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OPENNESS AND DIVISIVE DISCOURSE ON UKRAINIAN WAR REFUGEES. THE FIRST MONTH OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR IN POLISH ONLINE TABLOIDS

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Abstract

The Ukrainian-Russian war (2022-ongoing) has been associated with the issue of war refugees from the very beginning. The problem has aroused a very strong social response in Poland not only in the form of mass aid, but also differences of opinions in society. The aim of the study was to determine the specifics of the discourse on Ukrainian refugees in the two most popular Polish online tabloids: “Fakt” and “Super Express”. The analysis included two dimensions of discourse: openness, dialogic and divisive, polarising. Various dimensions of discourse were analysed: social, cultural, economic, and political. The study was conducted using hybrid methods. Based on data provided by the Brand24 platform, the first stage determined the number of articles containing the keyword “refugees” in the studied tabloids. Real Users (RU) rankings and the so-called Influencer Score were used to identify these media. Next, a discourse analysis of textual media materials from the first month of the war was conducted. The materials studied were the most influential articles from tabloids (423 items), dating back to the first month of the war. The study showed that open discourse takes the form of (1) emphatic, (2) agitating for duty, and (3) aid discourse. In contrast, the divisive discourse takes the form of (1) crisis and (2) polarisation discourse.

Keywords

mediatization of war, war discourse, refugees, humanitarian aid, polarisation, Russian-Ukrainian War

Introduction

The Russian-Ukrainian war, which commenced in 2022, has precipitated an unprecedented humanitarian crisis with millions of Ukrainians seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. Among these, Poland has been a primary destination due to its geographical proximity and historical ties with Ukraine. This exodus has brought the discourse around war refugees to the fore within Polish society, eliciting a gamut of responses ranging from solidarity and support to polarisation and hostility. The dynamic nature of this discourse, especially within the realm of Polish online tabloid media, offers a fertile ground for examining the mediatisation of the war and its implications on societal attitudes towards refugees.

This study aims to investigate the discourse surrounding Ukrainian refugees during the first month of the war in Poland's two most popular online tabloids, "Fakt" and "Super Express", both of which, during the earlier refugee crisis, intensified fear of migrants and exposed two different strands of refugee discourse ("Fakt" – criticism of the UE, "Super Express" – anti-refugee and anti-German approach) (Troszyński & El-Ghamar 2022). The analysis focuses on two primary dimensions of discourse: openness, which includes empathetic, duty-agitating, and aid-oriented dialogue; and divisiveness, which comprises crisis and polarisation discourse. By examining these discourses, the research seeks to understand how the refugee crisis and its impact on Polish societal attitudes is mediated.

The methodological framework of this research employs a hybrid approach, combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative discourse analysis. This dual method enables a comprehensive examination of discourse in the tabloids, capturing the breadth of coverage of refugees. Specifically, this approach allows for identifying key themes and narratives that dominate the discourse, providing a window into the broader societal processes of solidarity, polarisation, and mediatisation at play.

The significance of this study lies in its elucidation of the role of tabloid media in the initial response to a major refugee crisis within a frontline state. This analysis contributes to a broader understanding of media's role in emergencies and conflict situations, particularly in contexts where public opinion is highly fragmented and susceptible to polarisation. Moreover, it provides insights into the evolving nature of crisis-related discourse, which can inform future media strategies and policy-making processes in response to humanitarian emergencies. This research examines multifaceted nature of media discourse during the early stages of a conflict-induced refugee crisis. The findings underscore the necessity to scrutinise media practices and their societal impact, especially in ongoing global conflicts and their resultant humanitarian challenges.

Literature Review

Mediatisation of war

The media, used for both information and communication (Kozman & Melki 2017) as well as tactical activities (Horbyk 2022), is an equivalent actor of war (Horten 2011). Providing valuable explanations of the relationship linking the media to the military has a long research tradition (Horbyk 2023). The literature distinguishes three phases of the mediatisation of war: (1) broadcast war – transmission by mainstream media of messages

in line with the narrative of power, (2) diffused war – chaotic co-occurrence of equivalent official and grassroots messages on war, and (3) arrested war – the simultaneous circulation of media materials of different status that are predominantly convergent with the authorities' narration (Hoskins & O'Loughlin 2015). In this regard, it is important to emphasise that (1) the above phases may co-occur (Bolin et al. 2016); (2) full control of the media in wartime is not possible (Sapiera et al. 2015); (3) media broadcast the war in a manner tailored to their cultures (Crosbie 2015); (4) digital media make us participate in war even when we have never been on the frontlines (Kaempf 2013), but audience involvement in the conflict may be temporary (Vihalemm & Juzefovičs 2023).

