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## Polish borders: media polarization and representation of the refugee crises at the borders with Belarus (2021) and Ukraine (2022)\*

### *Abstract*

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** This paper examines how specific media outlets (*Polityka*, *Sieci*) have portrayed the crises on Poland's borders with Belarus and Ukraine. It focuses on refugees during the period of border crossings by capturing reactions, emotions, and decisions highlighted in the media during that period. Utilizing media polarization theory, the authors analyse similarities and differences in selected media outlets' coverage of the crises.

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**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The following research questions were asked: What is the media portrayal of the refugees on the Belarus and the Ukrainian borders? Does the structural level of MP (media polarization) impact the behavioural level? The authors conducted qualitative media content analysis, following Pisarek's (1983) research process and Mayring's (2014) Inductive Category.

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**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The theory of media polarization is presented, followed by an analysis of the literature examining this phenomenon in the context of the refugee crises at Poland's borders with Belarus and Poland. Qualitative content analysis of over 100 articles published in two

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strategically selected structurally polarized weeklies was carried out using the nVIVO software.

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**RESEARCH RESULTS:** The structural level of media polarization is reflected in the behavioural one. This study reveals that the main thematic focus is the refugees at the Belarusian border, who are described via political, social, and religious themes. The crisis at the Ukrainian border also exhibits polarizing elements, primarily centring on evaluating or criticizing the authorities and addressing or ignoring uncomfortable and problematic issues that emerge in connection to these refugees

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**CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION:** This study constitutes a significant contribution to the theory of media polarization, addressing it also in relation to issues of diversity, tolerance, inclusivity, and humanitarianism.

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**KEYWORDS:**

media polarization, border, refugees, Belarus, Ukraine

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Poland's borders, as part of NATO and the EU, have drawn media attention twice: first, at the Belarus border in 2021, and then at the Ukraine border in 2022. Both situations involved humanitarian crises related to people seeking refuge in Poland, and they continue to generate social, political, and media interest. However, the similarities between these borders end there.

The crisis on the Belarusian border which started in June 2021 was a result of a policy of the Lukashenko regime that aimed to destabilize Eastern EU countries (Śliwa & Olech, 2022). Observers noted that the sudden arrival of refugees at the Polish border was a planned element of hybrid warfare, orchestrated by an alliance between Minsk

and Moscow (*ibid.*). In response, Polish authorities tightened security measures, reinforced border guards, and constructed a special fence to prevent illegal border crossings. Acts of aggression, like pushbacks, denied people entry into Poland or return to Belarus, thus heightening the threat to their lives and health. Amid a declared state of emergency, Polish media faced restrictions in borderland access, giving Belarus control over the narrative (Ociepka 2023). In response, Poland's right-wing United Right alliance intensified media restrictions and fostered a hostile environment for refugees. For instance, during a press conference, a minister showcased alleged explicit pornographic content from a refugee's phone (Wróblewski, 2021). On the flip side, NGOs and volunteers offered essential aid and legal support to people freezing and starving at the border (Jurek, 2022). Public opinion appeared to favour the government's response, with almost 77% of society opposing Poland's acceptance of refugees (Bodalska, 2021).

Amid the ongoing crisis on the Belarus border, another crisis unfolded. In February 2022, Russia launched an attack on Ukraine, making Poland one of the primary destinations for Ukrainian refugees. To date, over 10 million people have crossed the border (Straż Graniczna, 2022), predominantly women with children (Rp.pl, 2023). Poland swiftly responded by organizing charity fundraisers, converting train stations and stadiums into shelters, and establishing the border as a primary distribution point for humanitarian aid. The government adopted a special law to simplify the process of legalizing residency and providing financial support to the refugees. An overwhelming 94% of society supported the arrival of Ukrainian refugees and, as of 2023, 78% still hold this view (Scovil, 2023). In the media narrative, Poland was portrayed as a 'silent hero' and a 'humanitarian empire' that was offering support and solidarity to Ukraine (kgr, 2023; Steć, 2022).

