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**KORNELIA BATKO**

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6561-3826>  
University of Silesia  
[kornelia.batko@us.edu.pl](mailto:kornelia.batko@us.edu.pl)

**ELŻBIETA TURSKA**

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0963-4424>  
University of Silesia  
[elzbieta.turska@us.edu.pl](mailto:elzbieta.turska@us.edu.pl)

**DAWID TATARCZYK**

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4042-7562>  
University of Silesia  
[dawid.tatarczyk@us.edu.pl](mailto:dawid.tatarczyk@us.edu.pl)

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## The Evolution of Media Narratives on Ukrainian Refugees in Poland (2022–2024): from Solidarity to Tension and Shifting Public Trust

### *Abstract*

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** This article examines how Polish media narrate issues related to Ukrainian refugees and how these narratives evolve over time alongside political, social, and economic developments. Our analysis covers the first two years of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, from February 2022 to February 2024.

**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** Our research utilizes qualitative content analysis to identify dominant frames, themes, and discursive strategies used by the newspapers, focusing on two of Poland's most influential newspapers: *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*. The article outlines changes in the media narratives and situates them within changing contextual conditions, without assessing audience reception or public perception.

**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The argument proceeds in three steps: (1) it situates media discourse within the broader theoretical framework of trust, migration, and media framing, outlining how symbolic narratives are constructed during humanitarian crises; (2) it compares the coverage of both newspapers, mapping the transformation of refugee-related narratives across political and economic contexts; and (3) it examines how shifts in media framing

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correspond with broader societal and political developments observed during the same period, without drawing conclusions about their mutual influence.

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**RESEARCH RESULTS:** Initially, both outlets framed the refugee influx through humanitarian solidarity, highlighting shared history and moral responsibility. Over time, however, narratives began to emphasize challenges related to welfare strain, labor competition, and social cohesion. This change intensified during politically sensitive moments—such as the 2023 grain crisis—when public debate focused on national resources and solidarity fatigue. These developments signaled a shift toward more ambivalent or issue-focused portrayals of refugees and unfolded alongside broader societal tensions of the period.

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**CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:** The study shows that media outlets function not merely as transmitters of facts but as co-creators of social trust and collective meaning. By revealing the mechanisms through which trust is built and destabilized, the article contributes to understanding the politicization of humanitarian crises and offers insights for more balanced media communication.

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**KEYWORDS:**

Ukrainian refugees, Media, Public trust, Integration, Poland

## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary communication landscape, the media plays a crucial role in influencing the public's perceptions of migrants and refugees. As such, the portrayal of refugees can generate both positive and negative perceptions (Chouliaraki, 2013). Moreover, through a conscious choice of stories, images, and terminology, the media can arouse kindness and empathy towards refugees, or fear, apprehension, and distrust (Berry et al., 2015). More than 200,000 refugees and migrants fled for safety across the Mediterranean Sea. Crammed into overcrowded, unsafe boats, thousands drowned, prompting the Pope to warn that the sea was becoming a mass graveyard. The early months of 2015 saw no respite. In April alone more than 1,300 people drowned. This led to a large public outcry to increase rescue operations. Throughout this period, UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations, engaged in a series of largescale media advocacy exercises, aiming at convincing European countries to do more to help. It was crucial work, setting the tone for the dramatic rise in attention to the refugee crisis that followed

in the second half of 2015. But the media was far from united in its response. While some outlets joined the call for more assistance, others were unsympathetic, arguing against increasing rescue operations. To learn why, UNHCR commissioned a report by the Cardiff School of Journalism to explore what was driving media coverage in five different European countries: Spain, Italy, Germany, the UK and Sweden. Researchers combed through thousands of articles written in 2014 and early 2015, revealing a number of important findings for future media advocacy campaigns. Most importantly, they found major differences between countries, in terms of the sources journalists used (domestic politicians, foreign politicians, citizens, or NGOs. One consequence of these developments is that newspapers are not merely conduits of information, but they also function as arenas for social discourse and dialogue, facilitating comprehension of different viewpoints and potentially strengthening communal bonds (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). That is why reliable coverage of the causes of migration, the living conditions refugees endure, and successful integration processes can be crucial in countering stereotypes and prejudices (Silverstone, 2007) broadcasting, the Internet and increasingly peer-to-peer technologies and networks.