The Russian-Ukrainian war has accelerated military uses of the media. While journalists call it the “first social media war” (Suciu 2022) or the “first TikTok war” (Chayka 2022), researchers question whether the reported intensification makes it necessary to distinguish the next stage of the mediatisation of war (Nilsson & Ekman 2024). In this context, there is a lack of studies that delineate how war is mediated by frontline countries that experience the conflict primarily through the prism of the arrival of war refugees.

Polarisation

Regardless of how polarisation is defined (Lelkes 2016), public discussion of refugees is mainly oriented around the opposition: victims vs. threat (Georgiou & Zaborowski 2017). This has been accompanied by a perception of anti-immigrant attitudes among Europeans since the “European Refugee Crisis” (Van Hootegeem & Meuleman 2019), at the same time, research highlights their readiness to provide humanitarian assistance (Jeannet et al. 2021). Moreover, positive attitudes towards asylum seekers in Europe increased between 2002 and 2016 (Van Hootegeem & Meuleman 2019). However, pro-immigrant tendencies seem likely to rise mainly in communities characterised by higher levels of education and economic status, which are more left- than right-wing (Albada et al. 2019). In parallel, the greatest support is given to asylum seekers who are attractive to the labour market, appear vulnerable and are Christians (Bansak et al. 2016).

The results of studies on the reception of war migrants from Ukraine (De Coninck 2023; el-Nawawy & Elmasry 2024; Moise et al. 2024) provide two main conclusions: (1) in contrast to migrants from Asia and Africa, European refugees are perceived as victims, and (2) the public debate about them is accompanied by low polarisation. At the same time, communication on refugees comes along with Russian disinformation (Neidhardt 2022; Sessa 2022), which has aimed to destabilise West European countries and understate Ukraine internationally (Iosifidis & Nicoli 2021). Nevertheless, existing studies insufficiently focus on Poland's perspective as a major host country, including the initial responses to the crisis and the mass media reports on grassroots relief efforts in the turbulent period of information warfare, while Polish people show the highest levels of resistance to war disinformation (Wenzel & Stasiuk-Krajewska 2022) and solidarity with refugees from Ukraine (Digidiki et al. 2024).

Media discourse on refugees

The media are the main provider of information and interpretation about refugees, and their messages can both legitimise their social acceptance and the necessity of reception

and deprive them of their citizenship status and support restrictive migration policies (Horsti 2016; Xu 2020). The results of the earlier research on the representation of migration in European media can be reduced to three conclusions: (1) the media use a number of frames to describe refugees and the most popular are economics, welfare, crime and security, and political and legal processes; (2) media images of refugees are mostly negative and constructed through the Us–Them opposition; and (3) over time, media discourse on refugees becomes increasingly negative and the initial humanitarian frame is gradually replaced by a securitisation one (Georgiou & Zaborowski 2017; Hamелеers 2019; Heidenreich et al. 2019). In turn, the most frequent issues around migration covered by the newsrooms, include, *inter alia*, crime, the social debate on refugees, asylum processes, reception centres, and asylum seekers themselves (Pöyhtäri et al. 2021).

Media that apply a humanitarian frame portray war refugees as victims and emphasise the moral obligation to take in migrants who need support from stronger hosts (Van Hootegeem & Meuleman 2019). This type of coverage is intensified by news on extremely violent events, such as child war victims (Georgiou & Zaborowski 2017). At the same time, the humanitarian frame is primarily characteristic of broadsheets, and the frequency of its use varies across countries (Berry et al. 2016). While the tabloid media focus more on portraying migrants from a criminal perspective (Greussing & Boomgaarden 2017) and are suspected of supporting anti-immigrant attitudes (Diehl et al. 2021).

