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Between Solidarity and Anxiety: Populist Radical Right Narratives on Ukrainian Refugees in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

Populist radical right parties across Europe have consistently capitalized on refugee crises to advance anti-immigrant agendas. By employing extensive content analysis of social media posts from February 2022, the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war, to March 2023, this article examines how Bulgarian, Czech, German and Polish populist radical right actors discursively contest and reinvent the legitimacy of Ukrainian war refugees. Two dominant narratives emerge. First, radical right politicians assessed the legitimacy of seeking refuge based on ethnicity, reasons for flight and gender, initially welcoming Ukrainians as vulnerable Europeans who needed immediate protection. Second, radical right rhetoric quickly endorses nativist connotations. Despite their cultural proximity, war refugees are now portrayed as an imminent threat to security, welfare and national identity. This study sheds light on the consistency of the discursive tactics populist radical right parties employ when shaping public opinion on solidarity, national identity, immigration and foreign policy.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe; Russo-Ukrainian war; refugees; populist radical right parties

The start of the Russo-Ukrainian war confronted the European Union (EU) with two unprecedented challenges: managing the largest population displacement in Europe since World War II and swiftly restructuring its foreign policy towards Russia. Between February and March 2022, more than 3.3 million people fled Ukraine, primarily to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Despite logistical struggles, host nations displayed remarkable solidarity and generosity. This behaviour stands in stark contrast to the public discourses of 'invasions' and 'illegal migration' often associated with Syrian refugees.

Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov's February 2022 statement exemplifies this shift, emphasizing the intelligence of fleeing Ukrainians and dismissing potential

concerns about their integration: 'These are not the refugees we are used to. These are Europeans, intelligent, educated people, some of them are programmers … This is not the usual refugee wave of people with an unclear past. None of the European countries are worried about them' (Radio Free Europe 2022).

An increasingly influential political force in both national and EU institutions, populist radical right (PRR) parties present a compelling research puzzle when it comes to their reactions towards Ukrainian refugees. Populist actors position themselves as champions of the 'pure people' against the 'corrupt elite' and assert that they are the authentic voice and representation of the 'volonté générale (general will)' (Mudde 2007: 23). PRR parties have also historically championed anti-EU and anti-Atlanticist positions, expressed admiration for President Putin's conservative nationalism and portrayed non-European refugees as cultural and religious threats (De Coninck 2023; Ivaldi and Zankina 2023). Their dramatic reversal on Russia and potential acceptance of Ukrainian refugees as culturally compatible 'European Christians' fleeing Russian aggression merits scholarly attention.

This article examines whether PRR parties have maintained solidarity with Ukrainian refugees or attempted to undermine humanitarian efforts. Through a systematic analysis of PRR discourses across several CEE national contexts, this research reveals that populist radical right actors remained consistent in employing frames questioning the legitimacy of refugees, portraying them as 'bogus' opportunists who endanger societal cohesion. Despite an initial display of solidarity, PRR parties quickly pivoted to depictions of welfare abuse and criminality, echoing narratives deployed against Middle Eastern and North African refugees.

This article offers two key theoretical contributions. First, it examines the internal dynamics of populist radical right parties (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; Mudde 2007), specifically focusing on the ideological consistency of anti-refugee rhetoric and its dissemination to the public. As immigration is a highly salient issue for these parties, it is important to observe the discursive strategies PRR actors employ to maintain their distinction from mainstream parties and to reinforce their core anti-immigration voter base.

Second, this study advances emerging scholarship on populist foreign policy and its impact on European foreign and security policy cohesion (Wajner and Giurlando 2024). Before the Russo-Ukrainian war, populist radical right actors openly displayed sympathy with Russia, criticizing EU sanctions and disrupting consensus-building on the EU level. Notably, PRR politicians have consistently expressed support for Russia through symbolic and concrete actions such as frequent visits to Moscow, meetings with United Russia representatives and participating as observers in the Crimea referendum and elections in Donetsk and Luhansk (EPDE n.d.; Joswig 2022). Since the onset of the war, Russia-friendly voices in Europe have not moved to the political margins. Rather, they have masked their foreign policy positioning behind negative rhetoric towards Ukrainian refugees, thereby presenting Russia as an important economic partner and questioning the legitimacy of Ukraine's cause.

To understand how PRR parties engage in discursive contestation over the status of Ukrainian refugees, this research analyses social media content from five prominent CEE parties – Alternative for Germany (AfD) (Germany), Revival (Bulgaria), Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and Trikolora Movement (Czechia) and Confederation

Liberty and Independence (Poland). These cases provide a valuable comparative perspective on CEE societies, most affected by Ukrainian refugee inflows, and with special historical and economic ties to Russia.

The article proceeds with a theoretical framework, rooted in extant research on how PRR parties portray migrants and refugees as 'out-group' threats. Subsequent sections detail the case selection and social media methodology, followed by an analysis of narratives about Ukrainian refugee legitimacy and perceived threats. The conclusion explores broader implications for understanding how PRR parties contest and reinvent notions of solidarity, national belonging and foreign policy.

Anti-refugee narratives and victimhood politics: theoretical considerations

This study uses constructivist theory to explore how populist radical right parties create and reinvent identities of belonging and threat, using cultural, historical and social contexts to legitimize their own anti-refugee and foreign policies. Discourse plays an essential part in constructing, maintaining and transforming sociopolitical realities (Wagenaar 2014). Language practices shape individual and collective identities, determine what counts as legitimate knowledge and establish power structures by normalizing certain worldviews while marginalizing others (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Foucault 1972 [2002]; Wodak 2009). Populist actors actively construct and mediate performances of crisis, capitalizing on external socioeconomic and environmental changes (refugee waves, financial crises, epidemics) (Moffitt 2015). Populist radical right parties skilfully nurture a sense of crisis within public consciousness, juxtaposing 'native' citizens against 'dangerous' outsiders and political elites who allegedly protect them. Xenophobic sentiments rise alongside radical right narratives that champion preservation of a culturally 'pure' nation, while vigorously rejecting ethnic and religious diversity (Buonfino 2004).

The Russo-Ukrainian war presents PRR parties with a complex crisis environment that could advance their political interests. While the conflict creates opportunities to stoke fear and resentment towards Ukrainian refugees, traditional PRR anti-refugee rhetoric – which typically targets non-European, non-Christian, non-white and male immigrants as undeserving of protection – may not readily apply. Ukrainians, sharing cultural, ethnic and religious characteristics with host nations, challenge the established radical right discursive framework of undesirable outsiders.

However, pro-Russian PRR parties have adapted towards fleeing Ukrainians with strategic problem reorientation, focusing on domestic socioeconomic impacts. As Central and East European households face rising food and energy costs, these parties have promised to safeguard the common people by criticizing asylum policies and linking Ukrainian refugees to economic insecurity and declining social status. This approach allows PRR politicians to maintain their anti-refugee stance while avoiding overt criticism of military aid to Ukraine and condemnation of Russian aggression.