Society, politicians, and the media in Poland approached these two humanitarian crises differently. These disparities in responding to the injustices experienced by civilians reinforce the perception of Poland as a nation embroiled in a 'meta conflict' that extends beyond its borders (Górska, 2019, p. 2). However, it is worth asking about the media's role in this process.

This paper examines how specific media outlets portrayed the Belarus and Ukraine border crises. It focuses on refugees in the period

of border crossings by capturing reactions, emotions, and decisions highlighted in the media during that period. Utilizing media polarization theory, the authors analyse similarities and differences in selected media outlets' coverage of the crises.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Media polarization (MP) – definitions and consequences

Numerous studies have demonstrated the existence of media polarization (MP) (Balch & Balabanova, 2011; McCluskey & Kim, 2012; Guenduez, Schedler & Ciocan, 2016).

Głowacki and Kuś (2019) define MP as the reflection and reinforcement of diverse societal and political views, distinguishing between structural and behavioural levels of media operations. As noted by Jupowicz-Ginalska (2020), the structural level of MP departs from state regulations and broadcasters' and publishers' operations, including editorial policies. The behavioural level relates to media content and its effects. Kotras (2013) suggests that MP deepens isolation rather than fosters dialogue. MP often correlates with media outlets' political affiliations, thus contributing to biased reporting (Brzoza & Kornacka-Grzonka, 2017; Bębenek, 2019). For instance, Skrzypczak and Iwasiuta (2021) note differences in news content between commercial and public broadcasters.

The consequences of MP include the multiplication of ethical standards and a reduction in professional solidarity among journalists (Głowacki & Kuś, 2019; Niziołek, 2007). It is also linked to a reduction in journalistic standards, thus posing a threat to freedom of speech (Szuleka et al., 2019) and restricting pluralist discussions. MP is found to shape people's attitudes towards those with opposing views, thus reinforcing echo chambers (Gul & Pesendorfer, 2012; Morris, 2020). Finally, in political crisis situations, researchers link MP to diminished human solidarity, which leads to a sense of alienation and "us vs. them" mentalities (i.e., Munoriyarwa & Chibuwe 2022; Hurvitz, 2020).

## Migrants, refugees, and borders in MP studies

While there is extensive literature on media portrayal of refugees, the connection between refugees and MP, particularly within the context of borders, remains limited, but some exceptions are worth noting.

Toneva (n.a.) examines Macedonian media's coverage of the 2015 refugee crisis, noting its contribution to information chaos and occasional fear. She identifies two frameworks that dominate in the media: humanitarian (emphasizing citizen engagement in solidarity) and securitization (aligning with governmental agendas). Polarised media, she finds, often lack critical context, particularly regarding refugees' backgrounds. Elliot and Brahim (2022) offer a broader perspective, highlighting how several European media outlets exploit the theme of migration for political purposes. They notice that the language of reporting remains problematic, with independent outlets largely avoiding government narratives, while others resorting to sensational language, thus accelerating MP.

In Poland, Troszyński and El-Ghamari (2022) describe the media's divided positions on migration in 2015–2018 as a "great divide" (p. 1) that is rooted in pro- or anti-government attitudes. Strupiechowska (2018), after studying the 2015–2016 crisis, observes that some people are averse to refugees because they consider them enemies of the nation. She notices that this approach is common among right-wing circles. Additionally, Koźdoń-Dębecka's (2023) study of MP during the Belarus border crisis finds pro-government media portraying mostly young men surrounded by armed services, labelling them 'illegal immigrants' or 'a group', while anti-government media show a more diverse picture that includes including women and children. Lasty Ociepka (2023) finds

a very clear difference between Polish government agencies' and pro-government media's approaches to the two groups of refugees: those from Belarus and those from Ukraine (p. 201).

In summary, while the themes of refugees and migration crises are examined in MP studies, there is room for further exploration, especially regarding the media narrative on the Polish–Belarusian and Polish–Ukrainian borders. This paper does this by answering the following questions: 1) What is the media's portrayal of the refugees

on the Belarusian and Ukrainian borders? 2) What is the impact of the structural level of MP on the behavioural level?

