

ARTICLE

Still Deserving? Social Construction of Ukrainian Refugees Changing Over Time

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Abstract

It has already been three years since millions of Ukrainians found refuge in other countries. In our longitudinal research, we examine in what way the main news websites in Poland and Czechia portray Ukrainian refugees and through that how they contribute to their social construction as a group deserving or undeserving of societal and public policy support. Data were collected from platform X, focusing on the accounts of the five most popular news websites in each country. In 2022, we expanded CARIN to CARIN +A, highlighting *assistance* as a booster (Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová, and Cekiera, 2023). Now, examining the period between February 24, 2023, and July 31, 2024, we formulate a *hypothesis of dimension content modification*, i.e. the meaning of deservingness dimensions change over time for the same target group. Both countries exhibited similar themes and narratives. This was most visible in the *attitude* and *reciprocity*, although *identity* was also important. While at the beginning of the invasion the question of deservingness tied to *who they are*, later *how they behave* became crucial. Additionally, we observed *normalisation* of the situation, without compassion fatigue. Longitudinal media analysis is rare but crucial for countering xenophobia and nationalism.

Keywords: deservingness; media representation; public policies; interethnic relations; refugees

Introduction

The sudden arrival of a large number of people of different ethnicity carries with it the risk of an increase in xenophobia and awakening of nationalism (Boomgaarden et al. 2013, Stockemer et al. 2018). It has already been three years since millions of Ukrainians left their country, fleeing Russia's attacks, and found refuge in other countries. In the initial phase, Poland and Czechia accepted the highest numbers of these refugees, one in absolute numbers and one in relative number as a percentage of its population, which had a clear effect on their overall ethnic composition. Despite both countries having been known for their previous reluctance towards migrants and refugees, which was evident in the media representation of these groups (Jelínková 2019, Pospěch, and Jurečková 2019, Pavelková, Hanus, and Hasman 2020, Balicki 2021, Cekiera 2022), their societies and governments not only accepted Ukrainian refugees, but supporting them became a kind of 'national duty', or a 'norm of behaviour' (Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová, and Cekiera, 2023) in the first weeks of the war.

In relation to these circumstances, in this article we want to focus on how, as time has passed, Czech and Polish media have represented Ukrainian refugees. Staying in the theoretical framework of the

social construction of target groups (Schneider and Ingram 1993), the concept of deservingness dimensions that we enhanced to CARIN+A (van Oorschot 2000, van Oorschot and Roosma 2017, Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová, and Cekiera, 2023) and media representation (Fürsich 2010), we specifically address the research question: In what way did the main news websites in Poland and Czechia portray Ukrainian refugees and through that how they contributed to their social construction as a group of deserving or undeserving of societal and public policy support in the period from February 24, 2023, to July 31, 2024? The research adds to the existing scholarship on welfare deservingness, in particular of deservingness of migrants and refugees (see below). As we directly refer here to our previous text, in which we followed the media's portrayal of Ukrainian refugees in the period from February 24 to April 24, 2022, the study can be categorised as longitudinal research. As before, we made a qualitative content analysis of the titles and leads of articles from the main Polish and Czech news websites published within the mentioned period. To gather the study material, we used the social media platform X as a research tool, since the news websites use it to attempt to capture readers' attention and redirect them to the full articles on their main websites.

In the original study we found that Polish and Czech media predominantly contributed to the positive social construction of Ukrainian refugees as a target group deserving of support from society and from public policies, although this portrayal was not straightforward. This was a factor in facilitating the introduction of generous public policies towards this group in both countries. The research we conducted in the first months of the full-scale invasion enabled us to conclude that Ukrainian refugees in Poland and Czechia were portrayed as a deserving population on multiple fronts. Moreover, the scale of *assistance* and the will to provide it that the media showed in both countries became a booster of deservingness dimensions, and allowed us to enhance van Oorschot's concept to CARIN+A. Additionally, we were able to formulate a hypothesis of constructed rationalisation of the assistance: recognising some population as deserving and underlining this recognition by providing it assistance, enables a society to rationalise the refusal of support in other cases (Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová, and Cekiera, 2023).

The current study covered a period in which the two societies had already had some experience with Ukrainian refugees and with policies that their governments had developed for that target group. Regardless of appearances, the examination of the media content produced at that time is even more vital now. Positive experiences with specific Ukrainian refugees do not always lead to a positive attitude towards everyone. An example of this can be found in Cekiera's (2024) research, in which landlords hosting Ukrainian refugees treated them as exceptional.

We found out that principally the media did not portray this group in a negative way, and still presented it as a deserving one. In both countries, Ukrainian refugees were constructed as a deserving target group across all dimensions of deservingness, i.e. CARIN+A criteria, which is a positive development from the perspective of preventing ethnic conflict, supporting refugee integration, and not feeding xenophobia or nationalism, particularly given that, as opinion polls reveal, public acceptance of Ukrainian refugees has declined over time (CBOS 2024, Kaim et al. 2024, Kyselá 2024). Based on our study, we may formulate a hypothesis that the meaning of, and emphasis on the specific dimensions are modified over time in relation to the same target group. Furthermore, over time we observe that the media begins to distinguish certain sub-groups from within a given group. What we also observe is the *normalisation* of the situation (including the less emotional nature of published articles). Likewise, it is significant that we do not observe compassion fatigue in the articles' tone.

Theoretical foundation

The key concept for our analysis is – as in our previous research – the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966), and specifically the social construction of target groups, to which the

media can contribute significantly (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Nonetheless, although Schneider and Ingram (1993) involved two variables, i.e. power and image, to formulate the typology of the target groups, we omit the element of power and focus merely on the perception of the target groups. Therefore, we combine the idea of the social construction of target groups with van Oorschot's concept of CARIN dimensions (van Oorschot 2000, van Oorschot et al. 2017), which we extended to CARIN+A by including assistance as an intensifier of other dimensions (Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová, and Cekiera, 2023). The dimensions enable us to define exactly what deservingness means, and who is deserving of support and attention from the state and society. According to van Oorschot (2000), we understand *control* as the given group's control over their hardship as well as their potential responsibility for it; *attitude* means the group's position towards receiving support, their compliance, gratefulness and conformity to 'our' standards; *reciprocity* refers to the group's past (i.e. earned) or future (i.e. expected) contribution to 'our' group; *identity* means being like us, the group's proximity to the majority or at least their 'pleasantness'; finally, *need* means the extent to which the group is perceived as being in need. Furthermore, *assistance*, meaning aid provided by the state and the society, and the will of the societies' to help, is a booster reinforcing perception of the target group as deserving in relation to certain deservingness dimensions (Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová, and Cekiera, 2023).