Trust is a fundamental element of social cohesion and successful integration, affecting the well-being of the individual and the socio-economic fabric of society. In recent years, Poland has experienced a significant increase in the number of immigrants, highlighting the need to address the issue of social trust between immigrants and the local community. The main research question of this article examines how the Polish media portrayed Ukrainian refugees during the first two years of the war between Russia and Ukraine (February 2022 to February 2024). To answer this puzzle, this study uses content analysis of articles from two of Poland's most widely read newspapers, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*.

Our findings indicate a multifaceted portrayal of Ukrainian refugees in Polish media. The media narratives about Ukrainian refugees also transformed through three distinct phases from February 2022 to February 2024. The first phase (February to June 2022) focused mainly on solidarity and humanitarian issues. The same pattern of observation was mirrored in the analysis of public opinion in Poland. For instance, the data shows that 94% of Poles were in favor of

accepting refugees from Ukraine in February 2022 (CBOS, 2023a). In the second phase (July 2022 to March 2023), there was a notable shift in the discourse and tone towards a more nuanced reporting. The emerging negative press coverage was fueled by fears of a potential strain on resources and the possibility of granting excessive privileges to refugees. This trend coincided with a general decline in public support. By November 2022, 43% of Poles expressed concerns about the strain on the country's social and economic systems due to the influx of refugees (CBOS, 2022d). In the third and final phase (from April 2023 to February 2024), there was a further evolution of media narratives driven by political and economic factors, especially in the context of the so-called grain crisis affecting Polish farmers. This has led to a significant decline in public support for refugees, with only 73% of Poles agreeing to accept them in April 2023, the lowest level since the beginning of the war (CBOS, 2023a).

In what follows, we begin by outlining the theoretical framework of our analysis. This framework, in turn, focuses on the migration and immigration patterns that influence Poland, particularly with regards to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. We then examine the pertinent literature on the significance of social trust and how Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) can assist in interpreting the link between media reporting and the sentiments expressed by Poles in public opinion research. Subsequently, we present our methodology used in the content analysis context, including the procedures we employed to collect and examine data from the two largest Polish newspapers. Overall, our findings illustrate how media narratives correspond with the socio-political context of the period studied. Although some shifts in discourse co-occur with changes observed in public opinion polls, the analysis does not permit conclusions regarding causal relationships between media content and public attitudes.

## 1. RESEARCH METHODS

Our article examines the portrayal of refugees from Ukraine in the Polish press between February 24, 2022, and February 24, 2024. Such analysis is crucial because in Poland, historical skepticism toward

foreigners is widespread, which makes media discourse an important arena where issues related to migration are presented and interpreted. By selecting specific themes and narrative frames, media outlets contribute to the ways in which information about people fleeing conflict is articulated and made accessible to the public (Chouliaraki, 2013).

Our research questions were: (1) How did the Polish media portray refugees from Ukraine? (2) How did media narratives evolve over time, and what thematic frames dominated across different stages of the conflict? The analysis focused on two leading national newspapers: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a liberal center-left daily, and *Rzeczpospolita*, a conservative-liberal newspaper devoted to economic and legal issues. Both newspapers have strong digital platforms and a significant readership (*Wirtualne media*, 2024). The analysis omitted *Fakt*, a tabloid newspaper that was the best-selling newspaper during this period.

In our analysis, e-editions of these newspapers were analyzed, excluding thematic and local supplements. Using the key phrase “refugees from Ukraine,” 333 articles were initially identified in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, of which 252 met the criteria for inclusion. In *Rzeczpospolita*, 112 articles were found, with 105 included in the final dataset. All content was accessed by paying for a subscription, and the data were then stored in text form. The texts were analyzed using a tool for creating and searching electronic language corpora (available at <https://korpusomat.eu/>). Table 1 illustrates the quantitative summary of the results.

Table 1. Articles about Ukrainian refugees from February 22, 2022, to February 24, 2024

Newspaper	Number of resulting articles	Number of articles after cleaning
<i>Gazeta Wyborcza</i>	333	252
<i>Rzeczpospolita</i>	112	105
Total	445	357

The analysis of the articles was primarily organic, based on the research question posed in this article. Our inductive approach created a typology of categories to which articles were assigned. One article was mapped to only one group. The typology included the following

categories: (1) economic (e.g., news about labor market, finance, the real estate market), (2) political, (3) social (e.g., focus on education, aid aspects, security, privileges, demographic factors), (4) cultural and integration, (5) legal, (6) system solutions, (7) global (e.g., articles on the situation in other countries or European Union solutions). It was then determined whether the portrayal of refugees from Ukraine had a positive (+), negative (-), or neutral (+/-) (i.e., representing more of an informative narrative) overtones. The conclusions derived from the results of the analysis can assist in comprehending how media narratives relate to public debate regarding the reception of refugees from Ukraine, as well as the prevailing themes and tone of discourse within the public debate.