## METHODOLOGY

The authors conducted qualitative media content analysis, following Pisarek's (1983) research process, which included the following steps:

Step 1: Selection of Media and Theoretical Framework. The authors adopted a theoretical framework for the levels of media polarization. Two structurally polarized weekly magazines were selected for further analyses:

- the liberal "Polityka" (hereafter: P): recent years have seen an increase in P's criticism of the conservative ruling party (Mielczarek, 2018; Anculewicz, 2019),
- conservative "Sieci" (hereafter: S): Mielczarek (2018) notes that this outlet serves as an open platform for Law and Justice party activists in government positions, often resorting to established stereotypes, parochialism, and xenophobia (p. 197, 200).

Structural polarization in financing has led to a situation where S benefited from the advertising budgets of state-owned companies in recent years, while P did not receive similar support (Dąbrowska-Cydzik, 2022).

Step 2: Research Sample Selection. To select the research sample, the authors identified the beginning of each humanitarian crisis (June 2021 for Belarus and February 2022 for Ukraine) and sought the first mentions of these crises in both magazines. 10 consecutive issues were selected for each crisis:

- P: Issues 34–44 (2021) and 10–20 (2022)
- S: Issues 35–45 (2021) and 9–19 (2022)

Each issue was searched for articles mentioning the crises under study, excluding interviews and essays. In total, 52 articles were selected from P (31 from 2021 and 21 from 2022) and 53 from S (33 from 2021 and 20 from 2022).

Step 3: Coding and Category Formation. In the third step, the authors employed Mayring's (2014) Inductive Category Formation, identifying categories emerging directly from the selected material. Nvivo software was used to assist this step, and the following

categories were formed for further analyses: number of refugees mentioned, their demographics (age, gender, family role, religion, ethnicity), descriptive words used (excluding demographics), the situation on the border (causes of the crises, their physical and mental conditions, experiences, etc.).

Step 4: Qualitative Content Analysis: The authors cross-checked the coding schema and conducted qualitative content analysis. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of media representations of refugees in the context of MP.

## RESULTS

### Borders with Belarus

#### *Polityka*

Information on the number of people arriving on the borders is so imprecise that “even a rescuer cannot accurately count the people” (37) (numbers in brackets refer to the number of articles published by the selected magazines; full references to these articles are included in the appendix). Varying data is presented, ranging from “a few” to “tens of thousands” (58). The intensity of the refugee influx is consistently emphasized (9; 52), and there are predictions of an increase in refugee numbers (10).

*P* quotes a government member stating that “men, mainly young, of conscription age, strong, are staying at the border. There is nothing to suggest that anything bad awaits them. It’s a march towards the European Union and luxury” (9). However, in the same text, there is information about the presence of women and their children among the refugees. Other authors confirm this, writing about “a family with a son”, “cases of families with children”, “a couple with a four-month-old child”, a “nine-person family”, and “children, elders and women” (9; 37; 38; 39; 43; 52; 53; 54). Young men are sometimes described as “falling to their knees”, being “completely weak and cold” (43) and “starting to collapse” (37). 4.1.1. *Polityka* refers to the ethnicity of the refugees. It writes about citizens of Central Asian, Middle Eastern, and African countries: “women, men, and children

from Afghanistan”, “arrivals from Iraq” (9), “immigrants from the Middle East and Africa who fell victim to an organised transfer action through Belarus” (58), or “Afghans deprived of medical care” (52). Skin colour is mentioned, describing “dark hands hidden in gloves” (37). There are also quotations from soldiers about “dirty dark-skinned people” and “Arabs” (9), from hunters about “n\*\*\*\*rs” (37), or from residents who express fear “because they are foreigners. They look different, they have a different culture” (9). For balance, *P* (39) also mentions that “most locals have compassion for refugees” despite rumours that “there might be terrorists or criminals among them” (39).

Refugees are referred to variously as “individuals”, “citizens”, “foreigners”, “arrivals”, “a group of people”, “migrants”, “fleeing individuals”, “people without assistance”, “camping individuals”, “uninvited guests”, “the refugee problem” or “desperate individuals in the forests” (9; 54; 58; 60; 61).