Although the problem of media representations of refugees has been widely addressed, to our knowledge, only one study of the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war by the Polish media has been delivered so far (Zawadzka-Palucka 2022). According to it, the portrayal of refugees from Ukraine is more positive than that of refugees coming from Africa, results which are in line with findings from other media outlets, indicating the use of respectful language and favourable ways of description towards Ukrainian migrants (Matulić & Škokić 2024; Sambaraju & Shrikant 2023). However, the existing research does not sufficiently expose the differences in the portrayal of refugees by different tabloids, while, as previous research have shown, this type of media may differ in general (Magin & Stark 2015) and in the war migration context (Troszyński & El-Ghamar 2022).

Thus, in the insufficient number of research on the refugee discourse resulting from the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, and concerning the border host countries, research was undertaken on the discourse taking shape in Poland during the first month of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It was decided to study the content of online tabloids, which, in light of previous research, are characterised not only by the disappearance of the previously negative and polarising refugee discourse, but also by their social significance, resulting from the level of readership and the resonance generated, both online and in the broader public discourse. Tabloid communication is also an important part of the mediatisation of war. The following research questions were therefore posed: (1) How was the tabloid refugee discourse in Poland shaped during the first month of the war, possibly both in its open and dialogical aspect and in its divisive, polarising one? (2) What significance did the shaped discourse have on the mediatisation process of this war? The above questions were answered based on mixed research methods using both quantitative (tabloid content analysis and analysis of online reading rates) and qualitative (discourse analysis) methods. The results corroborate some of the findings on previous refugee crises, but also indicate significant differences.

Methods

Research procedure

News articles published during the first month of the war in the Polish-language tabloid “Fakt” and “Super Express” websites were collected. The choice of both titles results from the fact that they have been the most popular among audiences for years (Rogoż 2020) and on the Internet, achieving the highest viewing rates. According to data from the PBI/Gemius Institute, which analyses Internet traffic, the monthly average number of real users (RU) for “Super Express” was over 10.7 million, and for “Fakt”, over 8.7 million (PBC 2024). In 2022, both websites achieved a total reach of nearly 75% among the leading platforms of national dailies online (“Fakt” 37.9% and “Super Express” 35.7%). The Internet reach of the chosen website indicates the percentage of real users visiting a given website in the population of all real Internet users (Wirtualne Media 2022). The data from the first months of the war and throughout 2022 confirm a high level of interest in “Fakt” and “Super Express”. Both the print editions and the websites had the highest market shares and held the top two positions in sales and popularity rankings of websites. Despite declining sales over the years, both titles sold an average of up to 100,000 copies daily (Kurdowski 2023). The impact of websites on the social media audience also dictated the choice of titles studied. The Brand24¹ analytical company’s Influencer Score index expresses it. The Influencer Score index gives insight into which source or author has the most significant influence on social media or the web – the higher the number, the more popular the source is. Both “Fakt” and “Super Express” received an index of 9 on a 10-point scale. It is also worth noting that the time spent by Internet users on selected websites increased in minute terms from February to March 2022 (Mediapanel 2022a; Mediapanel 2022b). The research material covers the first month since the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine (February 24-March 23, 2022). Indicators from Brand24 and databases like MediaCloud and BuzzSumo show that the majority of articles about refugees were published during this period. It was also the time of the most significant social shock and deep involvement in the aid process.

Data collection and selection

Data for the research were obtained from the Brand24 platform. A project was created in the analytical panel where the keyword “refugees” was set to search for journalistic articles focused on the issue. The search was limited to the websites of two tabloids. The collected data included the publication date, author, title, and links to articles on the publishers’ websites. The data package was downloaded as a spreadsheet database for proper data cleaning. Materials that were repeated or the keyword appeared not in the text but in comments or links to other articles were rejected from the database. Then, using active links, a set of articles was manually downloaded. Ultimately, the research corpus included 423 texts about Ukrainian refugees – “Super Express” 290 (68.4%) and “Fakt” 133 (31.4%). The texts were subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis in the next step.