The deservingness dimensions require, however, some commentaries. First, recent research studies confirm that each CARIN criterion is a kind of box for a range of ideas, norms and manifestations of the dimensions. It means that understanding and applying a particular dimension is context-related, e.g. the meaning of *need* may differ in the case of refugees in comparison to the case of families (Theiss 2023). Second, the *impurity of all deservingness criteria* has been observed (Michoń 2021, 217) as they do not occur in the opinions separately but rather as a form of amalgams of the criteria (Heuer and Zimmermann 2020, Nielsen, Frederiksen, and Larsen, 2020, Blum and Kuhlmann 2025). Third, as Laenen, Rosetti, and van Oorschot (2020) note, different criteria are applied to distinct target groups, with varying levels of importance assigned to each ('deservingness valuations'). In earlier studies, for instance, van Oorschot (2006, 2008, also in Reeskens and van Oorschot 2012), together with other scholars (e.g. Ford 2016, Reeskens and van der Meer 2019, Bell, Valenta, and Strabac 2022) call attention to the significance of the identity criterion in the case of migrants, leading to so-called welfare chauvinism. Nevertheless, it is not the rule that identity is the key deservingness dimension for migrants. For instance, Nielsen, Frederiksen, and Larsen (2020) highlight control, and also reciprocity. Their study confirmed the key importance of control, which in connection to perceived need may affect distinguishing the deservingness of economic migrants from the deservingness of refugees (thus to differentiate a subgroup of forced migrants – refugees – from the wider group of migrants). In contrast, de Coninck and Matthijs (2020) identified attitude as the most significant criterion with regard to settlement.

In relation to that we may refer to the idea of 'a good refugee' or 'an ideal refugee' which earlier studies (e.g. Szczepanik 2016, Wernesjö 2020) consider to be a legitimate recipient of care and compassion. An 'ideal refugee' is not a clear-cut concept. While some authors emphasis passivity of 'good refugees', who are helpless and poor, and additionally they are mostly female possessing a particular nationality (Szczepanik 2016) and they depend on charity (McDowell 2013), others note that there is a requirement of activity within the concept. For instance, Clark, Haw, and Mackenzie (2024) define 'a good refugee' as the one who follows proper channels, is law-abiding, grateful and contributing; and Haw (2021) points out that the 'ideal' refugee is someone who '*fits in*' and/or '*gives back*' to claim their place in Australian society (p. 3169) which relates to required refugees' responsibility and utility to the host society. The concept of the 'ideal' or 'deserving' refugee is a socially constructed category (Heinkelmann-Wild, Beck, and Spencer 2019) that serves to regulate and discipline refugee behaviour. Although it plays a central role in integration processes (Etzel 2021), it is dangerous as it may exacerbate exclusion as well as leave out legal, rights-based grounds of protection (e.g. Szczepanik 2016, Clark, Haw, and Mackenzie 2024). The media is one of the essential factors contributing to social constructions of target groups (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

Media representation – namely, the way in which the media co-construct understandings of reality and disseminate these portrayals (Hall 1997) – both reflects and influences society's perception of these groups, including spreading the idea of their deservingness (or undeservingness) (van Oorschot and Roosma 2017). Despite the fact that we recognise media users are an active audience often critical towards media messages involved in the negotiation of meanings (Fiske 1987), we consider public media as a significant constructor of meanings. Public media have remained influential despite the rise of social media and increased opportunities for sharing ideas on the internet, which have multiplied the number of public interpretations of reality. The opinions that internet users express under online articles and other virtual spaces may significantly impact the opinions of others. We are aware of the potential power of such commentary. Consequently, we refer to our findings as an important but only partial element affecting the perceived deservingness levels of Ukrainian refugees as public policy target groups. The media representation of target groups contributing to their social construction is significant also for their capability to affect public policies, and not only at the agenda setting stage (Kosicki 1993, McCombs 2002, Birkland 2015), but also further stages, e.g. policy implementation, and revisions and amendments (Shanahan et al. 2008, Rose and Baumgartner 2013, Peters 2016). In our case we may say that the media may influence government support for refugees, including widely understood integration policies affecting them. As many scholars confirm, the framing of the issue to the public may influence public acceptance or resistance to the policy (e.g. Soroka 2003, Baumgartner and Jones 2009, Crow and Lowlor 2016). In the case of refugees, the media may affect the public's attitudes towards arrivals, including nationalism and xenophobia, integration of foreigners, interethnic relations as well as public policies related to these issues (Schemer 2012, Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017, McCann, Sienkiewicz, and Zard 2023). They may either alleviate or intensify conflicts between different ethnic groups and nationalities, which subsequently (but also in advance, as a preventive measure) may require policy responses (e.g. Pandir 2020, Sheikh and Mustafa 2024). Media may contribute to the demobilisation of solidarity (Thomas et al. 2018), i.e. *solidarity fatigue*, a decrease in public support for refugees as a society becomes more used to the situation of refugees and less emotionally responsive over time. The term is similar to the much more frequently used concept of *compassion fatigue*, characterised in relation to the helping professions (Joinson 1992, Figley 1995, Adams, Boscarino, and Figley 2006, Bride, Rady, and Figley 2007), which Aldamen (2023) described on a societal level referring to the representation of Syrian refugees in social media.