## 2. MAIN PART

### 2.1. Poland as a country of (im)migration

The European Union has been grappling with a significant influx of immigrants. Poland, too, is experiencing an influx of immigrants, particularly in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, immigrants constituted approximately 1% of Poland's population in 2015; by 2021, this figure had increased to approximately 5%. (Labor Market Department MRPiPS, 2024). Still, it is important to consider the influence of Ukrainian migrants on the Polish economy prior to the February 2022 Russian aggression.

The geographic location of Poland is a significant factor affecting the country's distinctive migration patterns. Unlike other EU countries, which typically experience migration from Africa and the Middle East, most migrants in Poland come from other Eastern European countries. The war in Ukraine has caused a significant increase in the number of refugees seeking asylum in Poland. By February 24, 2022, more than 3.8 million people had crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border. In addition, from February 22, 2022, to August 2023, 1,615,825 refugees applied for asylum or other national protection programs in Poland. It is worth noting that just a decade ago, Poland was not an immigrant country. On the contrary, after Poland joined the European Union in 2004, the balance of migration was negative, as it was Poles who

emigrated to Western European countries. The situation changed after 2014. When eastern parts of Ukraine began to be affected by armed conflict, Poland started accepting seasonal workers from abroad (ODP, 2024). As a result, before the Russian invasion in 2022, a considerable cohort of economically active Ukrainian residents in Poland was already estimated at approximately 1.4 million (Wodzicki et al., 2022). The response to the massive influx of refugees from Ukraine by both the public and state authorities was fundamentally different from that of those trying to cross the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021, or the migrant crisis caused by the influx of people from Middle Eastern and African countries in Europe in 2015 (Maciejewska-Mieszkowska, 2022). Poland lacked a coherent strategy addressing demographic changes and labor market needs (PAP, 2017). Moreover, successive governments have failed to implement a coherent migration policy, while key documents have been repeatedly withdrawn or cancelled (Łodziński & Szonert, 2023). Such lack of planning is particularly problematic in the context of polarized public opinion on immigration, fueled by national security concerns and labor market competition (Włodarczyk-Madejska et al., 2021). In short, the lack of appropriate and strategic planning from the state, fuels apprehension among the public, and arguably fuels political polarization.

### 2.2. Building trust with immigrants

In recent years, Poland has been witnessing a notable expansion of its immigrant population, underscoring the urgency of addressing the issue of social trust between newcomers and the native Polish community. Interpersonal and institutional trust represent a fundamental dimension of social capital and integration. However, Poland has long been characterized as a country with low levels of public trust. The CBOS data, for instance, demonstrates that distrust dominates public attitudes and confidence in institutions remains weak (CBOS, 2022a). These types of indicators are important because the academic literature conceptualizes trust as a predictor of social integration, indicating that higher levels of trust correlate with better integration of outcomes for both immigrants and host communities (Mitchel, 2021). As such, trust is a fundamental element of social cohesion

and successful integration, affecting not only individual well-being but also the socioeconomic fabric of society. The massive influx of refugees after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine evoked empathy and solidarity, but it also evoked fears related to realist and symbolic danger, as well as resource competition and cultural differences. Researchers of migration patterns emphasize that accepting refugees can result in a number of both challenges and opportunities to the host country (Babińska et al., 2022). Considering threats: pressure on housing, jobs, and security can be listed. Overall, Poles treated the refugees from Ukraine, more as a potential source of benefits than problems (Babińska et al., 2022). Other research indicates that Polish citizens perceive various forms of public support for refugees differently. Although guaranteeing Ukrainian refugees to learn the Polish language, access to health care or public education is accepted by the vast majority of Poles surveyed, the willingness to provide direct financial benefits to refugees and housing support is met with clear opposition.