*Polityka* explains the process of smuggling migrants through Belarus, attributing the blame to Lukashenko’s regime. The response of Polish authorities is highlighted, raising alarm that “the rhetoric of a barbarian invasion has returned” (58). This weekly notes that the refugees have found themselves “trapped” between border guards refusing them entry to Poland and Belarusians not allowing them to return (9).

Journalists describe the border fence erected on the government’s orders. They claim that “it separates us from the refugees” (54), but its effectiveness is rather limited (36). The principles of a state of emergency are discussed, and there is a discussion about the strengthening of military patrols, with some suggesting that they seem to be “preparing for war” (9). *Polityka* highlights the challenging living conditions within facilities designated for foreigners, referring to them as “pathological” (52). As descriptions of the refugees’ health conditions emerge, there are mentions of hunger, hypothermia, fear, exhaustion, and concerns about the upcoming winter. Concerns are also raised about the brutality of the border guards and pushbacks, with some emphasizing that these practices are “inhumane” and “illegal” (37; 52; 58). *P* depicts refugees as being resigned, “accepting their circumstances”, and “sitting quietly in front of border guards” (9).



In this context, *P* raises questions about the boundaries of humanitarianism. In one issue, this weekly argues that when “humanitarian values are sacrificed, ... , we treat people just like [Lukashenko]: as biological weapons” (52). Other articles point out that both sides dehumanize the refugees and “seem not to understand that they are dealing with human beings” (9), condemning them to “trauma, mistreatment, drowning in swamps, cutting through razor wire, and starving to death” (60).

### *Sieci*

This weekly initially refers to “small groups” of people (32). However, as the situation unfolds, it mentions a “wave”, a “stream of illegal migrants” (5), “hundreds of thousands of incoming people”, and a “rapidly growing influx” (6). Amid all these descriptions, it is mentioned that there are only a “handful of those in need” (33).

Regarding age and gender, *S* focuses primarily on young men and children. When it comes to young men, one interviewee claims they came “to find a wife” and that they are “having a good time – music, cigarettes, branded clothes” (2). One immigrant “spun terrifying stories about serial murders of women”, while “African men harassed female officers” (*ibid.*).

When it comes to children at the border, *S* warns that it is Lukashenko’s authorities who direct them towards Poland. The strategy is to soften the Polish side with the death of children as “the death of children changes the perspective” (25). The same theory is put forth in other issues, where the children’s situation is seen as a “cynical game played by Lukashenko, immigrants, and some Polish journalists from liberal media” (33) and a “Belarusian propaganda tool” (45). Refugee parents are described as “fairly indifferent” to their children (2). Sometimes, they “simply lose the children in the woods”, or “remove their hats and shoes to arouse pity from the guards” (33).

Regarding refugees’ faith, *S* emphasises that “Muslims are being fed by Belarusians” (32) and that “countries in our region (...) resist the Islamic flood” (44). In terms of ethnicity, the articles not only mention people coming from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, but also touch on the theme of skin colour. They use descriptions such as “tanned”, “dark”, “Arab-like” (32, 3) and “non-Slavic” (34).

*Sieci* points out that liberal media and Lukashenko's journalists "use similar terminology, referring to immigrants as refugees" (34). In contrast, *S* consciously employs alternative terms like "illegal migrants", "anonymous arrivals", "foreigners", "visitors", and "citizens". When this weekly uses the term 'refugee', it places it in quotation marks (46). Descriptions such as "travellers" and "Lukashenko's tourists" (26) aim to diminish the seriousness of the situation on the border.

When describing the refugees' situation, *S* underlines Belarus's role in causing the crisis. The process of smuggling people from Africa and Asia is described as "an instrument of aggression exerting political pressure" (8). *S* contends that the refugee crisis is part of an attack on Poland and the EU's border (15; 5). This leads to an "effect of humanitarian catastrophe" (6), which is considered a "war initiated by Belarus" (44). The escalation of the situation serves Belarus's interests, even at the cost of "causing a rapid increase in fatalities" (6). *Sieci* criticizes the idea of opening the border, suggesting that it might allow anyone, including "jihadists carrying bombs", to enter the country (27). It reminds readers that "millions of people from culturally different regions came to Europe in search of a more comfortable life at the invitation of Chancellor Merkel", while warning about the "civilizational aspect of this migration and its consequences for the Western world" (44). For these reasons, *S* appears to support the government's actions, such as building a fence, which they refer to as "strategic defence infrastructure of the state" (47).