The Context

According to UNHCR data, by October 2024 as many as 623 thousand refugees from Ukraine applied for asylum, temporary protection or similar protection in Czechia. As of October 2024, there were 380 thousand refugees from Ukraine staying in Czechia. This means that refugees from Ukraine represent approximately 3.6% of the Czech population, which is the second highest number of Ukraine refugees as a share of population in Europe (after Moldova). Concerning Poland, by December 2024 as many as 1,880 thousand refugees from Ukraine applied for some kind of international protection, and at the end of 2024, 985 thousands refugees from Ukraine were living in Poland, i.e. about 2.6% of the Polish population (UNHCR 2024). Significantly, Ukrainians were the most numerous group of foreigners living in both Poland and Czechia even before Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine. The Central Statistical Office (2020) stated that at the end of 2019, there were over 1.35 million Ukrainians in Poland out of a total of 2.1 million foreigners. According to the data of the Czech Statistical Office, at the end of 2019, there were over 145 thousand Ukrainians out of almost 596 thousand foreigners in total; while at the end of 2021, there were almost 197 thousand out of 659 thousand foreigners (Czech Statistical Office 2022).

The sudden arrival of a large number of refugees from Ukraine affected the rapid evolution of refugee policies and integration policies in Poland and Czechia as several authors note. For instance, Andrejuk, referring to this situation, talks about the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a focusing event

for refugee policy in Poland (2023). Jelínková, Plaček and Ochraňa (2023a) point out that the substantial influx of Ukrainian refugees constituted an ‘external shock’ that has influenced Czech migrant integration policy. Even though integration policy in Czechia has undergone development for over twenty years in which many actors were involved (Zogata-Kusz 2020, Zogata-Kusz 2022), the situation after February 2022 provided new impetus for more rapid advancement (see also Ženková Rudincová and Vomlela 2024), in particular at the municipal level (Jelínková, Ochraňa, and Plaček 2023b, Jelínková and Zogata-Kusz 2026). In Poland, where explicit state-level integration policy has not been developed, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees forced local governments to develop (in a few cases) or to establish their reception and integration policies (Matuszczyk 2023, Bielewska, Ślęzak-Belowska, and Czeranowska 2024).

The governments of both countries provided Ukrainian refugees with extensive support, in particular in the first months of the conflict. In Poland, the special act of March 2022 introduced assistance for Ukrainian citizens, including the right to legal residence (initially for 18 months), access to free healthcare, education, and the labour market. Ukrainian citizens who arrived in Poland after February 24, 2022, received a single cash benefit per person, and gained access to many social benefits under the same conditions as Polish citizens. Czechia also introduced extensive support for refugees from Ukraine: the right to legal residence (initially for one year), access to free healthcare (for 150 days), education, and the labour market. Included in the support offered to Ukrainian refugees was, for instance, a one-time financial aid payment to cover basic needs, and humanitarian support provided monthly (Macková et al. 2024).

Despite some differences, both countries generally offered substantial public policy support to refugees considered deserving. However, such broad support was not sustainable nor desirable in the long term. As early as 2022, steps were taken to tighten the system to prevent abuse and – as we may assume – to prevent the development of xenophobia within some parts of society. In the spring of 2023, greater restrictions began to emerge. For instance, in Poland, from March 2023, individuals staying longer than 120 days in collective accommodation facilities were required to co-finance their stay (Dz.U. 2023 poz. 185). In Czechia, from April 2023, under the Lex Ukrajina 5, the system for paying monthly humanitarian allowances was substantially reduced (Cizinci.cz 2023). Starting September 1, 2024, Ukrainian refugees could use government-provided free accommodation for a maximum of 90 days. After this period, they would have to cover the costs of their stay (MPSV n.d.). Overall, both Poland and Czechia began efforts to motivate refugees to move toward self-sufficiency, reducing exceptions and attempting to integrate this group into the assistance system applicable to all residents of the country, and also to prevent xenophobia and emerging disapproval from some parts of society. However, it should be noted that these steps have frequently been criticised by non-governmental organisations, which, based on their daily work with refugees, view this stabilisation as premature and harmful to some refugees (e.g. Consortium of Migrants Assisting Organisations 2023, 2024).

However, the goal of this article is not to analyse or compare the development of policies toward Ukrainian refugees. The above examples illustrate that Ukrainian refugees were treated as deserving target groups in the policies of both countries, but as a result of the prolonged Russian invasion and the extended stay of refugees, as expected, Czechia and Poland reviewed and amended their policies toward this group.

Methodology

The research reported in this article refers to previous analyses resulting in the article ‘Deserving of Assistance: the Social Construction of Ukrainian Refugees’ (Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová, and Cekiera, 2023). In that text, based on Twitter posts from the first two months of Russia’s large-scale assault on Ukraine, we tried to identify the main narratives reinforcing social perceptions of Ukrainian refugees as deserving of assistance.

After two years, we decided to see if there had been any noticeable changes in the area we surveyed by carrying out a similar study – on a platform that had changed its name from Twitter to X – this time over a more extended period from February 24, 2023, to July 31, 2024. The extension of the analysis time was due to the apparent fact that the frequency of posts during this period devoted to Ukrainian refugees was lower than it had been in the first two months after the 2022 Russian invasion. We took data from the same accounts, which had been selected earlier for their popularity. These were the accounts of the five most popular news sites in each country at the time of Russia's large-scale assault on Ukraine – in the case of Czechia: @SeznamZpravy, @novinkycz, @Aktualnecz, @denikcz, @iDNEScz; in Poland from: @onetpl, @wirtualnapolska, @tvn24, @Int_Wydarzenia, @RadioZET_NEWS. Although there have been a few minor changes in the popularity rankings of the various media sources in the meantime, we decided to stick with our original choices. This was done to create an opportunity to compare the type of messages published over time (MediaGuru, 2021, Wirtualnemedi, 2022). This selection was not based on a criterion of ideological or political differentiation but was based (for the first study) on a criterion of popularity and (for the second study) on a desire to capture potential changes made visible by the same publishers. In this way, the research reported here can be categorised as longitudinal research. As one researcher writes, 'they are not very often used in communication and media studies, but many times their application in the field has contributed to important and interesting findings' (Lorenc 2017, 42). This approach to the analysis of media messages is sometimes also used to identify ways of communicating about migrants or refugees (e.g. Bos and Brants 2014, Strömbäck, Andersson, and Nedlund 2017, Beckers and Van Aelst 2019, Erhard, Heiberger, and Windzio 2021). The need to intensify longitudinal research is sometimes explicitly raised in connection with the issue of the effect of mass communication on migrants and refugees (Eberl et al. 2018, Seo and Kavakli 2022). We may assume that alongside opinion polls, such research makes it possible to follow discrimination, xenophobia or the potential for ethnic conflict.