1 The Brand24 digital platform monitors Poland’s and international Internet and social media.

Data analysis

Quantitative research was used as a primary exploration proceeding detailed qualitative analyses. The collected texts were entered and processed using the MaxQDA software, mainly for hybrid research. This step focused on two main tasks: determining the type-to-token ratio (TTR) index and identifying the most frequently occurring words and phrases. The TTR is a measure of the linguistic development of the text. It is the quotient of different (unique) words (“types”) divided by the total number of words (“tokens”). It can be a maximum of 1. TTR is also called a simple measure of lexical diversity (Kettunen 2014; Adil Jaafar & Abdul-Salam Jasim 2022). The analysis of the most frequently occurring words and phrases and words in the context made it easier to compare the linguistic layers of both titles.

The collected data was analysed qualitatively using the abductive method. First, the material was coded using the inductive approach, adopting the assumed main categories, such as political, economic, social, cultural, and military themes, as well as the division into openness discourse and divisive discourse. Then, using inductive coding, the categories of openness, dialogic discourse were distinguished: (1) empathetic, (2) agitation for duty, (3) aid discourse; and divisive discourse: (1) crisis and (2) polarising discourse.

Results

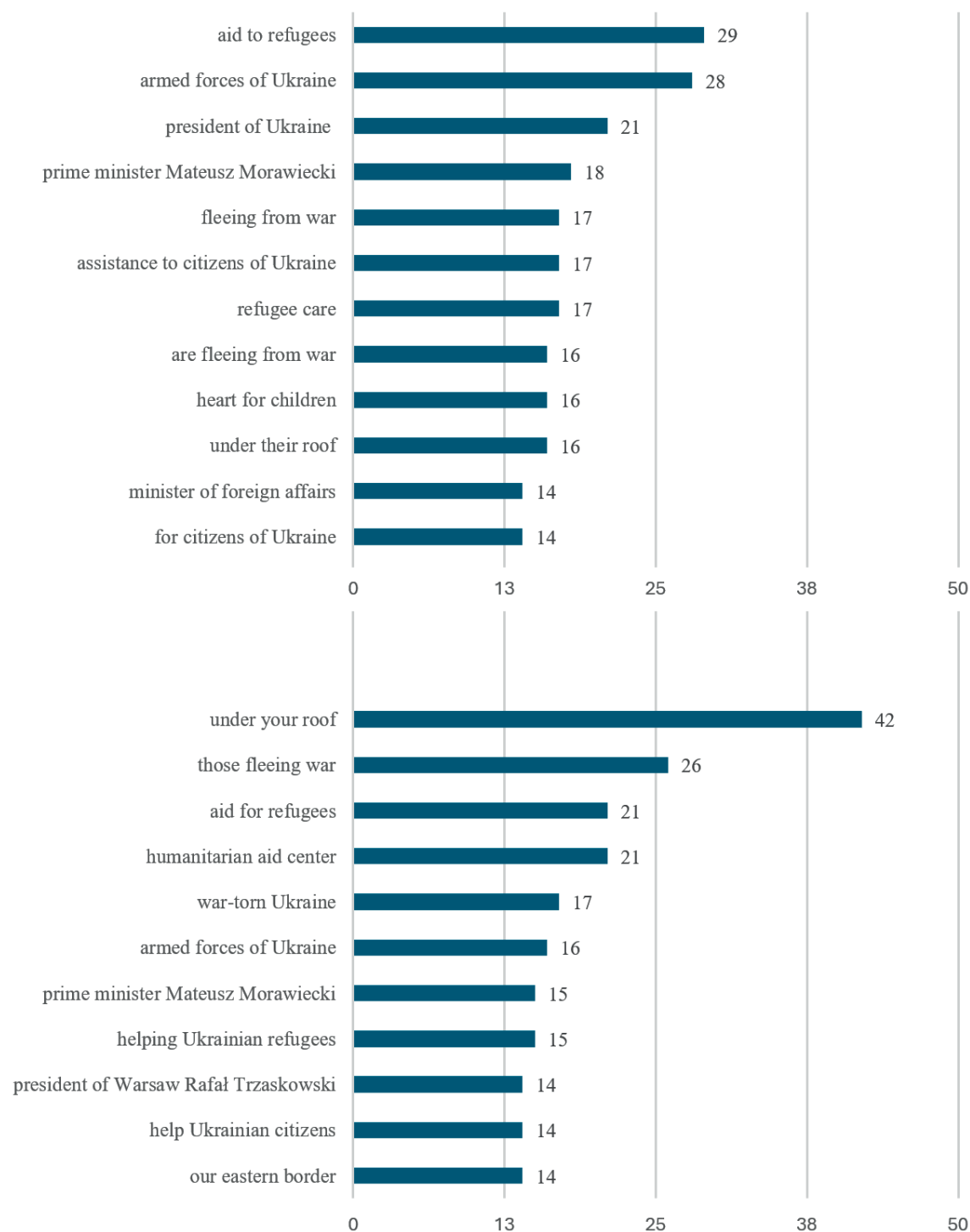
Quantitative results

Quantitative analysis showed that the articles of “Fakt” contained 4,307 unique words, and the TTR was 0.0403. The texts of “Super Express” consisted of 4,957 unique words. In this case, the TTR was 0.0392. The result indicates a marginally higher degree of lexical variation in the “Fakt” materials.

Apart from the words (“refugees”, “war”, “Ukraine”) directly resulting from the key terms searched for, the phrase “help” dominated 79.7% of the texts from “Fakt” and 78.1% of “Super Express” in both titles. The phrase “may” appearing in the examined texts is noteworthy. It appears in the context of activities that refugees could do after crossing the border, like filling in an application, collecting or buying food, and applying for assistance. Seventy-three point two percent (73.2%) of articles “Fakt” and 53.4% of “Super Express” articles feature a theme related to children (tragic conditions during the Russian invasion or their escape to Poland). The editors also devoted considerable space to the fate of women. The women’s theme appeared in 39.3% of articles in “Fakt” and 29.9% in “Super Express”. In addition to the phrase refugee, newcomers from Ukraine were often written about as persons, personifying the stories (73.2% of “Fakt” and 68.8% in the competing title, respectively).

An analysis of word combinations (phrases) allows us to note that “Super Express” far more often published texts that drew attention to the fact that Polish citizens took Ukrainian refugees under their roof (Figure 1).