Furthermore, *S* questions the poor mental and physical condition of the people at the border. It argues that there is propaganda about starving refugees and their suffering is an element of hybrid warfare (45), a "fabricated issue" (34). It believes that the "refugees should be helped" (34), but Poland is dealing with "economic immigrants, not victims of war or persecution" (15). The magazine mentions "terrifying stories" about the people at the border (2). Some migrants are alleged to have confessed to strangling women (2). *S* claims that immigrants demand more support and they sometimes "pretend to be in pain and don't like sleeping on mattresses" (2). In the same context, *S* refers to the challenges faced by border guards. They note that "foreigners use sticks and throw stones" (45), but guards "help whenever they can" because "after all, they [migrants] are human

beings" (3). According to this weekly, this dispels the myth of insensitive border guards who leave refugees with no help (3).

## Borders with Ukraine

### *Polityka*

This magazine gives the exact number of people who have crossed the border, emphasizing that these numbers will rise. Still, Poland is dealing with an "exodus" (52), a "sea of people" (21), a "wave of refugees" (19). *P* underlines that most of the refugees are women and children, although there are also seniors (11; 14). Men are fathers, brothers, caregivers who "bring their families to the border and return to fight" (22).

In the context of religion, *P* mentions Ukrainian women's right to access abortion in Poland (where access is significantly limited), quoting that "in Ukraine, it's a normal thing (...) Maybe because we're not as religious as the Poles?" (57). This weekly also acknowledges the Catholic Church's assistance and mentions the scale of actions in local parishes and the role of the Church's hierarchs. It talks about churches' role in housing refugees, providing aid and education, confessions in Ukrainian, and charity fundraisers. It believes that the Church "has passed the test of assistance" (4). At the same time, it adds that this institution could do more, including "calming tensions and extinguishing the fires of hatred" as well as addressing pro-life activists who distribute leaflets at the borders stating that "the greatest threat to peace is abortion" (20).

*P* addresses the situation of "non-Slavic" individuals at the border. It writes that those arriving without a Ukrainian passport "undergo double verification" (55). This weekly quotes experts who highlight the differential treatment of refugees from third countries, even though they are fleeing the same war. It also addresses the situation of Roma refugees, who are considered "lower quality" because most assistance is directed towards Ukrainians, revealing "boundaries of goodness" determined by skin colour. *P* observes that "crossing the border, a Roma-Ukrainian immediately becomes an ordinary Gypsy", with one expert suggesting that "ethnic chauvinism has joined the enthusiasm for helping" (23).

In the category of “situation”, *P* points to the Russian invasion as the cause of the crisis, referring to queues of “frozen, exhausted, hungry people” (49). It provides guidance for those welcoming refugees in their homes, advising consideration for their exhaustion, restraint, or even feelings of embarrassment (40).

The magazine also doesn’t shy away from problematic issues. Journalists point out that assistance is uncoordinated: “Suddenly, a few thousand sandwiches and candy bars appeared from the city. There’s no one to eat all of this”. (22). Difficult conditions prevail at border crossings: “Toilets overflowing. The wind blowing trash around” (22). The impression of chaos is compounded by information about those who try to profit from the situation, for example, by raising the price of gasoline (22). Aid is mainly grassroots, with volunteers organizing transport for the refugees from the border to the cities. Without state support they cannot respond to all aspects of the crisis, such as women disappearing, pimping, extortion, or offering accommodation in exchange for sex (21; 22). Another problem is the lack of gynaecological care, with NGOs responding by providing access to abortion pills, particularly for victims of rape (57).