X was employed exclusively as a tool for analysing the content of news websites rather than as a medium for examining user interactions or discussions on the platform itself. News outlets utilise their X accounts primarily to direct audience traffic to their online articles. The posts typically replicate article headlines and include excerpts from the lead paragraphs – sections that are most prominently displayed and thus most likely to be read by users, many of whom do not engage with the full article content, as the digital platform plays a crucial role in distributing news (Wilding et al. 2018).

We conducted our research using the qualitative content analysis method (Mayring, 2000), which involved three procedures: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verifying (see Miles and Huberman, 1994). In our data analysis, we adopted a constructionist perspective. As Silverman (2005, p. 160) notes, constructionist analysis of documents focuses primarily on the processes by which texts construct representations of 'reality' rather than on assessing whether the statements within those texts are true or false.

The material analysed was selected based on two key words – refugee (or refugees) and 'Ukrainian/Ukrainians'. Because both languages have grammatical cases, our search had to involve 'refugee/refugees' and 'Ukrainian/Ukrainians' in all grammatical forms as well as in both feminine and masculine forms. Posts that did not refer to refugees from Ukraine (and, for example, were linked to the situation in Gaza) were then excluded from the group. In this way, in Czechia the total sum of the posts was 265: 183 as 'Ukrainian'/'Ukrainians' and 82 with the keyword 'refugee'/'refugees'); and in Poland it was 256 (164 posts triggered by the keyword 'Ukrainian'/'Ukrainians' and 92 posts by 'refugee'/'refugees').

The research procedure was similar to the one we used in the previous study. Unlike in the case of many studies using this platform to research the opinions of its users on migration (e.g. Shah 2024), we did not analyse the discussion under the posts. We were only interested in the messages the media organisations conveyed and how they constructed the figure of the refugee deserving of help. We decided not to examine the content of the social media discussions and commentaries, as they

do not reflect the opinion of solely Polish or Czech internet users. It has been proved already that Russia, as part of its hybrid war efforts, attempts to influence online discussion of the sensitive question of Ukrainian refugees and everything in the virtual space that relates to its invasion of Ukraine. As Tanchak (2017), Zannettou et al. (2019), Zannettou et al. (2020) prove, Russian trolls enter internet discussion trying to influence public opinion (see e.g. Report), therefore, contrary to other authors (e.g. Łuczaj (2024) who focused on the discourse of so-called ‘Ukrainisation’), we decided not to analyse internet commentaries in order to avoid presenting a biased picture of the views of Polish and Czech internet users on Ukrainian refugees and policies towards them.

After collecting the posts, the first coding was carried out when we assigned the posts to the individual letters of CARIN+A. Despite some differences in codes and categories, we observed that the themes in both countries were similar, and the representations were often similar too. Finally, the third reading allowed us to revise the findings and identify and correct errors. Regarding language procedures, we coded all posts in Czech or Polish and then translated them into English. The results were analysed individually for both countries and then compared and discussed. Such a procedure refers to models for analysing posts on X proposed in the methodological literature. (Madden et al. 2025) The research material we refer to in the article is available in the appendices.

When researching dramatic events, it is crucial to remain aware of the ethical implications. This is particularly important in studies that directly or indirectly involve refugees (e.g. Birger and Shoham 2023, Fritzsche 2024, Pelletier, Kaewkitipong, and Guitton 2024). Throughout the analysis, we remained mindful that our research was grounded in the traumatic experiences of real individuals. This context demanded a heightened sensitivity to the circumstances of refugees and thoughtful efforts to portray them with care. Ethical considerations were, therefore, central to our work. While working on this article, we were convinced that the study’s results could contribute to a better understanding of the various contexts of host societies’ relations with refugees, and consequently improve their situation. The results may also support the development of policies that promote the integration of refugees and help prevent potential ethnic conflicts or the rise of nationalism. This approach is consistent with guidelines in the scientific literature that draw attention to the ethical issues of research on refugees (e.g. Dyregrov, Dyregrov, and Raundalen 2000, Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway et al. 2007).

Results

As our qualitative content analysis of the titles and lead paragraphs of Czech and Polish internet news websites reveals, the media portray the lives of Ukrainian refugees in Czechia and Poland as being marked by a profound sense of insecurity and a lack of control over their own situation. This sense of powerlessness stems not only from being forced to flee their homes due to war, but also from the everyday challenges that place refugees in a position of dependence and disadvantage – from working conditions and material hardship to the psychological effects of prolonged stress and exclusion. The analysis of CARIN+A deservingness dimensions is applied in detail below, including Table 1.

Control

In the category of *control*, two levels were revealed. On one hand, it is difficult for refugees to gain control over their lives. On the other, war is the reason they find themselves in such hardship, as it is the war that has led them into this situation. Information on the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Czechia and Poland emphasises their inability to control their lives and their lack of a sense of control over them. This issue encompasses a range of key areas of human existence, and it is also linked to uncertainty about the future. This is reflected in the labour market situation (for example, having to take up under-qualified jobs), material hardship, and an overall lower standard of living (iDNES.cz 2023d; Seznam Zprávy 2024e).