The quantitative study sheds light on slight differences in “Fakt” and “Super Express’s” approaches to reporting the Ukrainian refugee crisis. In addition to focusing on refugees, their fate, and the role of Poles in helping and welcoming Ukrainians into their homes, journalists exposed the activity and decisions of political actors, the situation on the front,

Figure 1. Most frequently appeared word combinations (phrases) [N]

Source: own elaboration based on “Fakt” and “Super Express” (February 24-March 23, 2022).

and Russia's military influence. The analysis of word and phrase frequencies provided a starting point for qualitative research and a basis for interpretation of the results of the qualitative analysis.

Qualitative results

Qualitative studies of the tabloid content allowed us to specify the following types of discourse: (1) open, dialogic discourse, including (a) empathetic discourse, (b) agitating for duty, (c) aid discourse, and (d) refugee discourse; and (2) divisive discourse: (a) crisis discourse and (b) polarisation discourse.

Empathic discourse

The key category of openness discourse was empathetic discourse. This is how we can describe the tabloids' communication of the situation faced by the people of Ukraine, especially refugees with the outbreak of war. According to the slogan that was revealed in the first period of the war ("Solidarity with Ukraine"), the dominant subcategories were solidarity, kindness, helpfulness, openness, selflessness, and generosity of the Poles. The narrative of "giving of oneself" and "boundless" dominated the articles. Support was also expressed symbolically – the tabloids wrote, among other things, about the placement of Ukrainian national colours in various places and contexts. The adopted nomenclature: "Guests from Ukraine" and "Friends of Ukrainians" (capitalised) indicated that Ukrainian refugees were given a certain status – that of a temporary and supportive neighbour. The situation was often illustrated from the perspective of a Ukrainian, who was written about as "just like us".

The empathetic message was particularly characterised by emotionalisation, which was achieved with the use of specific language ("sea of tears", "heart wrenching"), but also through the choice of emotionalising topics undertaken by tabloids, such as, in particular, the issues of children, e.g., children from orphanages, sick children, sick adults, and suffering animals of refugees. It was written that Poles prayed for Ukrainians, organised collections of donations and money, manifested solidarity with them in the streets, helped them materially as volunteers, hosted them in their homes, and were donors, sponsors, etc. The discourse referred to the themes of World War II, especially the history of the ghetto and Jewish escapes, comparing the situation of the Russian attack to nazism.