An effort can be made to explain these attitudes within the context of Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources Theory (COR). The theory is predicated on the assertion that human behavior is driven by the need to preserve existing adaptive resources (Niewiadomska, 2022). People experience stress when they fear losing resources important for survival in a particular social environment, or when invested resources do not deliver the expected benefits. According to COR, losing something is perceived more strongly than gaining new resources in the future. In order to prevent the depletion of resources, it is essential to maintain a consistent investment, acquisition, and compensation strategy. Thus, negative attitudes toward refugees can be a consequence of the fears of resource depletion, especially in times of economic poverty and strained public services.

Building trust requires actions that promote integration and reduce stereotypes. Such outcomes can be achieved through public education, positive narratives, and public policies supporting coexistence. In Poland, the socio-political environment was already tense as a result of the pre-war political rhetoric stigmatizing migrants and by the contrasting treatment of refugees at the Belarusian border in 2021. Post-pandemic economic problems and inflation further fueled fears of competition for limited resources.



The media plays a key role in framing public debates by shaping the informational environment about what is acceptable and what is unacceptable (Negrine & Goodfriend, 1988). Initially, refugees from Ukraine were welcomed with open arms, in contrast to refugees from the Middle East or Africa. However, while media coverage in the early stages emphasized solidarity, the narrative later became more negative, reflecting political discourse and growing tensions.

### 3. RESULTS OF SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS

We now turn our attention to the framing context in which information about refugees from Ukraine was analyzed. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 2. The analysis demonstrates that most of the articles in *Rzeczpospolita* were economic or social.

Table 2. Information about refugees from Ukraine by category and nature of the narrative

Type of factors	Rzeczpospolita (N=105)			Gazeta Wyborcza (N= 252)		
	+	+/-	-	+	+/-	-
ECONOMICS	23	3	13	3	0	8
POLITICAL (P)	1	0	2	35	13	13
SOCIAL	17	5	10	56	3	14
CULTURAL AND INTEGRATION (KI)	5	1	7	34	5	8
LEGAL (EL)	0	2	1	0	0	0
SYSTEM SOLUTIONS (RS)	5	4	3	12	2	8
WORLD (S)	0	0	3	29	2	7
TOTAL	51	15	39	169	25	58

Articles focusing on the economy were dominated by topics related to aid financing (EF) and the labor market (EPR). The social sphere was covered by articles about aid efforts toward refugees (SP). Additionally, *Gazeta Wyborcza* presented articles emphasizing social, political and cultural contexts and integration. The analysis revealed a uniformly positive stance towards refugees from Ukraine across both newspapers. Nevertheless, the number of articles with a positive narrative was greater in *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

Table 3. Information about refugees from Ukraine by category, subcategory, and the nature of the narrative

Type of factors	Rzeczpospolita (N=105)			Gazeta Wyborcza (N=252)		
	+	+/-	-	+	+/-	-
ECONOMICS	23	3	13	3	0	8
LABOR MARKET (EPR)	9	1	3	1	0	0
FINANCIAL (EF)	14	2	8	2	0	8
HOUSING MARKET (EN)	0	0	2	0	0	0
POLITICAL (P)	1	0	2	35	13	13
SOCIAL	17	5	10	56	3	14
EDUCATION (SE)	0	3	1	10	1	2
ASSISTANCE (SP)	15	2	4	35	1	7
SECURITY (SB)	1	0	5	11	1	2
PRIVILEGES (SU)	0	0	0	0	0	3
DEMOGRAPHICS (D)	1	0	0	0	0	0
CULTURAL AND INTEGRATION (KI)	5	1	7	34	5	8
LEGAL (EL)	0	2	1	0	0	0
SYSTEM SOLUTIONS (RS)	5	4	3	12	2	8
WORLD (S)	0	0	3	29	2	7

In the initial phase of the armed conflict, the media's attention was primarily directed towards describing the nature of the hostilities, and reporting on the number of refugees crossing the borders. Subsequently, both newspapers published articles underscoring the necessity of assisting Ukrainian citizens. In doing so, *Rzeczpospolita* emphasized information about the readiness of the Polish labor market to accept Ukrainians (*Polish employers are already waiting for Ukrainians*). Over time, forecasts also emerged, suggesting that the migration crisis could last a long time, which requires Poles to be patient and plan appropriately for daily, economic and educational support (*The refugee crisis will last a long time*). There was much material in the press showing various aid initiatives for refugees and articles pointing to the increasingly better situation of refugees in Poland and their good assimilation into Polish society. At the same time, around June, articles began to appear around the problems that arise in connection with the aid, including recovery of money for aid, problems with prices on the real estate market, and over-privileging (*It is challenging to deduct expenses to help Ukrainians*). They also reported on the need for systemic changes in aid to refugees from Ukraine.