The government “does very little beyond letting refugees into the Polish territory and promising social support” (56). *P* outlines the content of “The Refugee Act” but emphasizes that the responsibility for its implementation rests largely on volunteers and local authorities. This weekly stresses that “aid comes mainly from private people, while the Polish government is eager take credit for it” (24). Volunteers are quoted, highlighting that “no one can cope with the sea of people and the scale of the problems” (21). Nonetheless, *P* acknowledges their collective effort: “We provide assistance, even if it means learning on the go, and even if the state’s contribution is limited” (13).

*Polityka* briefly discusses both the short-term and long-term consequences of the crisis, noting potential risks for refugees and recognizing instances where Poles’ assistance may not be as extensive as before (21). Challenges include problems with securing employment that aligns with refugees’ qualifications and language barriers (14).

*P* also revisits the Belarusian border, reminding readers that there are still “harassment, arrests, and surveillance” on the border, arguing that “two different police forces and border guards seem to be

operating, as if we had two countries" (24). Furthermore, "offering aid to a dark-skinned person at the Belarusian border is prosecuted by law, while everyone is welcomed at the Ukrainian border" (22). In another text, *P* asks, "Why does a white mother deserve help, while a mother with a different skin colour deserves to be escorted beyond the wire fences?" (40). This weekly notes that "the kindness and openness of state services at the Ukrainian border" turn into "arrogance and oppressiveness on the Belarusian border" (24). The border with Belarus is described as the "dark side, quiet, hush-hush", while with Ukraine it's the "bright side of the moon, where one can feel proud of being Polish" (24).

### *Sieci*

Numbers illustrate the exodus of Ukrainian citizens. *S* talks about "so many refugees", "buses filled with refugees", "millions", "a wave/stream/influx" (1, 12; 17; 42; 50; 61).

Precise information about the age of minors, their mothers, sisters, or grandmothers appears and is often linked to family roles: "these are mothers with children" (41; 42). *S* also notes that men bring their families to the border and then return to fight. It advocates for an inclusive approach to Ukrainian children, stating: "Humanitarian considerations, but also the country's political interest, require us to surround these children with special care and permanently grant them the same rights as Polish children" (50).

The weekly touches on religious themes, with a particular emphasis on the Catholic Church's involvement. It states that the Church "is one of the most active entities", offering "encouragement from God", which "speaks volumes about the Church as a community" (42).

In terms of descriptive terminology, the word "refugees" is predominant. Throughout the text, individuals are, however, also described as "people escaping from war and bombs" "newcomers", "fugitives", "individuals in need", and "war victims" (27; 28; 30; 31).

*S* identifies Russia as the cause of the humanitarian crisis. As the journalists observe, "brutal aggression and crime impose an obligation on us to help the victims" (59). *Sieci* writes about refugees' stress, the hardships of the journey, and their longing for their home

country. The magazine notices that some Ukrainians “arrived with one plastic bag, so [volunteers] equip them from head to toe” (29). It focuses on aid support, considering two aspects: systemic and grassroots. In the first, *S* refers to the government’s and local authorities’ activities. It mentions opening the border, setting up reception points at railway stations and border crossings (50; 48). It notes that even those who don’t have visas or COVID-19 certificates are allowed to cross the border (48). This weekly details actions of local governments and the involvement of border guards (31; 42). The detailed “Refugee Act” expedites the issuance of personal security numbers and financial support to refugees, with instructions on how to correctly fill out documents to receive benefits (31). *S* emphasises grassroots initiatives, speaking of a “spontaneous surge of solidarity among Poles” (50). It describes “lines of wagons with humanitarian aid” (35) and the work of volunteers who, along with local governments, “took on the task of organizing initial aid for those fleeing. And they passed this test with flying colours” (61).

According to *S*, the “scale of empathy” astounds the world and creates a new image of the country because “Poland’s aid challenges existing stereotypes” (48). After all, a country that “welcomed the largest wave of non-EU war refugees” cannot be “an extreme example of a xenophobic society” (51). The magazine stresses this has the potential to shift how Poland is perceived on the international stage, stressing that “in moments of trial, the true cultural code is what matters, not invented identities and preferences” (30; 35).