PRR parties have also weaponized disinformation to undermine support for Ukraine by portraying refugees as threats to national security. CEE societies have been particularly targeted by Russian disinformation narratives, such as claims that paint President Vladimir Putin as a peacekeeper, while portraying Ukrainians as fascists and criminals spreading Russophobia (Wenzel et al. 2024). PRR actors echo and further

bolster the spread of these disinformation messages. Depicting Ukrainian refugees as threatening and 'undeserving' of protection may dissuade public support for Ukraine in the war. Recent public opinion shifts reflect these influences. In Czechia, support for 'total political and economic isolation of Russia' dropped from 63% to 49% between spring and autumn 2022, while opposition to accepting Ukrainian refugees doubled from 13% to 27% (Červenka 2022). Similarly, empathy for Ukraine among Bulgarian citizens declined from 32.4% to 23.1% between April and October 2022, while belief that 'the Ukrainian government is fascist' increased from 34.9% to 41.2%. Positive attitudes with refugees also reached a low of 25.8% (ESTAT Research and Consultancy 2022).

This trend of 'refugee fatigue' has emerged in German and Polish societies – support for Ukrainian asylum seekers fell from initial highs of 60% and 65% respectively in March 2022 to 49% by July (YouGov 2022). German polls registered growing demand for 'Good relations with Putin' (17% to 22%) and declining support for 'Confrontational policy toward Russia' (35% to 26%) between May and October 2022 (GLES 2022). Moreover, significant minorities in Czechia and Poland – 43% and 38% respectively – associated Ukrainian refugees with criminal activity (Wenzel et al. 2024).

Discursive narratives

Populist radical right parties may exhibit both positive and negative attitudes towards Ukraine refugees. Drawing on scholarship examining PRR responses to out-groups (refugees, immigrants and minorities), this section discusses the expected dominant narratives and their underlying frames. The first narrative evaluates the legitimacy of seeking refuge through four distinct frames: cultural compatibility, reasons of flight, gender dynamics and viability for on-site assistance. The expectation here is that Ukrainians would be presented positively as acceptable and deserving refugees because of their cultural (European) and religious (Christian) proximity to the host nations, and because they represent a vulnerable population of women and children.

The second narrative fosters perceptions of threat to host nations by suggesting that Ukrainian refugees: (1) undermine internal stability, (2) espouse fascist ideologies and (3) pose socioeconomic burdens. These framings occur against a backdrop of deteriorating living conditions in Central and Eastern Europe – exacerbated by trade depression, war-related production costs and sluggish recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank 2023). Given CEE societies' challenges with minority integration, the analysis also examines how historically targeted minorities such as the Roma and ethnic German Russian repatriates (Aussiedler) have been incorporated into the radical right framing of Ukrainian refugees.

'Legitimacy of seeking refuge' narrative
When evaluating the deservingness of refugees, a commonly invoked narrative centres on the depiction of 'bogus' asylum seekers, entering the EU through irregular channels, practising 'asylum shopping' and motivated by economic factors rather than genuine need for protection (Neumayer 2005). The cause of flight influences public opinion, with voters perceiving those fleeing war or civil conflict as more deserving compared to those escaping economic hardship (Bansak et al. 2016).

Gender, ethnicity and religion further influence perceptions of refugee legitimacy. While asylum for vulnerable women and children is often unquestioned, fleeing young men are portrayed as threatening 'asylum shoppers' (Vollmer and Karakayali 2018; Von Hermanni and Neumann 2019). Europeans consistently exhibit more accepting attitudes towards European and Christian migrants compared to those from non-European and Muslim backgrounds (Bansak et al. 2016; De Coninck 2020). PRR parties strategically employ religion and ethnicity to construct frames of potential cultural conflicts, rising crime and even population replacement, thus establishing migrant hierarchies that prioritize white Christian Europeans (Koppel and Jakobson 2023).

This narrative is particularly evident in Central and Eastern Europe, where PRR politicians in the Visegrad countries (Czechia, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia) maintain strong anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant positions, despite having small immigrant populations. Muslim refugees are portrayed as threats to citizens' daily lives and national identity (Stojarová 2018). During the 2015 'refugee crisis', Hungarian and Polish political actors characterized Muslim asylum seekers as potential terrorists and threats to women's safety (Goździak and Márton 2018). Highlighting the impact of perceived cultural and religious compatibility on public attitudes, David De Coninck (2023) suggests that EU citizens have reacted more positively to Ukrainians than to Afghan refugees.

'Threat to the host nation' narrative

Philanthropic relationships can be delicate, as host citizens who show solidarity implicitly expect gratitude and responsible conduct from refugees. Welcoming culture can quickly devolve into hostility, as seen after the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks and the Cologne New Year's Eve sexual assaults. These events transformed narratives of deserving refugees into suspicions of 'bogus refugees' and 'economic migrants' exploiting solidarity and the welfare state (Vollmer and Karakayali 2018).

Welfare chauvinism frames, casting asylum seekers as 'social parasites', have permeated public perceptions of immigration (Burgoon and Rooduijn 2021; Reeskens and Van der Meer 2019). Welfare chauvinism posits an inherent conflict between immigration and welfare state sustainability, portraying migrants as cynically abusing social benefits and privileges intended for contributing citizens (Pellegata and Visconti 2021; Rathgeb 2020). Thus, PRR advocates of a protectionist welfare state argue for restricting welfare access to 'deserving' natives, while imposing stringent measures on those deemed untrustworthy and 'parasitic' (Enggist and Pinggera 2022).

Fear of economic decline and social status anxiety provide one pathway to explaining the increasing support for populist radical right parties (Gidron and Hall 2017; Kurer 2020). Perceived personal financial decline has a negative impact on refugee approval (Von Hermanni and Neumann 2019), especially when coupled with an ongoing crisis. Recent research suggests a link between rising rent costs, anti-refugee sentiments and electoral support for PRR parties, particularly when housing affordability creates distributional conflicts (Cavaille and Ferwerda 2023; Held and Patana 2023). Thus, PRR messaging resonates strongly when depicting natives as 'second-class citizens' disadvantaged by refugee assistance programmes (Perocco and Della Puppa 2023).

Beyond socioeconomic issues, radical right discourses portray foreigners as threats to security and national identity. Framing immigration as a cause of increased criminality has been an effective electoral strategy (Rydgren 2008), shaping public opinion and decreasing asylum approval (Von Hermanni and Neumann 2019). Law and order concerns, such as adherence to social norms, destruction of private property and bodily harm, are often linked to ethnic, racial and religious minorities, introducing unfamiliar lifestyles into the homeland.

Associating immigration with national identity erosion and demographic replacement have become particularly potent tools for PRR mobilization (Hameleers 2019). PRR actors in Central and Eastern Europe cultivate fears of shifting power dynamics between majority and minority populations, emphasizing economic (minorities favoured in social welfare) and demographic threats (a targeted population replacement) (Bustikova 2016). Traditionally targeting historical minorities such as Roma and Jews, post-2015 rhetoric has expanded against non-European and Muslim immigrants. For instance, Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice parties have emphasized concerns that Muslim refugees intend to 'conquer' Europe by bearing enough children to replace the native population (Goździak and Márton 2018).

