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Two Borders, Two Logics: Future-Oriented Narratives on Migration from Belarus and Ukraine to Poland

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The article is focused on the main narratives prevalent in the Polish public debate about migrants arriving at the Polish–Belarusian border and those arriving at the Polish–Ukrainian border. The author seeks to answer the question of why a negative narrative about the former and a positive one about the latter became so popular during the same period and whether, over time, Poles' attitudes toward refugees from Ukraine may become similar to their attitudes toward migrants from across the Belarusian border. The study is based on focus-group interviews conducted among Poles living in Warsaw, Wrocław, Rzeszów and Łowicz. The collected data were analysed using the theoretical concept of 'narratives' adapted for migration studies.

Keywords: Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, migration, refugees, narratives

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Introduction

The early 2020s proved to be a time of immigration for Poland (Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk 2022). In 2021, hundreds of migrants from the Middle East and Africa began arriving at the Polish–Belarusian border, seeking to cross into the European Union; then, in early 2022, thousands of refugees from war-torn Ukraine began crossing the Polish–Ukrainian border. However, the reaction of the Polish public to these two parallel situations was very different. According to CBOS data, as many as 94 per cent of Poles were in favour of accepting Ukrainian refugees immediately after the outbreak of war (Feliksiak and Roguska 2022), while only 33 per cent were in favour of accepting newcomers from the Polish–Belarusian border shortly after they began appearing there (Feliksiak 2021). What was the basis for such a striking difference in attitudes towards these two seemingly similar situations?

To answer this question, it is necessary to outline the broader context. Firstly, it is worth noting that it was the attitude of Poles towards Ukrainians in 2022 that stood out as exceptional in the recent history of this nation. In turn, attitudes towards migrants[1] from the Belarusian border were in line with a certain trend that was especially observable during the intensity of the 2015–2016 European migration crisis (Babakova, Fiałkowska, Kindler and Zessin-Jurek 2022). At that time, Poland stood out in comparison to other EU countries for its exceptionally negative attitude towards migrants arriving in Europe mainly from Africa and the Middle East (Cutts, Goodwin and Raines 2017) and thus from similar regions as contemporary migrants from the Polish–Belarusian border.

However, today's situation is significantly different to that of 2015–2016. Poland and the EU authorities are now accusing Kremlin-backed Belarus of organising the smuggling of Middle Eastern and African migrants onto its territory and then allowing them to illegally cross EU borders (European Commission 2021). In public and political discourse, these differences were further emphasised by reports suggesting that some individuals crossing the Belarusian border were not typical asylum-seekers but persons with criminal records or ties to foreign security services. According to official statements, Polish Border Guard officers were repeatedly attacked with stones and other objects (Muraszkiewicz and Piotrowicz 2023; Polish Border Guard 2021). This situation was frequently framed by state actors as a form of 'hybrid warfare' involving the strategic instrumentalisation of migration. At the same time, some people at the border were, in fact, vulnerable individuals in need of humanitarian assistance – including families with children – which made the situation ethically and politically complex. The reaction of the Polish public, however, was clearly defensive.

Given the images from the fortified, closely guarded Polish–Belarusian border, the scenes from the Polish–Ukrainian border may have seemed a striking contrast even though they came from the same country and in the same period. The initial scale of Polish assistance to refugees from Ukraine was unprecedented and significantly distinguished Poland from other big EU countries like Germany and France or Ukraine's other neighbours. During the first month of the war, Poland received and provided immediate assistance to more than 2 million refugees (Grabowska and Pięta-Szawara 2023). During the first three months, the total value of aid provided by the Polish authorities and ordinary citizens was equivalent to almost 1 per cent of Poland's GDP (Baszczak, Kiełczewska, Kukołowicz, Wincewicz and Zyzik 2022). Despite the deep polarisation of the Polish political scene, helping Ukrainians united Poles across everyday divides (Kalinowska, Kuczyński, Bukraba-Rylska, Krakowska and Sałkowska 2023). Moreover, it was not only the government, local governments or third-sector organisations but also ordinary Poles who became involved in helping. Shortly after the outbreak of war, as many as 68 per cent of Poles claimed to personally help Ukrainian refugees financially or materially (Feliksiak and Roguska 2022) and the number of similar declarations remained close to 50 per cent until the end of

the year (Scovil 2023a). Tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees were picked up from the border by ordinary Poles in their cars and hundreds of thousands ended up not in refugee camps but in the private homes of Polish citizens across the country (Wojdat and Cywiński 2022).

What made Polish society welcome the Ukrainians with such openness and solidarity when, at the same time, it remained largely indifferent to the fate of migrants from across the Belarusian border? Are these factors permanent or merely incidental? In recent years, an increasing number of scholars, as well as international organisations, NGOs and governments, have emphasised that one of the most powerful factors shaping societies' attitudes towards migrants is the narratives told about them (Dennison 2021; McVeigh 2018; OHCHR 2020). Guided by this assumption, we should seek answers to the question posed above in this very area, looking for fundamental differences between the most prevalent narratives describing these two so-differently-perceived migrant groups in the Polish public debate, as well as analysing how they may have changed over time.

