural capital to great effect. (Photograph by Ka Young Ko, 2023)