Special framing: differentiated treatment of historical minorities

Populist radical right parties have focused on two major European minorities affected by the Russo-Ukrainian war – Ukrainian Roma and Russian-German repatriates (Aussiedler). The Roma, Europe's largest ethnic minority, are concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe.[1] They have historically faced stereotyping as unadaptable, lazy, criminally inclined, welfare-dependent and posing a demographic threat (Kende et al. 2017; Weinerová 2014). Populist radical right parties across Bulgaria (Ataka), Czechia (SPD), Hungary (Jobbik) and Slovakia (Slovak National Party) have successfully mobilized anti-Roma sentiment (Fekete 2014; Pirro 2014).

The Russian-German repatriates represent a crucial demographic for Germany's AfD party. Since the 1980s, approximately 3 million 'late resettlers' from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have emigrated to Germany. During the initial years of integration, they experienced resentment from native Germans due to perceived competition over limited resources such as employment and housing (Betz 1990; Matejskova 2013). Since its inception, the AfD has actively engaged with this community through Russian-language manifestos and intra-party groups like the 'Russian-Germans in the AfD' (Kamenova 2023). The 'late resettlers' have become a significant AfD electoral base, with 15–18% support rates (Spies et al. 2022).

Given the minorities' importance for PRR actors, this study analyses their portrayal in relation to Ukrainian refugees on social media, examining whether ethnic Ukrainian Roma face discrimination despite their war refugee status; and how Russian-German citizens are depicted in relation to Ukrainian asylum policies.

Research design

Using discourse analysis, this study examines how populist radical right parties use social media to justify and contest the status of Ukrainian war refugees, focusing on discursive frames of belonging and threat (Wodak 2009).

Central and Eastern European post-communist states provide an important methodological environment due to their economic vulnerability to the war in terms of trade and energy dependence, and susceptibility to Russian disinformation activities, stemming from ethno-linguistic and historical realities. This research analyzes five opposition PRR parties: Revival (Bulgaria), Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and Trikolora Citizens' Movement (Czechia), Alternative for Germany (AfD) (Germany) and the Confederation Liberty and Independence (Poland). Governing PRR parties like the Polish Law and Justice are excluded to avoid potential bias from justifying governmental decisions for refugee protection policies.

Social media provides a convenient and uncritical platform for PRR politicians to bypass mainstream media outlets and directly communicate their messages to a targeted audience (Blassnig et al. 2019; Engesser et al. 2017). Data was collected from Facebook, X and Telegram, accounting for diverse communication preferences and bans on certain platforms.[2] For instance, Facebook banned the Confederation between January 2022 and March 2023, while some AfD politicians prefer encrypted messaging on Telegram. The textual data was systematically compiled from party and elected officials' accounts, including both the unadulterated party positions and the perspectives of individual politicians, which may deviate from the party line.[3]

The data corpus includes 459 unique posts from 24 February 2022, the onset of the Russian invasion, to 31 March 2023, encompassing a full year of refugee accommodation: AfD – 235 posts across all platforms; Confederation – 115 posts from X; SPD and Trikolora – 64 posts, Facebook and X; Revival – 45 posts from Facebook. Only posts referring to Ukrainian refugees were selected. The following keywords were used to filter social media data: 'refugees', 'migrants', 'immigrants', 'asylum seekers', 'Ukrainians' and 'Ukrainian citizens'. Additional keyword search was conducted to identify posts that mention Russian-Germans and Roma in connection with the war refugees.

This study employs deductive reasoning with two pre-specified discursive narratives based on scholarship of xenophobic rhetoric and sentiments discussed in the theoretical considerations section. The 'Legitimacy of Seeking Refuge' narrative examines four frames referring to: (1) cultural, ethnic and religious proximity of Ukrainians to the host nation; (2) valid asylum reasons such as fleeing violent conflict; (3) gender and age considerations with women and children as acceptable refugees; and (4) preference for local assistance over refugee accommodation.[4]

The second narrative, 'Threat to the Host Nation', explores three frames of threat: (1) internal stability risks produced by crime, identity erosion or potential demographic replacement; (2) violations of social norms such as support of Nazism and fascism; and (3) socioeconomic pressures such as refugees exploiting limited resources and social benefits. The frame 'References to fascism and Nazism' is the only data-driven coding category as prior research has not linked anti-refugee discourse to depictions of fascism or Nazism.

Frames are mutually exclusive. Thus, posts may contain multiple codes, but specific phrases or words cannot be coded into several categories as they carry a single meaning. To mitigate biased interpretations, the coding was done simultaneously by the author and a research assistant. The author translated Bulgarian and German posts into English, while the research assistant handled Czech and Polish translations. Translations aimed to preserve original meanings and idiomatic expressions.

Case country selection

This study focuses on four CEE states most affected by the Russo-Ukrainian war – with high Ukrainian refugee influx and high energy dependence on Russia. Poland, Germany, Czechia and Bulgaria led the EU in providing asylum or temporary protection for Ukrainians (UNHCR 2023), while relying on Russian natural gas that constituted a substantial portion of their domestic consumption until 2022 – from 50–60% in Poland and Germany to 80–90% in Bulgaria and Czechia (IEA 2023). The war has exacerbated post-pandemic economic pressures, with CEE households experiencing energy poverty and increased food prices (World Bank 2023).

These nations exhibit diverse historical and contemporary relations with Russia. Bulgarian society maintains Russophile sentiments, rooted in Tsarist Russia's support for independence from the Ottoman Empire. These sentiments are reinforced by the influences of the former communist Bulgarian Socialist Party and nationalist parties like Ataka and Revival. Russia's economic influence extended through tourism (approximately 13% Russian tourists) and energy (gas imports, ownership of petroleum refineries and nuclear plant fuel and technology) sectors (Lessenski 2015).

Similarly, Germany and Russia have established deep economic ties in the energy sector. Before the Russo-Ukrainian war, Germany was a major importer of Russian gas and a key participant in the Nord Stream 2 project. Historical complexities such as East Germany's communist legacy and the integration of Russian-speaking German resettlers since the 1980s influence public attitudes towards Russia.

Czech Russophile sentiments stem from the anti-Habsburg resistance and the belief that Russian tsarism would defend Slavic nations against Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian or German oppression. These sentiments were tempered by negative experiences during communism, especially the Soviet suppression of the 1968 Prague Spring. Today, pro-Russia stances are associated with the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) and the populist radical right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) (Bajda 2019).

Poland is an outlier on Russophile sentiments as Polish-Russian relations reflect persistent tensions. In the 1790s, the Polish kingdom was partitioned among Austria, Prussia and Russia, with Russia dominating Eastern Poland. The 19th century was marked by struggles for independence and repressions by Tsarist Russia. A similar cycle is observed with the Soviet occupation of Eastern Polish territories under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, until the Solidarity Movement challenged the communist regime in the 1980s (Ozbay and Aras 2008).