Table 1. Content Categories of CARIN+A Criteria of Deservingness present in Czech and Polish news websites*

Czech news websites	Common	Polish news websites
Control	Dealing with a problematic situation (war).	
	Lacking control over their own lives (on an individual, personal level as well as on a broader, societal level); Showing different sub-groups (e.g. people with disabilities).	
Being victim of crime (e.g. reports on physical attacks), and hate exploitation		
Attitude	'Ideal refugee' who integrates (works, in schools, in social and community life, is proactive, learns the language, customs, e.g. Christmas) + is grateful + wants to return home	
	Resisting against the Russian invaders (even though the media identify a subgroup of conscripts who do not want to fight, therefore they are not considered deserving)	Not being a spy
	Not being the wealthy using our support	
Reciprocity	Showing gratitude towards Poles / Czechs	
	Contributing to the state budget through their skills, entrepreneurship	
Identity	Emphasising cultural proximity, also in relation to newcomers from Africa and Middle East	
	Being successful as refugees who built a new life in a new country	
Not being Romani		
Not being Russian		
	Being a part of the community of identity of resistance – also in historical terms – against Russia's imperial inclinations	
Need	Emphasis on the difficult situation resulting from being a refugee (being poor, mostly it is mothers and children)	
		Conscripts considered as treated badly by their own country
Need to be protected against hate attacks		Being a victim of misfortune or mistreatment

Continued

Table 1 Continued

Czech news websites	Common	Polish news websites
Assistance	Assistance is still being provided./ Support is still necessary and justified	
	Attempts are being made to regulate aid – ‘helping wisely’ and preventing abuses (increasing emphasis on these issues).	
Limits in providing the housing and education for Ukrainian kids.		Emphasis on the ethical aspect of helping refugees (for example, invoking the words of Pope Francis about the need to help refugees).
Limits in the protection in Czechia (Ukrainians face hatred from the majority, Romani, and politicians, there are also hoaxes on the Internet).		Uniqueness of Poles’ assistance to refugees from Ukraine.
Czechs fight against hatred of Ukrainians.		Poles’ help is recognized, appreciated by others, and rewarded.
		Embezzlement and fraud by Poles in the context of helping refugees from Ukraine.
		Emphasis of the demographic of the refugees – it is mostly mothers and children.
		Planned changes in social policy to reduce the benefits received by Ukrainians.

*Despite CARIN+A criteria are separated in the table, in fact the categories are mostly amalgams of more than one criterion.

Presenting daily life in Ukraine as being under constant threat of violence contributed indirectly to the image of Ukrainian refugees as people not having control over their lives (Wirtualna Polska 2023a). The messages also emphasised and reminded viewers of the fact that the presence of Ukrainians in Czechia and Poland was not a situation of their choosing, but a brutal necessity resulting from the ongoing hostilities. Attention was also drawn to the less obvious aspects of the situation of war refugees, related to the psychological effects of such cruel experiences and the feeling of a permanent state of insecurity (iDNES.cz 2023e; Aktuálně.cz 2024, Seznam Zprávy 2024b; Interia 2023f).

The media also report stories of Ukrainian refugees with disabilities, emphasising the difficulty of organising one’s own life in a war situation (Onet 2024a). This whole category is marked with a sense of insecurity and lack of control over one’s situation. Here we observe the first instances of posts referring to articles presenting anti-Ukrainian behaviours and attitudes (including physical attacks – as the examples show in Czechia: e.g. Seznam Zprávy 2023g; Seznam Zprávy 2023e). These phenomena create an additional sense of threat for refugees (Seznam Zprávy 2023c; Seznam Zprávy 2023g; Seznam Zprávy 2023h; iDNES.cz 2023b).

Attitude

In both Czechia and Poland, the category of attitudes is distinguished by the figure of the ‘ideal refugee’ constructed by the media. An ‘ideal refugee’ is a gainfully employed (Seznam Zprávy 2023j; Seznam Zprávy 2023j), proactive person (iDNES 2023a). Despite their longing for their home country, they adapt to their new conditions, try to integrate into the community of their new home, and learn the language (Seznam Zprávy 2023k). This also applies to pupils who are improving at school (TVN24 2024a).

An essential element of the (expected and promoted) attitude is the gratitude that the ‘ideal refugee’ feels towards the host community (Aktuálně.cz 2023b; TVN24 2023e). Such a person thinks of their homeland all the time, even while being outside its borders: they try to help their compatriots struggling back home in every way possible (for example, protesting against the actions of the Russian ambassador – Wirtualna Polska 2023d). In this way – as some texts have emphasised – they strengthen the Ukrainians’ resistance against the Russian invaders, which is also in the interest of the Czech Republic, Poland, and the whole of Europe. Simply put, ‘they fight for us’, in what could be also understood as a form of reciprocity – as they earn help by fighting for us – and the reason we identify positively with them (Seznam Zprávy 2023a; TVN24 2023a). The figure of the ‘ideal refugee’ also includes the expectation on the part of the host community that the person will return to Ukraine after the end of hostilities (Aktuálně.cz 2023a).

Nevertheless, we can identify a subgroup of conscripts who did not conform to the ideal of a refugee, as news sources on X in both countries reported on Ukrainians trying to avoid fighting on the front lines. Although for the most part not expressed explicitly, one may read between the lines to discover the expressed opinion that these individuals do not have the ‘right’ attitude. At the same time it means that the hosting societies do not identify with this subgroup as they do not want to ‘also fight for us’. In the case of this subgroup we may say that some articles suggest that it is not *deserving* (iDNES.cz 2023h; Interia 2024i).

Some articles call attention to other subgroups of Ukrainians not considered as deserving. These included the wealthy – in their case news websites highlighted that they are not in need and can afford much more than the majority. In the case of Poland, there was also news that there were dangerous spies hiding among Ukrainians (Interia 2023j; Interia 2024h; iDNES.cz 2024a).

Reciprocity

We can identify the dimension of reciprocity in the analysed texts primarily on two basic levels. The first is the numerous cases describing Ukrainians as people who appreciate the help given to them by Poles (e.g. TVN24 2023e). Refugees have been quoted thanking the Poles for creating a ‘second home’ in Poland. The gratitude expressed is an example of the ‘proper placement of aid.’ It reinforces the feeling that Ukrainian refugees deserve help and it sustains the will to continue providing it – but it also clearly portrays the refugees as being in an unequal relationship with their hosts. Similar gratitude can be found in Czechia as well (Aktuálně.cz 2023b).