Furthermore, six months after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, *Rzeczpospolita* focused on analyzing the impact of refugees on the labor market and the consequences of the war in this area. Both newspapers published articles on solidarity and aid to refugees from the beginning of the conflict, strongly emphasizing the scale of this assistance. There were also articles showing pessimistic forecasts about the decline in the quality of life of Poles because of refugee assistance, among other things, and about their over-privileged status.

A year after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, both newspapers featured articles based on analysis and statistical research on the presence of refugees from Ukraine in Poland. *Gazeta Wyborcza* published articles on this theme while also emphasizing the positive dimension of the refugee adaptation (*It surprises many: Ukrainians in Poland are not only workers, but also employers and entrepreneurs*). In *Rzeczpospolita*, the analysis was more about the economic dimension, but not exclusively (*How Poles work with Ukrainians. Results of a new survey*). These publications highlighted the impact that migrants have had on various aspects of life in Poland, including society, the economy, the labor market. Diverse views on the consequences of immigration from Ukraine were presented, pointing out existing concerns about the potentially harmful effects of migration on the local labor market and income opportunities (*Wages in Poland would grow faster without foreign workers?*). On the other hand, there have also been publications analyzing the positive impact (*Refugees have strongly spurred consumption growth*).

*Gazeta Wyborcza* published articles reporting on initiatives to integrate refugees, including joint celebrations of the anniversary of the outbreak of war by Poles and Ukrainians in Poland's largest cities, which included marches and events. Despite the positive initiatives, there were also reports of negative phenomena, such as online resentment towards Ukrainians, an example of the challenges to social acceptance of refugees (*Anti-Ukrainian shaming on the Internet carries wide...*). *Gazeta Wyborcza* also published articles analyzing Poles' attitudes toward Ukrainians, in which it stressed that these attitudes are still positive, but with a downward trend (*Prof. Duszczyk: A significant upsurge by Poles? We were wrong on one issue*). There were also articles showing that Ukrainians who settled in the European Union,

including Poland, had mixed experiences.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, they appreciate the help and openness; on the other hand, however, they experience disrespect and blame for the rise in prices (*Encompassing report on refugees from Ukraine in EU countries. How is Poland different from its neighbors?*).

Between March and June 2023, the Polish media moved its focus from direct coverage of refugees to broader issues affecting Polish-Ukrainian relations. The so-called grain crisis, triggered by the influx of Ukrainian agricultural products into EU markets, raised concerns among Polish farmers and fueled tensions between the two countries (*Now it is just a grain crisis. Trade has completely frozen*). These were mainly articles showing that the opening of the EU market for grain, vegetables, or poultry from Ukraine worries Poles. Similar sentiments can be seen in articles from May and June (*Ukraine apparently expects Poland to sacrifice its own agriculture*). The escalation of the grain crisis, triggered by the increased flow of Ukrainian grain and other agricultural products to Poland, Romania or Bulgaria, which has become a bone of contention negatively affecting Polish-Ukrainian relations (*Kyiv-Warsaw tensions. Ukraine's grain import ban in the background*).

In July and August 2023, debates about Ukrainian refugees focused on rising tensions in Polish-Ukrainian relations. *Gazeta Wyborcza* highlighted the rising tension in Polish-Ukrainian relations, raising issues such as propaganda against Ukrainians and the importance of maintaining good Polish-Ukrainian relations (*Good relations with Ukraine are the Polish raison d'être, but they need to be worked on*). The coverage also focused on the 80th anniversary of the Volhynia massacre, which further worsened relations – emphasizing the need to clarify matters related to the Volyn massacre in connection with the 80th anniversary of these events. Responsibility for this situation was attributed to the camp of Jarosław Kaczyński (chairman of the Law and Justice party), which sought to maintain power by using the demand for a harsh settlement with Kiev for the Volyn massacre.<sup>2</sup> Media

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1 The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) has published the results of a major survey of more than 14,000 Ukrainian refugees who fled to the European Union after Russia attacked Ukraine on February 24 last year (*Fleeing Ukraine*, 2023).