Selection of populist radical right parties

This study examines five opposition populist radical right parties in Central and Eastern Europe that have achieved significant electoral successes at national and EU levels. These parties have united in their efforts to reshape European policies, culminating in the establishment of the Europe of Sovereign Nations group in the European Parliament in July 2024. While these parties were not selected based on their pro-Russia stance, PRR actors tend to be more Russia-friendly than mainstream parties, as noted by Andreas Fagerholm (2024).

Bulgaria's pro-Russia Revival party, established in 2014, secured 14.6% in April 2023, becoming the third-largest parliamentary force. In Czechia, Tomio Okamura's anti-immigrant Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) has polled around 10–12% since its 2015 founding, recently strengthening its position through an alliance with the Trikolora Movement in 2023. The AfD, founded in 2013, stands out as the most successful radical right party in post-World War II German politics, winning seats in both the Bundestag and state parliaments. In Poland, the radical right alliance Confederation Liberty and Independence has established itself in the political landscape since its 2019 formation, securing 7% in the 2023 parliamentary election. In the June 2024 European Parliament elections, the parties gained significant electoral support: AfD with 16% (from 11% in 2019), Revival with 14% (from 1% in 2019), the Confederation with 12% (from 4.5% in 2019). Only the Czech SPD registered a slight decline in the European Parliamentary results – from 9% in 2019 to 5.7% in 2024.

Results: populist radical right rhetoric between solidarity and anxiety

The analysis examines two main narratives used by populist radical right parties to portray Ukrainian refugees (Table 1). The narrative on 'Legitimacy of Seeking Refuge' is predominantly employed during the initial months of the Russo-Ukrainian war (Figure 1). Ukrainian refugees were framed as culturally similar Europeans with legitimate reasons for fleeing. The German AfD and Polish Confederation contrasted fleeing Ukrainians with 'illegal economic migrants' from the Middle East and Northern Africa.

This positive narrative quickly gave way to negative rhetoric, questioning the need for protection of Ukrainian refugees (Figure 2). PRR actors actively participate in weaving frames of collective threat to the cultural, economic and social wellbeing of the nation. Discussions of internal stability issues such as petty crime, use of violence and fascist revisionist acts peaked in March 2022 and slowly lost relevance. However, frames of economic and social burdens, depicting Ukrainians as 'welfare tourists' enjoying privileged treatment, remained prevalent throughout the study period.

The AfD specifically focused on protecting ethnic German-Russians from collective blame and discrimination by national authorities and non-state actors. Additionally, Czech and German politicians singled out fleeing Ukrainian Roma as fraudulent, unassimilable and threatening to social cohesion.

Table 1. Percentage of Posts Referring to Specific Frames, per Country

Positive mentions	BG	CZ	DE	PL	Total
Narrative 1: Legitimacy of seeking refuge					
Cultural, ethnic and religious similarities	0	3	19	0.8	10
		(2)	(44)	(1)	*(47)*
Reason of flight	4	3	16	9	11
	(2)	(2)	(38)	(10)	(52)
Gender dynamics	0	3	19	2.6	10.6
		(2)	(44)	(3)	(49)
Demand for local help	0	1.5	5	0.8	3
		(1)	(12)	(1)	(14)
Negative mentions	**BG**	**CZ**	**DE**	**PL**	**Total**
Narrative 2: Threat to the host nation					
Ukrainians not 'real' refugees	24	22	12	2.6	12
	(11)	(14)	(28)	(3)	(56)
Undermining internal stability	33	23	5	32	17
	(15)	(15)	(12)	(37)	(79)
Special Frame: Threat to ethnic Russian minority	0	1.5	14	0	7
		(1)	(32)		(33)
References to fascism and Nazism	7	1.5	0	1.7	1
	(3)	(1)		(2)	(6)
Economic and social burden	55.5	72	47	56.5	54
	(25)	(46)	(111)	(65)	(247)
Special frame: Ukrainian Roma minority	0	25	8	0.8	8
		(16)	(18)	(1)	(35)

Notes: Country columns show the percentage of frames for each country's total social media posts. The number of posts is in brackets. The 'Total' column represents percentages from all 459 posts.

Narrative 1: Legitimacy of seeking refuge

Cultural, ethnic and religious similarities

Populist radical right parties share a vision of an overarching European identity grounded in Caucasian ethnicities, Judeo-Christian values and Greco-Latin civilizational roots. This perspective excludes 'others' as intrinsically unassimilable and threatening to European identity. Initial responses to Ukrainian refugees in March and April 2022 centred on this dichotomy of belonging.

PRR parties were quick to capitalize on Ukrainians, characterizing them as 'acceptable' refugees, while reinforcing their opposition to Syrian and Afghan asylum seekers. Ukrainians, according to these parties, differ significantly from the 2015 refugee waves, because they come from 'a very related circle of civilization' (#075, Trikolora) and are 'culturally close to us and easier to integrate' (#157, AfD).[5] In the symbolic checklist
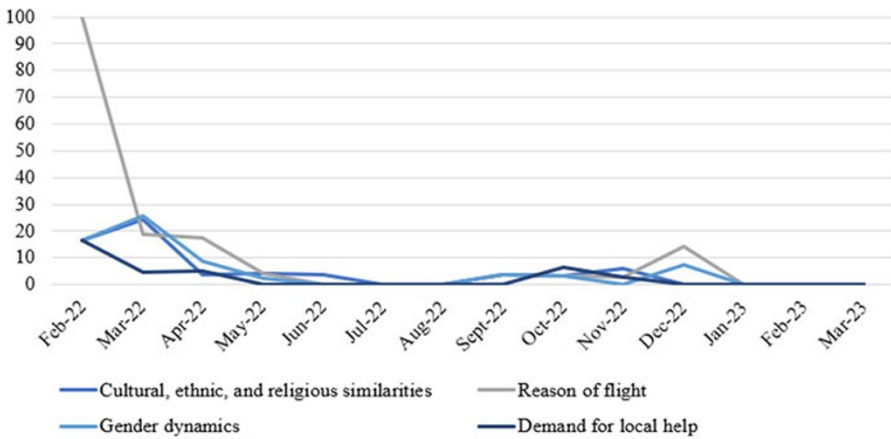
Figure 1. 'Legitimacy of Seeking Refuge': Frame Distribution of Posts as Percentage of Each Month
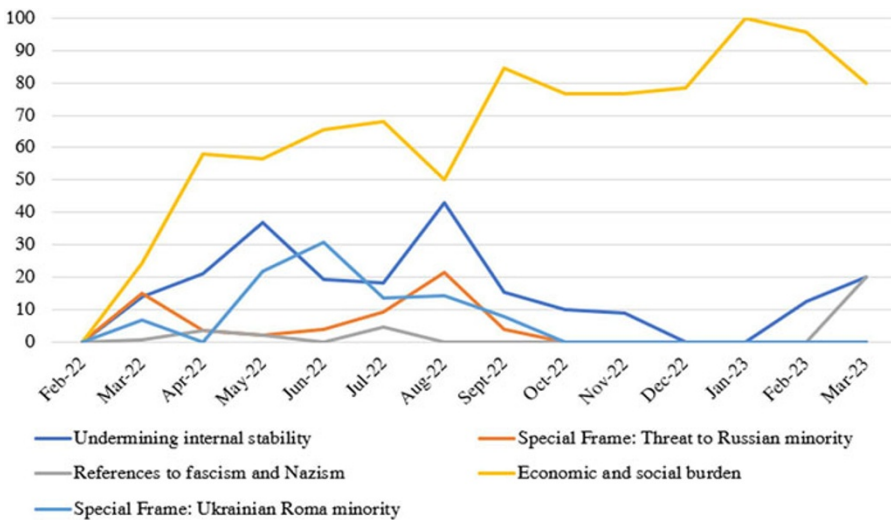