Agitating for duty

A feature of the agitating for duty discourse was exhortations to help, to understand the situation, and to create circumstances, as it were, in which passivity was impossible. Articles often included ethical formulations: one should help, one must help, we must help, we cannot not help, etc. On the one hand, this was accompanied by a sense of necessity (Poles and Poland must help because they are a border country); on the other hand, the moral obligation to help and fraternity, ("stand by each other") was marked, which was especially the case with Christian churches, mainly Catholic, but was also accompanied by exhortations from local and central authorities, local government organisations, celebrities, and other individuals. Texts abounded with words pointing to the impossibility of a scenario other than relief: among other things, one wrote about "passing the test"

(by implication: of decency and heart), the need for Poles and Ukrainians to unite in this situation, and reliability.

This was augmented by descriptions of the tragedy and drama of the situation (like “a catastrophic film with a vision of the apocalypse”), the great quantifiers used (everyone, always, everywhere). Tabloids provided detailed instructions on how to help. Over time, criticism of “bad Poles” (usurers, swindlers) appeared in the narrative, as well as the naturalisation of attitudes and behaviour, i.e. the assumption of automatic duty. The discourse turned into an assimilationist discourse. For example, the personal needs of Ukrainian construction workers, drivers, or doctors were pointed out. The anti-Russian narrative became categorical. Publishers did not agree with the “bestial attack of aggression”, and events were given a global and historical character, treating this as an attack on the post-USSR “the new world order” and indicating the hope that Poles, in the event of aggression, would receive the same help.

Aid discourse

Aid discourse should be understood as any information regarding the aid provided by Poland and Poles. In addition to the catalogue of facilitations and bonuses that could be generated in the course of the analysis, as well as detailed instructions on how to proceed to take advantage of them, the aid discourse was dominated by the subcategory of readiness. Poles were ready to help, and authorities were ready with help. Efficient action was communicated. Poles were mobilised. Actions were spontaneous and dynamic; “no limits”, and the pace was extremely fast. It was pointed out how the needs of Ukrainians were being met and implemented. Morale was described as high, and Poland was friendly to refugees. A key role in aid was played by “ordinary people”. Over time, pathos and cloying narratives began to appear in the narrative. The generosity was exaggeratedly described, pointing to the immediacy and automaticity of the helpers’ actions. Many metaphors were used to indicate the special role of Poland (“safe haven”) and Poles who were generous and self-sacrificing (even sandwiches were made “with all their hearts”). Moralising and poetising the image of heroes was present (e.g., those who go with convoys to Ukraine).

There was also no shortage of a deliberate contrasting of, for example, neighbouring train stations (where refugees stayed) and shopping malls (where Poles spent their time pleasantly) as two different worlds, and boasting about the assistance provided by journalists. In a similar vein, there was also a subtype of discourse that can be described as celebrity discourse. Singers, actors, and partners of sports and political stars used the opportunities to showcase their humanitarian work. Companies, too, took the opportunity to promote themselves. It was reported that a grocery chain reduced prices in border stores. Other companies (e.g. clothing, transportation) ordered sponsored articles to mention their products or services on the occasion of the refugee crisis. Moreover, the tabloids cited both gossip sites, social media and promoted other media, such as entertainment TV shows and magazines.

Refugee discourse

The last type of openness discourse was the refugee discourse, that is, taking the refugee’s perspective and showing their emotions, situation, and plans. Above all, refugees were

presented as preoccupied with fear, anxiety, and apprehension. Often in the articles there was a theme of crying, both by children and adults; sadness; grief, and despair. Refugees, on the one hand, were presented as helpless, captive, and at the mercy of the Poles; and on the other hand, as well-organised, resourceful, and with concrete plans. Some assumed the temporary nature of the situation and makeshift solutions. Some declared concrete plans for settlement, emigration to western Europe, or further afield. Some showed sentimentality and a desire to return to their “beloved Ukraine”. Once the uncertainty was accentuated, at other times hope. Occasionally, Ukrainians’ gratitude to the Poles was mentioned. Undoubtedly, the dominant subcategory in the discourse was trauma of children and adults and a combination of horror and exhaustion.

