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Erika Simpson

Western University, simpson@uwo.ca

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Our response to refugee crisis could define us

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Migrants demonstrate outside the main Eastern Railway station in Budapest, Hungary, September 1, 2015. Hundreds of angry migrants demonstrated on Tuesday demanding they be allowed to travel on to Germany, as the biggest ever influx of migrants into the European Union left its asylum policies in tatters. Around 1,000 people waved tickets, clapping, booing and hissing, and shouting "Germany! Germany!" outside the station. A refugee crisis rivalling the Balkan wars of the 1990s as Europe's worst since World War Two has polarised and confounded the European Union, which has no mechanism to cope with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of poor and desperate people. REUTERS/Laszlo Balogh

A caravan of gypsies surprised me once, when I was biking through Eastern Europe. Their horse-drawn carriages, with gigantic wooden wheels, passed me on a country road somewhere in Yugoslavia.

The gypsies, whom Europeans call the Roma, towed three brown bears in straw-laden trailers. Because it was swelteringly hot, the three bears looked forlorn and definitely not in the mood for dancing.

Dancing bears and persecuted lions can't claim refugee status. But after years of Roma coming to Canada to seek asylum, the Conservative government changed the rules to drastically cut down — and then to increase — the number of Roma refugee claimants from Hungary.

Simply being a Roma from Hungary was insufficient proof of persecution, ruled refugee judges, and in 2009-10 only one to two percent of refugee claimants from Hungary were accepted.

According to researchers from Western University and Osgoode Hall Law School who reviewed Immigration and Refugee Board decisions between 2008 and 2012, only 18 percent, or 660, of their claims were granted, compared with 47 per cent (54,290) from all countries.

But new data from the Immigration and Refugee Board show the acceptance rate of Roma claims has greatly increased under Immigration Minister Christopher Alexander, who succeeded Jason Kenney. It shot to 68 per cent in the first half of 2015.

One factor contributing to the increase is the growing evidence of racially-motivated persecution of ethnic Roma in Europe. They are often discriminated against and suffer from oppression, including less state and police protection. Many Europeans treat the Roma with hostility, due in part to their ill reputation for nomadism, bohemianism and thievery.

An official refugee is someone who is outside his or her country of nationality and has a well-founded fear of persecution in that country based on one or more of five grounds: race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

Most desperate people crossing borders illegally do not fit the legal definition. They may be victims of immense hardship. They may suffer persecution or death. But if they have not been singled out on one of the five grounds — if for example, they have not been persecuted because they are of a certain ethnic origin or religion — they are not refugees under Canadian law.

If the Canadian government were to decide to accept even more legal refugees from Europe, including more desperate Syrians, displaced Libyans and persecuted Roma, they could not be told where to settle in Canada. Among other things, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms prevents our government from dictating that refugees must move outside the “Golden Triangle” (Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa) to more isolated places like Goose Bay, N.L., or Flin Flon, Man.

We can imagine Canada's future could include caravans of gypsies travelling along the highways each summer, competing with retired folk similarly travelling in convoys of recreational vehicles. But all refugees are allowed to choose where (and whether) they will settle down. Most will choose larger cities, but municipal, provincial and federal governments should put in place more incentives to encourage them to move to smaller cities and the rural areas.

How future Canadian governments will approach the global reality of increasing numbers of displaced people needing official refugee status deserves more debate.

Wars, climate change, conflict and persecution are forcing more people than at any other time to leave their homes and seek refuge and safety elsewhere, according to a new report in June from the UN refugee agency.

Globally, one in every 122 humans is now a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum. At the end of 2014, that meant 60 million people.

Canada will take only a handful of those millions. Successive Canadian governments — Liberal and Conservative — have accepted about a quarter-million immigrants and refugees a year, with refugees making up only a small, fluctuating portion of that total.

Since Canada's population is declining due to our low fertility rate, we need more immigrants and arguably more refugees. In more than 40 countries, including Canada but also in Eastern Europe and Asia, population size is expected to decline in coming decades. About 95% of world population growth will occur in the developing countries. The combined population of the 49 least developed countries is projected to double by 2050.

World population growth means that every time the second hand on your watch ticks — 60 times a minute, 3,600 times an hour, 86,400 times a day — three babies are born into the world. That's more than a quarter-million babies a day and more than 100 million babies a year.

Millions of those kids will move into mega-cities, each with a total population in excess of 10 million. The UN projects that by 2025, 630 million people will live in 37 megacities, including Tokyo-Yokohama, with a population of 38 million, Mexico City with 21 million, and Delhi with more than 30 million.

On the other hand, Statistics Canada's medium-growth scenario projects the total Canadian population will increase from 33.7 million in 2009 to 43.8 million by 2036 and then to 52.6 million by 2061.

There is a strong case for opening Canada's doors and creating incentives to help nurture many thousands more official refugees — not only more Roma from Hungary, but also more Afghans, Bangladeshis, Chinese, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Iranians, Libyans, Nigerians, North Koreans, Pakistanis, South Sudanese, Syrians, Ugandans, etc.

Hopefully by 2061, a few more world-class multicultural cities will emerge in the country with the second largest land mass in the world.

— *Erika Simpson, an associate professor of international relations at Western University in London, teaches classes on global violence and international security, and is the author of *NATO and the Bomb* and many other publications available on her blog. She is the vice-president of the Canadian Peace Research Association and the past vice-chair of the Canadian Pugwash Group.*