Figure 2. 'Threat to the Host Nation': Frame Distribution of Posts as Percentage of Each Month

of European belonging, cultural and ethnic proximity is a major factor legitimizing refuge. Ukrainians are European, Slavic and Western, while others are dismissed as 'clearly NOT of Caucasian descent' (#233, AfD), 'African adventurers' (#258, AfD) and socialized in 'backward structures' (#191, AfD). Alluding to the unproblematic integration of Ukrainians, Trikolora underscores historical Czech–Ukrainian bonds, forged through shared territories like Subcarpathian Rus and Eastern Galicia: 'Our ancestors lived for several generations in a joint state with a significant part of the Ukrainian population' (#107, Trikolora).

East German AfD politicians show particular originality in depicting 'undeserving' asylum seekers. Thuringian leader Björn Höcke refers to African students as 'magicians' transforming African passports into Ukrainian ones (#216, AfD) and derogatorily equates a chocolate marshmallow Mohrenkopf ('Blackamoor head') adorned with a Ukrainian flag to a Ukrainian student (#217, AfD).[6]

This deliberate visual choice questions the legitimacy of seeking refuge and demarcates the rigid boundaries of non-belonging, drawing parallels between fleeing African students and dark-skinned North African servants in wealthy European households from the 16th to the 18th centuries. To solidify this non-European and 'non-deserving' identity, Jürgen Braun describes fleeing men as 'Afrokrainer': 'This is a student from Ukraine who is not Ukrainian and therefore does not have to do military service against Putin's soldiers, preferring to travel to Germany instead' (#227, AfD).

While examining the discourse on perceived threat from non-Ukrainian refugees, two unexpected patterns emerge. First, PRR parties conflate religion and ethnicity when excluding non-Europeans, rarely juxtaposing Muslims with Christians. Rather, politicians tend to portray national identities that blur the boundaries between ethnicity, culture and religion (Cesari 2023). Labels such as 'Arab', 'African' or 'Asian' form a singular entity of 'undesirables', who supposedly do not fit within Western traditions and culture.

Second, only Bulgaria's Revival avoids discussing the difference between Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian refugees. Understanding this peculiarity merits further investigation, which is beyond the scope of this study. One plausible interpretation is their strong pro-Russian position – avoiding positive portrayals of fleeing Ukrainians in order not to challenge the spreading of Russian propaganda. Another interpretation could be Revival's tactical restraint on Islamophobic rhetoric, given Bulgaria's historical integration of Balkan Islamic and Turkish minorities (Rexhepi 2018). While other nationalist groups like VMRO–Bulgarian National Movement and Ataka express anti-minority sentiments towards Muslims, Jews and Roma, Revival – as a new political actor – may strategically adopt a moderate discourse, avoiding racist statements and appealing to a broader electorate.

Reason of flight

If we were to select one emblematic statement encapsulating the initial response of the populist radical right, it would be 'Ukrainian war refugees welcome – no place for social migrants!' (#111, AfD). This discourse introduces civilizational incompatibility and socioeconomic threat dimensions. Ukrainians are portrayed as 'suffering families' (#228, AfD), 'who may have already lost everything' (#373, Confederation). The Confederation draws a clear distinction between Ukrainian refugees and everyone else, seemingly disregarding the hardships non-Europeans have also faced during conflict: 'people who have lost their homes, who have lost their fathers, yes – bombs are now falling on their houses, tanks are driving over their cars' (#411, Confederation).

Conversely, non-European refugees are depicted as economic burdens, threatening the stability of the social welfare state: 'ruthless' and 'cunning economic migrants' (#413, #371, Confederation), accused of 'clogging up the system' (#226, AfD). The populist radical right de-emphasizes their need for protection and empathy, portraying them as opportunists seeking to accumulate more wealth: 'boys in designer clothes

with smartphones' (#077, SPD), 'free riders and knights of fortune' (#111, AfD) and 'prosperity seekers' (#263, AfD).

To emphasize the treacherous nature of 'African and Arab social migrants', Czech and German politicians insist 'real war refugees' must demonstrate legitimate flight reasons and intent to return home. Only Ukrainian refugees are seen to fit the criteria: 'After all, more Ukrainians, including mothers with children, are already returning to Ukraine than leaving, precisely because the areas they come from are safe, schools and shops are working there' (#095, SPD).

Gender dynamics

Radical right discourse has introduced gender-based criteria for 'refugee deservingness', asserting that only Ukrainian women and children are vulnerable and in need of protection. Those who do not meet this requirement are portrayed as detrimental to the host society or cowardly for fleeing. Trikolora (#075) favours 'mainly women and children … not cocky young men with contempt for our culture'. The AfD juxtaposes courageous Ukrainian men with the 'cowardly' behaviour of fleeing non-Ukrainians: 'The Ukrainian men bravely fight for their country and send their families to safety. The other gentlemen solve this – well – differently' (#252, AfD).

Men are depicted as posing greater economic and national security risks. They immediately transform into 'economic migrants' without legitimacy to seek asylum because they did not stay to defend their homeland. The AfD reinforces this negative perception by weaving in a narrative about Ukrainian women's safety in refugee centres. Echoing the discourse surrounding the 2015 Cologne New Year's Eve's sexual assaults, the AfD capitalizes on a similar story involving a Ukrainian girl. In mid-March 2022, German conservative and radical right news portals reported that two Nigerian and Tunisian men with Ukrainian passports allegedly raped an 18-year-old Ukrainian woman in a Dusseldorf refugee accommodation (*Junge Freiheit* 2022). Approximately 20% of AfD posts between 15 March and 30 April cited this report to bolster justifications of accepting only Ukrainian women and children: 'It is clear that no mass rapists come from Ukraine' (#110, AfD). This reference perpetuates the 'myth of the immigrant rapist', reducing refugees from diverse backgrounds into a singular frame of misogynist violent 'brown men' targeting vulnerable white women.

Demand for local help

In the first months of the Russo-Ukrainian war, PRR parties exhibited a clear preference for Ukrainians refugees. However, this welcoming attitude gradually shifted to reluctance and, in some cases, open hostility. Politicians consistently stressed the need to prioritize local assistance before accepting refugees. Both the Czech Trikolora and the German AfD direct responsibility to neighbouring countries like Poland as the 'first safe country beyond the border of Ukraine' (#106, Trikolora). Meanwhile, Polish politicians advocate direct aid to Ukraine rather than providing temporary asylum: 'It is not a good idea to react to the war in Ukraine by calling for more than 40 million Ukrainian citizens to come to Poland and other European Union countries. It's best to help on site wherever possible!' (#348, Confederation).