*Sieci* also returns to the border with Belarus, continuing the narrative of a “battle to shield the Polish border from the operation of the Belarusian dictator” (59). It posits that if Poland had succumbed to Lukashenko’s propaganda, “the extraordinary mobilization of the state and its citizens to help Ukraine and the Ukrainians” would not be achievable today (18; 59). Differences between the crises are highlighted: “war refugees crossing legally through border crossings” are juxtaposed with “migrants storming illegal border crossings, often using violence” (16). It questions the credibility of those arriving via Belarus, stating that they lie because “that’s how they were trained by Lukashenko’s officials in Belarus and Putin’s officials in Russia” (16).

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis yields insights that address the research questions. It is apparent that the structural level of media polarization is reflected in the behavioural level (RQ1). The liberal and anti-government weekly publication *Polityka* takes a critical stance towards the ruling right-wing coalition in both crises. It opposes the border closures and the imposition of a state of emergency during the Belarusian crisis. Additionally, it highlights what it perceives as inadequate and short-sighted actions in response to the Ukrainian crisis. In contrast, the conservative and pro-government magazine *Sieci* unequivocally supports the measures implemented by the authorities on both borders. It offers explanations and justifications for how the Belarusian crisis is handled and adopts a more emotive and positive tone when discussing the Ukrainian crisis, thereby shaping the role and significance of the ruling coalition.

The structural level of media polarization is most apparent in the biased reporting seen in representations of the Belarusian border crisis, which are influenced heavily by political, social, and religious themes. When addressing the Belarusian border, *Polityka* acknowledges the role of Lukashenko's regime in causing the crisis but does not dare question the humanity of the refugees for this reason. The magazine refers to migrants as "refugees" and employs neutral and emotionally charged language that evokes compassion. It provides background information on the newcomers, exposing the racist and derogatory ethnic terms used by some Poles. This magazine also poses uncomfortable questions about the limits of Polish humanity, asking whether we really differ from Lukashenko's regime if we fail to treat others with dignity. In contrast, *Sieci* presents the migrants (not refugees) as a threat, dehumanizing them, referring to them as tools, instruments, and Lukashenko's plan. The government on the other hand is portrayed as a hero, defending the whole region not only from "culturally different people" but also from the Minsk and Kremlin alliance. Poland is under attack, a victim of hybrid warfare, with "refugees" being one of its cogs.

The crisis at the Ukrainian border also exhibits polarizing elements, primarily centring on evaluating or criticizing the authorities and addressing or ignoring uncomfortable and problematic issues.

*P* doesn't shy from emphasising the more challenging aspect of the humanitarian crisis and questions Poles' national sense of self-worth, pointing out that not every refugee receives the same level of help. *S*, on the other hand, focuses primarily on the scale of Poland's involvement in helping, emphasizing the involvement of volunteers, local authorities, law enforcement agencies, and territorial defence forces. However, this weekly remains silent on challenging issues, such as the situation of Roma and non-white refugees, lack of control over aid actions, or the personal tragedies of victims of rape.

This text has certain limitations: it focuses on the analysis of selected texts from two periodicals, omitting other media. Examining media polarization and representations of the refugee crises over a longer period and in other media would undoubtedly provide a more comprehensive picture of polarization regarding refugees. Nevertheless, this study constitutes a significant contribution to the theory of media polarization, addressing it also in relation to issues of diversity, tolerance, inclusivity, and humanitarianism.

## FUNDING

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## Appendix (materials)

1. Andrijanić, G. (2022). Narodowe rekolekcje. *Sieci*, 12.
2. Biedroń, W. (2021a). Jest ciężko, a jesteście opluwani. *Sieci*, 41.
3. Biedroń, W. (2021b). Zimna wojna. *Sieci*, 42.
4. Borek, Z. (2022). Parafie pod parą. *Polityka*, 16.
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6. Budzisz, M. (2021b). Łukaszenka w pułapce migracyjnej. *Sieci*, 43.
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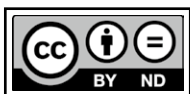
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