2 The ethnic cleansing of 1943–45, carried out by Ukrainian nationalists in the eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic.

reports intensified tensions between Poland and Ukraine, focusing on protecting Polish farmers' interests during the grain crisis. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and presidential advisor Marcin Przydacz stressed Poland's right to defend its economy: "*defending the interests of the Polish farmer*" and urged Ukraine to acknowledge Polish support: "*Ukraine has really received much support from Poland. I think it would be worth them starting to appreciate the role that Poland has played for Ukraine in recent months and years,*" he continued. In the response, Ukrainian official Andriy Sybiha dismissed the accusations of ingratitude, underlining the two countries' strong relationship (Ukrainska Pravda, 2023). In response, the media began to report on the challenges faced by Polish farmers because of Ukrainian grain. They published articles highlighting how the ban on grain exports from Ukraine could lead to a famine disaster. Strong emotional overtones characterized these publications and were extensively illustrated with photos of grain and starving children in Africa. The narratives became more negative from September to February, with articles addressing the challenges of integrating refugees, declining hospitality, and political disputes. *Rzeczpospolita* published articles talking about the problems of integrating refugees in Poland (*Ukrainians divided about Poland, disappearing hospitality, Language barrier beats Ukrainian refugees*). In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, articles adopted a more negative tone toward refugees, especially those dealing with political issues (*Poll: Europe does not believe in Ukraine's victory, Government plans to extend aid to Ukrainians living in Poland*).

The Polish media's attitude toward Ukrainian refugees is subject to multiple interpretations. Some scholars note that the Polish press presents diverse narratives (Zawadzka-Palucktau, 2023), while others observe a predominantly positive portrayal and widespread public support (Babicki et al., 2023). Li et al. (2023) found that contact with refugees can increase both empathy and perceived threat, shaping ambivalent attitudes. A double standard persists – Eurocentrism makes Europe and Poland more welcoming to Ukrainian than to refugees from Middle East (Gu, 2023). Initially, Polish media expressed strong support for Ukrainian refugees (Ruszczyk et al., 2022), contrasting with earlier skepticism and later negativity influenced by political discourse (Moll, 2022; Malinowski Rubio, 2019).

Our research identifies three phases in media narratives. The first (Feb–Jun 2022) focused on humanitarian solidarity. *Rzeczpospolita* emphasized economic aspects, while *Gazeta Wyborcza* highlighted integration stories. Public support was very high – 94% of Poles favored accepting refugees, and 68% declared active help (CBOS, 2022b; 2022c).

Favorable media coverage coincided with high levels of public trust in opinion polls, and assistance was frequently presented as mutually beneficial, which aligns with the principles of resource consolidation (COR). Although the analysis does not allow us to determine whether these patterns are connected causally. Helping refugees was framed as an investment that would benefit Poles and Ukrainians by exchanging cultural, social, and economic resources. The second phase (Jul 2022 – Mar 2023) brought more nuanced narratives emphasizing economic pressures. *Rzeczpospolita* focused on market and fiscal impacts, while *Gazeta Wyborcza* examined social and integration issues. Public concern increased – by late 2022, 43% feared that the socioeconomic system would be overwhelmed (CBOS, 2022c). Refugees began to be perceived as a potential threat, as losses were felt more strongly than gains, which is in line with Hobfoll's theory. At this point, the potential depletion of resources was more important than the visible benefits, such as increased consumption or labor market assistance.

In the third phase (Apr 2023–Feb 2024), political tensions – especially the grain crisis – deepened distrust. Economic losses among farmers and perceived ingratitude from Ukrainian officials intensified negative framing. Hobfoll's theory predicts that the limitation of resources increases the likelihood of loss, and that an initial loss can lead to subsequent further losses. Indeed, Polish farmers have been severely affected by the material losses caused by the so-called grain crisis, while statements from the Ukrainian officials were often perceived as ungrateful. These developments occurred during a period marked by declining public trust indicators. Support for accepting refugees dropped sharply, marking the lowest level since the start of the war (CBOS, 2023b). The present analysis, however, focuses exclusively on the evolution of media discourse and does not address the factors underlying these broader shifts. The analysis shows that press narratives correspond with social attitudes towards

refugees from Ukraine. However, based on our research, it is not possible to determine the nature or direction of the relationship between media narratives and levels of public trust. Balanced press coverage is important for informed public debate and to build empathy and mutual trust between Poles and Ukrainians.