Some PRR politicians voice concerns about treating all Ukrainians as war refugees, arguing that the conflict is only concentrated in specific regions (#067, SPD; #106,

Trikolora). Bulgaria's Revival takes a more assertive stance, questioning the legitimacy of fleeing Ukrainians and claiming only Donbas residents are 'real' refugees: 'The real [refugees], the neediest and those who suffered the heaviest blows of the neo-fascist governments since 2014, this is the population of the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics! … But they cannot come to Bulgaria!' (#018, Revival).

Narrative 2: Threat to the host nation

Undermining internal stability

As the Russo-Ukrainian war progressed and more Ukrainians sought temporary protection in the EU, PRR parties began constructing negative frames reminiscent of those used towards Syrian and Afghan refugees in 2015. A prominent discursive tool employed to foster anti-Ukrainian sentiment is the narrative of fear.

From culturally close Europeans, Ukrainians are now depicted as norm breakers, unwilling to adapt to local customs and 'abusing people's compassion and kindness' (#008, Revival). Trikolora politicians suggest that Ukrainians would bring social ills and crime, drawing parallels with past refugees from Yugoslavia, cautioning citizens against blindly welcoming even European refugees (#075, Trikolora).

PRR parties frequently highlight incidents of property destruction or drunk driving to underscore a perceived sense of impunity among Ukrainians. From 'long-suffering refugees', Ukrainians are transformed into vandals and petty criminals accused of smearing paint on cars (#002, Revival),[7] stealing duvets from refugee accommodation (#101, SPD), driving under the influence (#146, AfD) and refusing to pay in restaurants (#007, Revival). One AfD post particularly reinforces harmful stereotypes of Ukrainian men as inherently aggressive and women as sex workers: 'These [Ukrainian-licence] cars are black, big, fancy and look very violent. The drivers often look like you don't want to mess with them. The female drivers or passengers, on the other hand, look like women from the traditional horizontal profession – but at a very high price level' (#176, AfD).

Bulgarian politicians deem Ukrainian vandalism particularly harmful, especially when targeting national symbols, such as the 'desecration of monuments that bear part of the history of my Motherland' (#004, Revival). Reinforcing the narrative of national threat, Revival cites numerous instances of repainted communist monuments. The Soviet Army monument in Sofia has served as a repertoire of contention to anti-war activists. In February 2022, it was painted with Ukrainian colours and slogans like 'Assassins', 'Occupiers' and 'Honour Ukraine'.[8] In August 2012, it was altered to support protest and performance art group Pussy Riot, while in March 2014, the monument's soldiers were painted in Ukrainian and Polish colours, highlighting the Crimean annexation and Katyn massacre. PRR parties interpret these anti-war expressions as attacks on national identity – disrespecting the Russian soldier, a hero and liberator of the Bulgarian nation – effectively positioning both Ukrainian refugees and Bulgarian activists as enemies of the state.

As politicians protest the desecration and replacement of national symbols with Ukrainian ones (e.g. Soviet monuments, street name changes, Ukrainian flags in government buildings), they interweave the narrative of population replacement. Radical right rhetoric focuses on the anxiety of losing one's rightful place in society – natives

becoming strangers in their own country: 'Today? We went shopping at Lidl. As Czechs, we were in the minority' (#058, Trikolora); 'Are we going to be refugees in our own country?' (#022, Revival).

If Syrian and Afghan refugees were perceived as posing an Islamization threat, now these same societies are exposed to 'Ukrainization'. For Bulgarian politicians, it is scandalous to change traditions to accommodate Ukrainian refugees, such as the alleged cancellation of annual commemorative sirens for the revolutionary and poet Hristo Botev. This debate was fuelled by an earlier government decision to cancel the customary 1 April civil defence alarm testing to avoid disturbing refugees. Alluding to the subservient behavior of Bulgarian authorities, Revival positions itself as a defender of Bulgarian identity: 'It is worrying that we are increasingly disrespecting our own history, traditions and culture. On 2 June, we will honour the day of Botev and those who died for the freedom of Bulgaria, despite the Ukrainian refugees' (#029, Revival).

Population replacement rhetoric is especially pronounced in Poland, where the Confederation launched a nationwide campaign 'Stop the Ukrainization of Poland'[9] in February 2022, opposing the 'changing of the ethnic structure of our country': 'I do not want to legitimize this radical population, cultural, political – and consequently, perhaps also territorial – transformation that my homeland is undergoing today under the pretext of helping others' (#396, Confederation).

Notably, this rhetoric predates the current crisis – Polish radical right actors such as the National Movement (Confederation alliance) and the far-right National Radical Camp (ONR) have used the slogan since 2018 to resist Ukrainian influence in labour markets, cities and universities (Kobialka 2019; Wyborcza 2018). Now, the Confederation criticizes government efforts enabling 'the emergence of a powerful minority' and 'de-Polonization' (#382) through refugee settlements in the countryside, the emergence of cultural enclaves like 'little Kyiv' in Warsaw and Krakow and access to demographic initiatives (such as 'Family 500+'): 'the president of NBP [National Bank of Poland] complains about Polish women that they do not want to give birth and announces the settlement of Ukrainian women who will give birth to their children in Poland and thus artificially inflate demographic statistics!' (#398, Confederation).

Germany's PRR discourse takes a distinctive turn, focusing on alleged threats to its ethnic German-Russian minority. Russians are portrayed as victims of special discrimination and collective punishment, or '*Sippenhaft*'.[10] By invoking the principle of *Sippenhaft*, now incompatible with German Basic Law, AfD politicians remind the public of the arbitrary terror against 'enemies of the state' under Nazi leadership. They cite instances of Ukrainians terrorizing Russian-Germans, despite these being isolated cases: 'We are seeing a huge wave of discrimination against this demographic: bullying, threats, harassment and even physical violence are now commonplace, although criminalized in our state' (#185, AfD); 'in Berlin, a Russian-speaking citizen was asked by a Ukrainian if he spoke Russian. After he said yes, the Ukrainian suddenly hit him in the face with his fist' (#283, AfD).

German politicians are especially critical of what they perceive as cancel culture perpetuated by German authorities and state institutions. Eugene Schmidt, an AfD politician of Russian descent, references a state media documentary, depicting Russian-Germans as 'poorly integrated so-called Putin fans' and 'not real Germans' (#171), with Russian cultural heritage and sports being particularly targeted. Such discourse can be

useful for the populist radical right to redirect public empathy from Ukrainian refugees to solidarity with the German nation and potentially Russia.

References to fascism and Nazism
Among the fearmongering discursive tactics employed by PRR parties, the 'fascism frame' stands out as particularly extreme. This rhetoric seeks to invoke moral responsibility among citizens to oppose Ukrainian refugees, portraying them as carriers of fascist ideology and violence. This frame is predominantly espoused by PRR parties in Bulgaria, Czechia and Poland.