Crisis discourse

The first face of divisive discourse was crisis discourse. The refugee situation became very difficult for the hosts over time and aid enthusiasm began to give way to rationalisation and expectation of external support. The rate of refugee growth accelerated, and yet there were declarations of unlimited aid possibilities. Meanwhile, hosts had to be confronted with reality, such as the inefficiency of train stations in major cities. Rarely did anyone in the tabloids cool the mood, such as the coordinator of one of the provincial governors, who urged others to consider the responsibility for the assistance offered, i.e. if one took in refugees on one’s own, one had to provide for them later.

It was written that the coordination effort was enormous, yet often ineffective. The need for resources was growing, and in some spheres there was a problem of excess (e.g., specific donations). Growing organisational and logistical difficulties were written about in the tabloids. Local authorities began to demand first the support of the central authorities and changes in the regulations enabling aid, and later the help of the European Union and the United Nations. A crisis of aid capacity became apparent (“total chaos”, “total confusion”). Medics began to fear the inefficiency of the Polish oncology system. There was a shortage of doctors. Local authorities also expected long-term strategies to be adopted (in the labour market, education, social system, etc.). As a response to this, the special act prepared by the parliament created a new crisis. There were accusations by the opposition against those in power of exploiting the situation for legal abuses. At the same time, the tabloids also began to write about Poles performing unethical (usury, stretching) or punishable (rape, theft) occasional acts on Ukrainians.

Polarised discourse

The polarised discourse concerned those issues that can be described as dividing society. The first dissonance appeared at the very beginning, when fear (e.g., of the residents of the border town of Medyka) and the need to support (“you have to help”) were juxtaposed. The refugees were presented as a large group of mothers with children. Meanwhile, among the refugees were men, Ukrainians (which was not written about at the beginning), and men from different parts of the world. It became dangerous on the streets of border towns, such as Przemyśl. Fear (“people are just scared”) appeared among border residents. Tabloids denounced information about alleged rapes and thefts. There were acts of aggression against dark-skinned emigrants, allegations of usury and extortion. At the same time, the

tabloids used outdated cases in their descriptions (e.g., loans, so-called “instant loans”) and mixed outdated cases with actual abuses. They wrote about the reluctance to rent apartments to foreigners and the increase in rental prices for Poles as well, such as in Warsaw.

One of the contentious issues was also the aforementioned matter of so-called readiness to help refugees. The authorities communicated preparedness, and the situation sometimes presented itself differently. The narrative of full readiness was opposed by volunteer groups, who, when the authorities took credit for it, felt unappreciated. The situation at the border was also used for other purposes. For example, one social activist equated the situation of war refugees with that of emigrants on the Polish-Belarusian border, demanding equal treatment for all emigrants. The problem of “disappearing COVID-19” was also recognised. The approach to strictures and vaccinations was liberalised, without requiring anything in this regard from refugees, concluding in a moralistic tone to put yourself in the place of war victims. The divisions culminated in a discussion in the parliament on the special act, which took the form of a quarrel, including accusations of agency by opposition deputies. Polish citizens, meanwhile, began to fear impediments in access to health care resulting from the equalisation of Poles and Ukrainians in this regard.

Discussion and conclusions

The analysis conducted indicates the presence of a two-fold discourse in the first month of the war in Polish online tabloids: openness and divisive. Quantitative analysis based on word and phrase frequency indicated the openness discourse is the quantitatively dominant. Nearly 80% of the articles examined contained the word “help”. The analysis also showed a significant presence of word combinations such as caring for a refugee, taking someone into their home, or giving a heart to children. According to qualitative analysis, the openness discourse took the form of empathetic, agitating for duty, aid and refugee discourse. The divisive discourse occurred much less frequently and took the form of crisis or polarising discourse. It should be noted that the two discourses interpenetrated each other and were present in both tabloids analysed. Significantly, some themes also evolved, from emotional, pathos-filled and mass “aid enthusiasm” to slightly more subdued, rational and somewhat critical depictions of the presented issue.

The research conducted is consistent with previous findings regarding the positive portrayal of Russian-Ukrainian war refugees. Refugees from Ukraine, unlike refugees from Asia and Africa, are treated explicitly as victims of war who should be helped, rather than a potential threat to the local community (De Coninck 2023; el-Nawawy & Elmasry 2024; Moise et al. 2024; Zawadzka-Paluektau 2022). The findings also confirm an observation regarding the sexuality of refugees. Consistent with previous findings, women and children are typically portrayed as victims of conflict (Kotilainen & Pellander 2022) in contrast to (some) men being a potential source of danger. In this context a crime, including sexual crime, is emphasised (Koch et al. 2020).