Table 4. Context of showing information about refugees from Ukraine by category and nature of narrative in Phases

	PHASES																	
	February 24, 2022 – June 30, 2022						July 1, 2022 – March 31, 2023						April 2023 – February 2024					
Type of factors	Rzeczpospolita (N= 68)			Gazeta Wyborcza (N= 120)			Rzeczpospolita (N= 26)			Gazeta Wyborcza (N= 70)			Rzeczpospolita (N= 11)			Gazeta Wyborcza (N= 62)		
	+	N	-	+	N	-	+	N	-	+	N	-	+	N	-	+	N	-
ECONOMICS	12	1	9	3	0	8	9	2	3	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0
POLITICAL (P)	0	0	1	12	5	4	1	0	0	14	0	1	0	0	1	9	8	8
SOCIAL	14	3	10	51	1	6	2	2	0	19	1	5	0	0	0	3	1	3
CULTURAL AND INTEGRATION (KI)	1	0	3	17	0	0	3	1	0	12	2	3	1	0	4	5	3	5
LEGAL (EL)	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SYSTEM SOLUTIONS (RS)	3	2	3	8	1	2	2	0	0	4	0	2	0	2	0	0	1	4
WORLD (S)	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	4	0	0	0	8	1	3
TOTAL	31	8	29	91	7	20	17	5	4	52	3	15	3	2	6	25	14	23

CONCLUSIONS

The paper demonstrated how Polish media narratives about Ukrainian refugees evolved into three distinct phases, reflecting both socio-political and economic changes. Initially, the newspaper outlets emphasized empathy and solidarity. Public support for refugees was portrayed as a form of a collective investment.

Over time, reports increasingly focused on issues of resource constraints, political disputes, and bilateral tensions, resulting in a more cautious and problem-centered discourse. These changes reflected how media framing adapts to evolving socio-political circumstances.

However, the analysis does not allow us to draw conclusions about the direction or nature of the impact of these narratives on public perception. Similarities between discourse and polling results should be treated as co-occurring developments. It is possible that they co-exist, or that changes in public opinion precede and shape. Future research combining media analysis with audience studies could help explore these relationships more directly, using methods capable of capturing reception effects.

The presented research has certain limitations. First of all, the study is limited to two newspapers, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*. While these two outlets are influential in the Polish media landscape, they do not fully represent the diversity of Polish media sources. Many other outlets and sources, such as regional media, television, or social media, of course exist. Moreover, the best-selling newspaper, *Fakt*, a tabloid publishing controversial content, was omitted from the analysis. Secondly, our conclusions are based on qualitative content analysis, which provides an in-depth understanding of how narratives are constructed, but it does not allow for determining their effects, nor for generalizing the findings beyond the analyzed material. Future studies may incorporate survey-based or experimental methods to examine audience perceptions—questions that extend beyond the scope of content analysis. Such research could complement discourse-based findings by exploring how people interpret, negotiate, or contest media narratives. The third limitation is the time-period under investigation. We focused on a two-year period (Feb 2022 to Feb 2024), which covers immediate reactions to the war and attitudes toward refugees from Ukraine but may not capture additional long-term changes in public discourse and integration outcomes. Finally, the study focuses exclusively on media content. Since it does not include data on audience perceptions or survey-based measures, it cannot address how media narratives might relate to public attitudes. Any parallels between the evolution of discourse and broader public opinion trends should therefore be interpreted only as co-occurring phenomena, not as evidence of causal relationships.

By addressing these limitations, future work can deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between media, public opinion, and trust in times of humanitarian crisis. In the context of forced migration, it is worth noting that Russian necropolitics – as



Anna Budzanowska points out – redefines sovereignty through the power over life and death, which is directly reflected in the policy towards Ukraine and the humanitarian consequences of this conflict (Budzanowska, 2025). Future research should cover a wider variety of media types, including digital and social media platforms, to capture a broader range of narratives and influences. Comparative studies based on analysis of similarities and differences in portraying Ukrainian refugees in different national contexts involving other EU countries can also be interesting. Additionally, extending the time-frame of analysis would allow researchers to observe how discourse evolves in the longer run, without attempting to infer changes in public attitudes or assess the effects of media narratives on audience perceptions—questions that require different methodological tools.

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