The other aspect of reciprocity is the relationship providing economic benefits resulting from Ukrainian refugees working in Czechia and Poland. The fact that they take on simple jobs and are economically valuable for the host country highlights this group of refugees as valuable contributors to Czech and Polish society: they are individuals who support the state budget through their skills, entrepreneurship, and employment (Seznam Zprávy 2023j). However, reports often indicate that refugees tend to take on low-skilled jobs, reflecting the challenges of full economic integration (Seznam Zprávy 2024a).

Identity

Both countries regarded the cultural proximity of Ukrainians to Czechs and Poles as a highly significant factor (Radio ZET News 2023a; iDNES.cz 2023c). This stands in contrast to media

perception of refugees, particularly from Syria and Africa, during the European Migration Crisis of 2015–2017, when both countries were rather reluctant to provide assistance (TVN24 2023c; Seznam Zpravy 2023a).

Additionally, it was considered important that Ukrainians were fleeing war with Russia, which poses a potential threat to Czechia and Poland, both of which have experienced Russian occupation. This has led to a strong sense of identification with Ukrainians who are resisting aggression. This attitude exists in Poland despite an uneasy shared history between Poland and Ukraine (TVN24 2024b; iDNES.cz 2023e; iDNES.cz 2023i; iDNES.cz 2024b).

In both countries, we also found refugee success stories that serve as examples of individuals who overcame hardship and built a new, successful life in Czechia or Poland (Seznam Zpravy 2023b; Onet 2024b).

Unlike in Poland, in Czechia there were signs of rivalry from the Roma community. Clashes between groups of Roma and Ukrainians in Brno attracted media attention (Seznam Zpravy 2023f; Seznam Zpravy 2023i). At the same time, one Romani activist expressed the view that Czechs are more protective of Ukrainians' rights than those of their own people, i.e. the Czech Roma (iDNES.cz 2023f). The newspapers also reported that Ukrainians are more popular with the majority than Russians living in Czechia (iDNES.cz 2023i).

Need

This category aligns with previously identified patterns, ranging from the need for financial support due to their circumstances to the fact that many Ukrainians live in poverty. The emphasis on the difficult situation resulting from being a refugee (work, education, childcare, etc.) is highlighted in Poland (Interia 2023i). Both countries also note that those in need of help mainly consist of mothers and children (Aktuálně.cz 2023a; iDNES.cz 2023d; Seznam Zpravy 2023k; Interia 2023c; Interia 2023h). Additionally, the presence of disabled people among Ukrainian refugees is emphasised, as well as the especially difficult situation of unaccompanied minors in Czechia (Radio ZET News, 2023c; Deník.cz 2023a).

In light of attacks on Ukrainians in Czechia and Poland (Seznam Zpravy 2023g; Interia 2023b), the media acknowledges that this group should be protected by the majority from such incidents, as it is vulnerable.

Again we may devote special attention to Ukrainian conscripts. In addition to the aforementioned articles, there were also ones that referred to conscripts either residing in Poland or trying to reach Poland as vulnerable people who were even treated badly by their own country (Interia 2024d). The newspapers reported via X on misfortunes that befell Ukrainians in Poland, as well as the way some Poles mistreated Ukrainians, highlighting their need for support.

Assistance

Assistance to Ukrainians continues in both Czechia and Poland, with reports highlighting ongoing efforts to provide practical support (Seznam Zpravy 2023a). However, both countries face challenges in sustaining this aid, attempting to regulate aid by promoting 'wise assistance', and preventing abuses (Wirtualna Polska 2024a; Interia 2024b; Wirtualna Polska 2024b).

In Czechia, while many continue to help (Aktuálně.cz 2023c, Deník.cz 2023a), there are limitations on the protection offered to refugees (Seznam Zpravy 2024d). Issues such as difficulties in placing Ukrainian children in schools and maintaining accommodation remain urgent (Seznam Zpravy 2024c; Seznam Zpravy 2023d). Additionally, some Ukrainian refugees encounter hostility, including hate attacks from segments of the local population (from the Czechs and some Romanis (iDNES.cz 2023g; Seznam Zpravy 2023h) and xenophobic comments from some politicians (novinky.cz 2023). Even though the internet has served as a platform for spreading misinformation (Deník.cz 2023b), there have been cases of Czechs who have tried to fight against hatred (Deník.cz 2024).

In contrast to Czech coverage, Polish news emphasised the uniqueness and ethical aspect of helping refugees (for example, invoking the words of Pope Francis about the need to help refugees – Interia 2023e; Interia 2024c; Radio ZET News 2023b). At the same time, the perception of Polish assistance, both within the country and internationally, has been highlighted (Wirtualna Polska 2023b; TVN24 2023d; TVN24 2023f), as well as the economic benefits of Ukrainians' presence in Poland (Interia 2023g). However, there have been cases of embezzlement and fraud by Poles in the context of providing assistance to Ukrainian refugees (Wirtualna Polska 2023c). Demographic factors, particularly the large number of women and children among the refugees, are often cited as reasons to continue with the provision of aid. Additionally, planned changes in social policy aim to reduce the benefits received by Ukrainians residing in Poland (Interia 2023d; Interia 2024e; Interia 2024g).

Discussion and conclusions

This analysis has made it possible to observe that Ukrainian refugees continue to be portrayed as deserving in Czech and Polish media, as similar representations appeared on major news platforms in both countries. Nevertheless, while in the first weeks of the full-scale invasion the question of their image and deservingness related to *who they are*, later the question of *how they behave* seemed to be much more important. This deservingness manifested in all dimensions, but occasionally in a slightly different way than in the first weeks of the second phase of the invasion. In particular, this relates to the specific emphasis placed on certain dimensions, as well as the content of said dimensions. Moreover, we may observe *normalisation* of the situation in the media, which is in part related to stabilisation in policies. Significantly, what we do not observe is *compassion fatigue*, although after so many months we might expect some signs of tiredness due to following the tragic and sad stories of refugees and from ongoing efforts to provide them assistance.