The characterization of Ukrainians as 'national enemies' draws heavily on World War II history, specifically the actions of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). Stepan Bandera, a prominent OUN leader, gained fame for resisting Polish rule in the 1930s and opposing both Germans and Soviets in the 1940s. In 1942, Bandera supporters formed the UPA, which was responsible for mass killings of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia (Shevtsova 2022). While some Ukrainian officials, particularly in Western Ukraine, regard Bandera as a national hero and refer to the 1943 UPA killings as the 'tragedy of Volyn', Poland's ruling Law and Justice party officially recognized these actions as genocide in 2016 (Woidelko 2017).

The historical context has become a potent rhetorical tool for devaluing Ukrainian refugees, presenting them not merely as petty criminals, but as potential sympathizers or perpetrators of crimes against humanity: 'Greek-Catholic Ukrainians in Liberec [Czech] sing the praises of the war criminal Bandera. Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes! Or not?' (#047, SPD).

Resurrecting the ghosts of historical villains, Polish politician Grzegorz Braun questions the innocence of fleeing Ukrainians by providing an extensive historical account of Ukrainian violence against Polish people. This narrative aims to transform war refugees into objects of contempt, into hostile strangers who do not deserve protection:

> Already in 1768, the Ukrainian peasantry murdered the Polish population in an extremely brutal way. Later, in the years 1939–1947, the methods of inflicting cruel deaths as part of OUN-UPA operations were very similar to those of the 18th century. The conclusion is that hatred and cruelty towards Poles has been present in the Ukrainian mentality and culture for centuries.

> Is it possible that the people who came to our lands in recent months quickly got rid of their centuries-old tradition? (#409, Confederation)

The Bulgarian Revival also brings up historical resentments shared by the broader European community – particularly the memory of the fascist past. The party constructs a narrative of imminent threat, suggesting that the 'new young "Galician" generation' (#033, Revival) of refugees would soon cause problems in Bulgaria. The danger is personal and immediate, not generic and distant, potentially impacting the safety of each Bulgarian citizen: 'THE FASCISTS ARE ALREADY AT YOUR DOOR' (#003, Revival); 'Wearing an armband with a slogan "Glory to Ukraine", something like

contemporary SS. Walking and willing to deliver fist justice. They want to subject us with force, but they will not receive our subordination' (#033, Revival).

Revival politicians invoke the memory of the 14th Waffen-SS Grenadier Division (First Galician), a World War II unit primarily composed of Ukrainian volunteers. They draw a tenuous connection between this historical unit and Ukrainian refugees, implying that these refugees are not genuine victims of war, but rather insidious infiltrators of Bulgarian society.

The politicization of historical experiences during World War II is evident in how PRR actors in Bulgaria and Poland intertwine national anti-fascist narratives with the legitimacy of Ukrainian refugees. In Poland's case, national consciousness carries a sense of historical injustice with the dual occupation of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Radical right parties put special emphasis on allegedly overlooked aspects of Polish suffering, regarding events like the Katyn massacre and the experiences of non-Jewish forced labourers. Battle for historical memory in Bulgaria is based on a more complex relationship with Nazism. In 1941, Bulgaria joined the Tripartite Pact coalition with Nazi Germany, and the Bulgarian monarchy, despite being unsupportive of Nazi ideology, exhibited strong fascist leadership. The Soviet Union, with the help of a national anti-fascist resistance, is regarded as a liberator of Bulgaria from the Nazi regime. These historical trajectories provide PRR politicians with the opportunity to frame narratives of victimhood and resilience, and to connect them to Ukraine's involvement with the Nazi regime. Such discourse also echoes a widespread Russian government disinformation campaign that depicts Ukraine as a neo-Nazi Russophobic regime (EUvsDisinfo 2022).

Economic and social burden

While narratives of an 'endangered nation' may serve to evoke emotional resistance to Ukrainian refugees, PRR rhetoric also introduces pragmatic fears, particularly socioeconomic burdens. This framing becomes especially impactful amid economic anxieties stemming from the Russo-Ukrainian war and slow post-COVID recovery.

PRR parties portray fleeing Ukrainians as spoiled, ungrateful, and affluent foreigners, exploiting the war for a luxurious vacation at the expense of social benefits. They highlight a perceived 'sense of entitlement' (#331, AfD) among refugees, branding them as 'impudent whims', 'indulged in a relaxing shopping spree' (#008, Revival) and demanding 'caviar and shrimp' from food banks (#329, AfD). These depictions aim to create a rift between refugees and the host society – citizens who are struggling financially may not empathize with Ukrainians who allegedly live a lavish life. This framing is particularly emphasized in Bulgaria and Germany, with references to refugees' vehicles as 'luxury limousines' (#009, Revival) and 'Slava Ukrainskim SUV!' (#176, AfD): 'But is it appropriate for young Ukrainians to seek shelter as refugees, only to smash through our freeways and cities in their thousands in big, fast cars, enjoying every social benefit …' (#136, AfD),

In some instances, the populist radical right downplays the seriousness of refugee flight with irony. From war refugees, Ukrainians suddenly transform into 'tourists': 'A Ukrainian website advertises "Free excursion to Bulgaria"' (#012, Revival); 'Ukrainian refugees are returning to Bulgaria after visiting Turkey and Greece for the holidays … Expect traffic jams on the highway' (#027, Revival).

Revival's framing of 'vacationers' may resonate strongly with Bulgarian citizens. First, Ukrainians and Russians contribute significantly to summer tourism in Bulgarian resorts. Labelling fleeing Ukrainians as just another group of vacationers diminishes the need for empathy. Second, this rhetoric partially draws from actual decisions by Bulgarian authorities on asylum accommodation. Unlike Syrian and Afghan refugees stationed in trailers and asylum centres, Ukrainians were immediately housed in hotels at luxury summer and winter resorts. Such depiction may provoke anger among Bulgarians, who would perceive government subsidies to be unjustly used to sponsor leisure activities for refugees.

Thus, radical right discourse reconstructs the image of vulnerable women and children into that of social parasites and scheming fraudsters ready to tap into welfare resources: 'Of course, we have to help. But de facto, long before the war, millions of Ukrainians sat on packed suitcases. About 35% of the population wanted to emigrate in 2017' (#270, AfD). By juxtaposing hard-working citizens with 'undeserving' and unreasonably expensive refugees, PRR parties aim to arouse a sense of injustice and discourage solidarity. They present refugees as 'homo oeconomicus' (#176, AfD), as rational self-interested individuals making decisions solely to maximize benefits: Ukrainians 'strategically' choose to 'hibernate' in Germany for the winter (#286, AfD) or go to 'Poland, the Santa Claus of Europe' (#419, Confederation).

PRR parties reinforce the perception of refugees as detrimental to citizens' livelihood and invoke worst-case scenarios through images of suffering children, pensioners and the working poor. Even if the framing of population replacement threat does not elicit strong emotional resonance with the public, the danger of prioritizing Ukrainians over natives is ubiquitous and already changing social dynamics. Politicians urge citizens to recognize the widespread social injustice perpetuated by both refugees and national authorities: 'Now, we are feeding foreign people, while Bulgarians are starving. Bulgaria is a stepmother to Bulgarians and a mother to Ukrainians' (#036, Revival); 'It is socially dangerous when doubts begin to legitimately gnaw at the minds of our citizens, that the Czech government does more for foreigners than for its own citizens' (#076, Trikolora).