The research conducted partially confirms the previous findings of the change in the way refugee crises are reported in the media under the influence of the duration of the conflict. As in the case of coverage of the “European Refugee Crisis”, after the initial phase of an enthusiastic aid narrative, welfare themes are being introduced into the tabloids (Van Hootegeem & Meuleman 2019). A number of other findings from earlier studies were

confirmed to some degrees, including the way in which welfare discourse is constructed based on the figure of the victim of unjust violence, who should be helped in accordance with a moral obligation (Van Hootegeem & Meuleman 2019). The introduction of a rationality interpretive frame in the face of the growing organisational challenges of hosting large numbers of refugees (Triandafyllidou 2017) and the existing gap in media discourse between the narrative and experienced border (Chouliaraki & Musarò 2017) was confirmed also. The media's willingness to expose examples of anti-refugee behaviour (Zawadzka-Paluckta 2022) and the empathisation of refugees through the evocation of significant historical events (Seo & Kavakli 2022) were present.

The manner of reporting in the two tabloids analysed should be considered consistent, which does not support other findings of differences in the way events were reported between different tabloids (Magin & Stark 2015; Troszyński & El-Ghamar 2022). Moreover, the results of our research deny how tabloids provide images of migration pushed by the authorities (Matthews & Brown 2012). The opposite appears to be true, i.e., media images of the situation at the border pushed the political decisions made (Digidiki et al. 2024). Moreover, contrary to previous findings (Krzyżanowski et al. 2018), our research, like other studies on refugees from Ukraine (De Coninck 2023; el-Nawawy & Elmasry 2024; Moise et al. 2024), shows that Europe, faced with the Russian threat, has begun to solidify rather than divide.

Returning to the research question posed at the outset, it can be argued that the tabloid refugee discourse of the first days of the Russian-Ukrainian war was shaped in Poland both within the framework of openness, empathising humanitarianism; and divisiveness, polarisation and crises. In each of the two types of discourse, specific types can be distinguished, which are intertwined with each other, although in quantitative terms the open discourse dominates over the divisive one. The discourse shaped in this way was part of the mediatisation of the war, being also largely part of the so-called "arrested war" (Hoskins & O'Loughlin 2015). In the tabloids, the materials varied in status, although in sum they coincided with the narrative of the authorities and the dominant social discourse of not questioning the aid provided.

It is worth noting the limitations of our research, including the restriction to one type of media. It does not allow us to compare, for example, broadsheets and tabloids (Greussing & Boomgaarden 2017) and discern possible differences in the ways refugee crises are reported (Hameleers 2019) or the lack thereof. The studies conducted also preclude cross-national comparisons (Berry et al. 2016; Moise et al. 2024; Van Hootegeem & Meuleman 2019). It would be desirable to conduct future studies focused on other countries hosting refugees during the first phase of the full-scale Ukrainian-Russian conflict, especially Hungary, Moldova, and Slovakia.

Previous research on migration crises speaks to the narrowing of narrative frames over time and the media's tendency to portray the long-term consequences of managing migration and the expenses associated with the process (Greussing & Boomgaarden 2017). According to our research, the tabloids have been moving toward rationalising ecstatic humanitarianism over time, but the diversity within topics has been increasing rather than decreasing. The research caesura adopted, however, did not allow us to determine changes over a longer time frame, hence it would be valuable to examine longer periods falling within different phases of the war.

Similarly, many studies deal with giving voice to refugees. In host countries, they are most often referred to as “host” representatives, and if refugees are already given a voice, it tends to be heard from men (Georgiou & Zaborowski 2017; Zawadzka-Palucka 2022). Our research did not consider this thread. In addition, on the basis of the research conducted, it was not possible to clearly answer the question of a new phase of mediatization of the war being present (Nilsson & Ekman 2024), because the research covers only a sample of the narrative of the Russian-Ukrainian war and focuses on the perspective of one host country, hence continued research on the phases of war mediatization would be advisable.

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