Ukrainian refugees were portrayed predominantly, both directly and indirectly, as people who lacked sufficient *control* over their lives; directly when the media covered issues related to their flight from war; and indirectly when it described military combat and its consequences in Ukraine. They were also represented as people who were in great *need*, mainly through articles pointing out their poverty and other problems they faced despite their best efforts to solve them. Currently, however, this lack of control and ongoing level of need have somewhat exposed the shortfalls in the receiving countries' policies, as the articles related to people who had been residing in the hosting countries for many months, not to those who had just fled the war.

Although over the period of our research both countries' media recognised Ukrainian refugees as people in need, the dimension of *need* requires some additional remarks. We may assume that there is some *threshold of needs* that a society is able to accept. If more needs are expressed (types of work, language in school etc.), then there is a risk that a society will treat the target group as having a demanding attitude. Humanitarian narratives celebrate vulnerability, but if refugees ask for 'too much', they can be perceived as too demanding. On the other hand, if the relevant public policy is considered too generous, it may lead to public resentment. Daily observations from the first months of the Ukrainian refugees' stay suggest that, for instance, in Poland many people were irritated by the fact that some municipalities introduced free public transport or free entrance to the zoo and other attractions for Ukrainian refugees. Gradually, public policies became less generous and more strict. We may presume that one of the reasons was to prevent ethnic tensions rising.

It seems that as time has passed the significance of *attitude* and *reciprocity* has clearly increased. Humanitarian need and assistance were no longer that important, and the news did not present Ukrainian refugees solely as victims. The meaning of *how they behave* became more relevant. Apparently, these two dimensions, *attitude* and *reciprocity*, are essential for the image of *an ideal refugee*, and in general we can see that Ukrainian refugees living in Poland and Czechia are portrayed as such.

The content, or rather the meaning, of *attitude* and *reciprocity* has slightly changed. While originally (compare Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová, and Cekiera, 2023) *attitude* mainly related to gratefulness, subsequently it additionally attached importance to a proactive stance towards integration (working, learning language, having relationships in the community). While originally *reciprocity* related mainly to the expectation that Ukrainian refugees would join the hosting countries' labour markets, later the media reported on the gains made in relation to – primarily – the economic activity of Ukrainian refugees in the receiving countries. The media, especially Czech media, not only showed how many Ukrainian refugees were active on the labour market, but also emphasised how much the state *earned* on providing assistance to them, comparing government expenses and Ukrainian refugees' contributions to the state budget. In the case of Poland, such articles only appeared later on, in the autumn of 2024. As previously, the dimension of reciprocity included the idea that Ukrainians were fighting for us (Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová, and Cekiera, 2023). To sum up, in the period we examined, the news websites in both countries presented Ukrainian refugees mostly as grateful, active and useful, what corresponds to the idea of 'a good refugee' in understanding of e.g. Haw (2021) and Clark, Haw, and Mackenzie (2024).

As has been the case with other authors (e.g. Heuer and Zimmermann 2020, Theiss 2023), our research has confirmed that the social construction of the target group in question has only rarely expressed individual dimensions. Even brief passages of text are in fact amalgams of multiple dimensions, where control intertwines with need and attitude, attitude meshes with reciprocity, and so forth, as we have noted above.

Regarding the dimension of *identity*, the media in both countries has emphasised cultural and physical (i.e. skin colour) proximity, and has also compared these attributes to those of newcomers from other countries. While Heuer and Zimmermann (2020) identified need and lack of control as key dimensions of the perception of refugees, and identity as central for migrants in general, our study has found that, in the case of Ukrainian refugees, identity was a significant element in their social construction. This confirms the findings of scholars pointing out the distinction the media (and governments) make between white and non-white refugees, between Ukrainians and – in particular – people from Africa and the Middle East (e.g. McCann, Sienkiewicz, and Zard 2023, Zawadzka-Paluckta 2022, Iberi and Saddam 2022). And this distinction is not only based on ethnicity, but also, for instance, on religion. As Lukášová (2017) claims, being a Christian is a significant factor that blurs the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Also, De Coninck (2022) points out that a significant factor is not only Ukrainians' ethnicity and the related perception that they pose a relatively minor symbolic threat to the hosting culture (i.e. the fear that migrants challenge the receiving society's values, religion, belief systems or ideology – see Stephan, Ybarra, and Morrison 2009), but also their perceived utility in countering an aggressor-based threat. Russia is considered a common enemy, and as De Coninck (2022) notes, there is a fear that Russia will not stop at the borders of Ukraine.

Finally, *assistance* that in the first weeks of the arrival of thousands of Ukrainian refugees was a significant booster of other deservingness dimensions, related to the fact that helping Ukrainians was almost considered 'a national duty' in which many ordinary people, NGOs and local governments engaged (Zogata-Kusz, Öbrink Hobzová, and Cekiera, 2023, p. 16). With the passage of time, we can observe *normalisation* in this area as the media predominantly reported on official assistance provided by the state through their – already more stabilised – policies. In other words, both the assistance itself changed, and the way the media talked about it changed as well.

Some academics noted that the content, or rather the meaning, of particular deservingness dimensions differs depending on the target group. For instance, Theiss (2023) discovered that in addition to the common understandings of the content of the attitude dimension, in the case of refugees it meant having respect for Poles, Polish culture and Catholicism; not imposing 'one's own values', not violating law; integrating, assimilating learning Polish, being cultural, being nice, smiling and not shouting. In contrast, with regard to families with children, it meant having many children; raising children properly, doing the hard work of raising children (Theiss 2023, 970).