Socially vulnerable citizens are forgotten and left to survive on their own, while Ukrainians purportedly enjoy various social benefits, such as cash transfers, free healthcare, free transport, free accommodation at luxury hotels and free entry to museums. Bulgarian PRR actors vividly describe the plight of pensioners, while German politicians adopt an ironic stance on the social situation: 'while our old people survive for years on a jar of yogurt and old bread, and during the winter months are huddled in their cold, poor homes' (#004, Revival); 'While pensioners have to collect returnable bottles due to the horrendous cost of living, Ukrainians drive through our cities in luxury carriages and receive social welfare at the same time!' (#193, AfD).

Polish politicians warn of intentional discrimination, asserting that Poles have become 'second-class citizens', and expecting 'growing anxiety between Poles and Ukrainians' (#358, Confederation) to create social outrage and disrupt societal peace. Attempting to evoke anger over mistreatment of citizens, the AfD emphasizes news reports about housing eviction in Lörrach (Baden-Württemberg), where 40 residents received notice of termination from the municipal subsidiary to create space for 100 refugees: 'This case is hard to beat for cynicism. People who have lived there for decades

should now give way to Ukrainian refugees. The process is emblematic of Germany and a contemptible policy towards nationals' (#148, AfD).

To further challenge the privileged status of Ukrainian refugees, Czech and German PRR discourses specifically focus on fleeing Ukrainian Roma and link them to well-established frames of 'social welfare fraudsters'. PRR politicians do not consider Ukrainian Roma as real war refugees because they only speak Romani or have dual citizenship with Hungarian passports (#093, Trikolora; #257, AfD). 'Extended Roma family with 84 members from the Hungarian–Ukrainian border area overwhelms those responsible for refugees in Thuringia. The family does not speak Ukrainian' (#169, AfD).

As an ethnic minority that has experienced discrimination and integration challenges, Roma are already on the precarious edge of society. They are dehumanized as 'parasites' and labelled uncivilized and 'unadaptable migrants' (#067, SPD). This rhetoric has been consistently employed by SPD leader Tomio Okamura since 2011: 'Their lifestyle and life values, long cultivated through the centuries, like it or not, are colliding and have collided with the values of all civilized countries' (Tomio Okamura, November 2012, as cited in Kostlán 2012).

When it comes to identifying the social welfare 'parasite', ethnic Roma are singled out from the whole Ukrainian population. Ukrainian Roma families are accused of 'turn[ing] the Czech state into an ATM for social benefits' (#066, SPD) and exploiting the Hartz 4 system, while 'Germans are getting poorer' (#174, AfD).

This targeted discrimination against Roma within the anti-Ukrainian refugee rhetoric underscores the exclusionary nature of PRR ideologies. These frames perpetuate harmful stereotypes and marginalize vulnerable communities, raising concerns about long-term consequences on social cohesion and inclusion.

Conclusion

As the Russo-Ukrainian war continues and Europeans grapple with rising living costs, solidarity fatigue towards Ukrainian refugees has become increasingly evident. Rising irritation among the public is visible through frequent populist radical right demonstrations and even instances of outright hostility. This study reveals how populist radical right parties across Central and Eastern Europe politicize humanitarian emergencies and swiftly revise the criteria for deserving protection, while reinforcing nativist conceptions of belonging.

Particularly striking is how PRR politicians have adapted their rhetoric in a region where the idea of a Christian Europe that needs protection from Islamic and non-European influences holds significant sway. Despite initially extending solidarity to Ukrainians as 'culturally proximate', vulnerable and assimilable Europeans, PRR rhetoric quickly shifted to portray them as welfare fraudsters, violent criminals and even fascist revanchists. This transformation reveals an underlying ideology where rights and empathy are reserved exclusively for those meeting strict native identity prerequisites.

This study makes several key contributions. The discourse analysis illuminates how the populist radical right blends seemingly pragmatic appeals with conspiracist

views, creating a multifaceted platform that resonates broadly even when immigration is not a primary public concern. Their anti-refugee messaging strategically responds to voter anxieties while advancing specific foreign policy goals. By portraying Ukrainian refugees as parasitic outsiders, PRR actors exploit the precarious socioeconomic environment in CEE societies, propagating dangerous politics of fear that scapegoat vulnerable groups and foment social divisions. As observed by Paul Taggart (2000), populist radical right parties demonstrate remarkable rhetorical adaptability and flexibility to capitalize on heterogenous crises, allowing them to preserve their core ideological framework when faced with situations that challenge their traditional narratives.

This research also paves the way to understand populist radical right foreign policy and its impact on the European Union's capacity to formulate coherent foreign and security policy. The CEE geopolitical context is particularly complex – these states, having endured decades of Soviet domination and still perceived by Russia as its sphere of influence, have joined Euro-Atlanticist institutions. This creates a unique political landscape where historical ties with Russia and European integration collide. Depicting Ukrainian refugees as costly, threatening and undeserving of protection serves to bolster the PRR's foreign policy goals of legitimizing the Russian invasion of Ukraine and undermining European support for Ukraine. As Alexandru Moise et al. (2024) note, distrust in Russia and trust in Ukraine/NATO have increased support for Ukrainian refugees. As the public is more likely to be taking cues from political elites, negative portrayal of Ukrainians may also dissuade citizens' support for sanctions on Russia, as well as military and financial aid to Ukraine.

While the studied parties remain in opposition, they significantly shape public attitudes and constrain mainstream parties' responses to geopolitical conflicts. Future research should examine how PRR messages disseminate through social media and how grassroots actors and social movements may amplify radical right discourse. It is also important to develop survey frameworks to assess their impact on citizens' perceptions of Ukrainian refugees and sentiments towards Russia. Understanding the PRR's flexibility and adaptability is crucial, as it may pose serious challenges to establishing common European foreign and security policies towards authoritarian regimes.

Future research may also inform policymakers and advocacy groups how to come up with holistic responses to refugee integration and the spread of disinformation. With war, climate disasters and food insecurity continuing to fuel population displacement, developing evidence-based strategies to confront radical right discourses becomes increasingly important. This study provides a foundation for understanding and addressing the challenges posed by PRR rhetoric in the context of humanitarian crises and ongoing conflicts.

Notes

1 Bulgaria (10%), Hungary, Romania, Slovakia (7–9%), Czechia (2%), Ukraine (1%) (European Parliament 2025).

2 Appendix, Table A, in the Supplementary Material, for number of followers on each platform.

3 Appendix, Table B for distribution of social media posts across party accounts.

4 Appendix, Table C for the Codebook.

5 Indicates the social media post number ID and PRR actor.

6 Figure A, Appendix.

7 Figure B, Appendix.

8 Figure C, Appendix.

9 Campaign website: https://stopukrainizacjipolski.pl/.

10 A family/clan shares responsibility for crimes committed by individual members. Between 1933 and 1935, the principle of *Sippenhaft* was employed to intimidate Nazis' political opponents (Loeffel 2007).

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