Meanwhile, based on our study, we may formulate a hypothesis that the meaning of specific dimensions are modified over time in relation to the same target group as shown above, in particular with regard to attitude and reciprocity. As for control and need – to elaborate, at the beginning of the conflict it referred to people who had just arrived, whereas now these categories also encompass how their needs and lack of control relate to the state's policies towards them. We may assume that the shifts in meanings relate to the fact that while in the first weeks of the full-scale Russian invasion Ukrainian refugees were represented in the media as people in emergency situations, on the move, escaping the war; later the media were in fact reporting on individuals who were already neighbours, colleagues, parents of Czech or Polish children's schoolmates. Nonetheless, as the war continues, we can hardly claim that the target group has *changed* in any fundamental way. Our findings on how Ukrainian refugees are depicted led us to similar conclusions as in Theiss' study (2023). However, our findings led us to the conclusion that Ukrainian refugees usually are expected to contribute to society by working and integrating into the community. This involves them taking the first step. Moreover, the Ukrainians tick one more necessity: they are depicted mostly as women with children, which turned out, especially during the European Migration Crisis, to be an important factor in being perceived by host societies as victims (Szczepanik 2016).

This analysis has led us to conclude that the situation has normalised in many areas. The first manifestation of *normalisation* has been the clearly lower number of articles referring to Ukrainian refugees. The tone of writing on the topic has also become much less emotional than in 2022. Second, 'the national surge of assistance' has also not continued in its original form, as the number of Ukrainians arriving in Poland and Czechia has been decreasing. Also, the two national governments have been changing their policies towards Ukrainian refugees, moving from rules introduced under the then new emergency situation towards policy stabilisation, which conforms, for instance, with the ideas of the punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner and Jones 2005, Jones and Baumgartner 2012). Similarly, other relevant groups and organisations have changed their approach towards Ukrainian refugees over time (TVN 24 2024c). Finally, most Ukrainians have adapted to the new situation and (at least a portion of them) have integrated into the receiving societies (PAQ Research 2024). For all these reasons, coverage of Ukrainian refugees as well as the topic of direct assistance has decreased in frequency in the media.

Interestingly, we noted that in many cases the media did not distinguish between Ukrainian refugees and Ukrainians who had arrived in Poland and Czechia before the full-scale invasion. Nonetheless, we may expect that because of the amount of support provided to Ukrainian refugees by both societies and governments, any mention of 'Ukrainian' would evoke connotations, in the given situation, regarding a representative of this specific group; despite the fact that in Poland the special law on assistance to Ukrainian refugees did not extend to those who had arrived before hostilities commenced.

Although, in general, the social construction of Ukrainian refugees appears to have remained constant, over time, we can observe that subtle distinctions have emerged within the target group, with certain subgroups becoming more apparent, which corresponds to Schneider and Ingram's ideas on the subject (1993). While in the first weeks of the full-scale invasion, the media simply talked about Ukrainian refugees (although more often focusing on women with children and the elderly), in the period covered in the current study, we found some articles talking specifically about conscripts that lived in Poland and Czechia and did not want to join the Ukrainian army (Interia 2023k). Such articles appeared primarily in Polish media. Although they did not explicitly identify these people as being undeserving, nor employ an accusatory tone, they did describe the situation as a problem for the Ukrainian government, and in doing so one may observe that the deservingness of conscripts warranted at least 'a question mark'. A similar situation exists in regard to Ukrainian refugees who have committed criminal offences.

As for differences, in both Czech and Polish media, Ukrainian refugees have consistently been portrayed as '*deserving*' – that is, grateful, active, and beneficial to the host society. Most CARIN+A categories were represented similarly in both countries. However, certain examples reveal how each

country has emphasized different aspects of this image, reflecting the specific conditions of its society. In the *control* category, media in both countries depicted Ukrainian refugees as lacking control over their lives due to the war. However, Czech media more frequently referenced articles addressing anti-Ukrainian attitudes, including incidents of physical attacks, and emphasized the need for society to prevent such occurrences. Under *attitude*, media in both countries identified a subgroup of refugees who were not considered deserving: wealthy refugees in Czechia, and possible spies in Poland. In *reciprocity*, Czech media highlighted the economic contributions of refugees relatively early, with articles comparing state spending on aid to the refugees' contributions to the national budget. In Poland, similar discussions emerged only in the autumn of 2024. Czech coverage therefore placed more emphasis on economic contributions, whereas Polish narratives more often stressed moral duty and loyalty to the host nation. Within the *identity* category, Czech media reported instances of conflict between local Roma communities and Ukrainian refugees. Such tensions were absent from Polish media narratives. In the *need* category, Polish media drew attention to conscripts who either resided in Poland or sought to reach it as a vulnerable group. This narrative was entirely absent in Czechia. In *assistance*, Polish media initially focused more on the humanitarian dimension of support, partly due to demographic factors, as most arrivals were women and children, and often framed this help in moral terms, which was recognized both nationally and internationally. Over time, however, criticism arose concerning overly generous benefits, eventually leading to stricter policies. By contrast, Czech media focused more on cases of misinformation and hatred spread online, stressing the need to counteract such phenomena.

Final remarks

The longitudinal study of the representation of Ukrainian refugees in Polish and Czech media allows us to conclude that despite time passing, in general the main news websites have presented refugees as deserving even after one to two and a half years. It is a positive finding from the perspective of how the media may influence both inter-ethnic relations and public policy development. Nevertheless, we observed that over time, certain subgroups – with somewhat different levels of deservingness as represented by the media – have begun to be distinguished from among the given group.

The melting of various dimensions into deservingness amalgams is a natural phenomenon that our research also confirmed. Based on our study we may, however, formulate *a hypothesis of dimension content modifications*, i.e. that the meaning of and emphasis on specific deservingness dimensions changes over time for the same target group. In both countries, this was most visible in the dimensions of *attitude* and *reciprocity*, which are closely related to the concept of the 'ideal refugee', although *identity* was also important in the case of Ukrainian refugees. We also observed *normalisation* of the situation (fewer articles, less emotions, stabilisation in policies). Likewise, it is significant that we did not observe compassion fatigue in either the media's content or tone.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <http://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2025.10120>.

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