CBOS poll results show that, in 2023, after a period of spontaneous solidarity immediately after the outbreak of the war, Poles' attitudes towards refugees from Ukraine began to deteriorate, with the percentage of respondents supporting their admission falling by more than 40 percentage points by the end of 2024 (Scovil 2024a). The research presented in this article was conducted precisely at the moment when Poles' discouragement towards Ukrainians was becoming more pronounced – i.e. in the summer of 2023 – on the wave of the so-called 'grain crisis'. This was related to the uncontrolled influx of Ukrainian grain on the Polish market (Jastrzębiec-Witowska 2023) and other events straining Polish–Ukrainian relations, like the Ukrainian missile explosion in Polish Przewodów. At the time, a different, much more negative narrative about newcomers from Ukraine was emerging. This article attempts to identify its core elements and some of the reasons behind its rise in popularity and to compare it with the negative narrative about migrants from across the Belarusian border. Such analysis allows the question to be posed as to whether the spectacular manifestations of Poles' solidarity with Ukrainian refugees at the beginning of the war were merely a temporary deviation from the aversion to outsiders shown in 2015–2016 or whether there were more-permanent factors behind them finding expression in the most widespread narratives in society.

A central interpretive focus of this article lies in the future-oriented dimension of the narratives. Beyond simply describing the present or recalling the past, many participants articulated expectations, hopes and fears concerning the presence of migrants in Poland. These visions of the future – whether they imagined threat, integration, dependency or social enrichment – played a crucial role in shaping respondents' current attitudes and moral judgments. This temporal projection functioned not only as a justification of their views but also as a framework for distinguishing between the two border situations.

Previous research

Narratives concerning refugees from Ukraine and migrants from across the Belarusian border have previously attracted considerable scholarly attention. Recent studies have examined how public discourse constructs a distinction between 'real' and 'fake' refugees (Zessin-Jurek 2022) and how the media framed some categories of migrants as 'illegal' (Pietrusińska 2022a). Scholars have also analysed state securitisation strategies[2] and the political framing of the border situation (Adam and Hess 2023). Studies referring to securitisation processes have focused on the narrative created by the government of the right-wing Law and Justice party (PiS), showing its political function in the run-up to the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland (Nitszke 2023) or reconstructing (with the help of framing analysis) the image of the

migrant as a 'criminal' or 'barbarian' in the media controlled by the government (Jas-Koziarkiewicz 2023). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the 2023 elections were won by a liberal coalition of political groupings led by the Civic Coalition; however, once the government was formed, it adopted the same securitisation narrative and, in some respects, even sharpened their approach, e.g. suspending temporarily the right to asylum for migrants arriving on the Polish–Belarusian border. In turn, the attitude of the general Polish public towards migrants from the Belarusian border became worse than ever (Scovil 2024b).

Some studies also pointed to the existence of two competing narratives about the Polish–Belarusian border crisis. In addition to the securitisation narrative, which was dominant and supported by the government media (especially TVP), a positive narrative was also mentioned, disseminated by the left-wing, anti-government media (especially TVN), as well as by NGO workers and activists involved in helping migrants. It referred to compassion-based solidarity, portraying migrants in a more individualised way (Kawecki 2024; Pietrusińska 2022b), at the same time often lacking reflection on broader geopolitical or security-related concerns. Moreover, in some cases, the humanitarian framing also seemed to align with political agendas – particularly in contexts where aid work became a form of public performance or a way of expressing opposition to government policy (Kosman 2024). The analyses showing the conflicts between a security-centred and an emotional, individualised approach to migration suggest the existence of some enduring narratives about migrants reappearing in Polish public debate at different times, as the division they describe was also present in analogous analyses of the public debate around the time of the migration crisis of 2015–2016 (Bertram, Puchejda and Wigura 2017; Kotras 2016).

On the other hand, existing research on the narratives around refugees from Ukraine who began arriving in Poland after the Russian invasion in February 2022 focused mainly on the positive narrative which, indeed, very clearly dominated the Polish public space during the first months (Hargrave, Homel and Dražanova 2023). This positive narrative about Ukrainians was often juxtaposed with the negative narrative about migrants from across the Belarusian border, as both were prevalent in Polish society and supported by the Polish government in parallel. The differences in narratives were, moreover, translated into concrete practices and legal solutions – people who entered Poland from Belarus were often detained in very difficult conditions, were not given access to a fair asylum procedure and were forcibly returned to their home countries (Amnesty International 2022; Klaus and Szulecka 2023).

Research points to polar opposites in the narratives of the government and many Polish media on migrants from across these two different borders, indicating the effect of othering and labelling practices leading to the construction of a division into 'good' and 'bad' migrants, the former defenceless and in need of help, the latter dangerous and requiring repulsion (Grabowska 2023; Liszkowska 2023). These divisions were reinforced by media 'echo chambers' (Szylko-Kwas 2023; Zessin-Jurek 2023a) – with both pro-government and liberal outlets framing events in ways that aligned with their political agendas rather than fostering broader societal reflection on humanitarian concerns. Researchers also drew attention to an interesting gender dimension of this division: it was mostly women with children who came to Poland from Ukraine, fitting into the social image of the defenceless and weak 'real refugee', while media coverage of both the migration crisis of 2015–2016 and 2021 portrayed the newcomers seeking refuge in Europe primarily as strong young men, not arousing sympathy and automatically fitting into the image of the 'invader' (Bloch 2023; Hargrave *et al.* 2023).

Over time, analyses of negative narratives about Ukrainians living in Poland also emerged, as these gained popularity in both traditional and social media (Grzesiczak 2023). Far-right groups made early attempts to exploit the complex and often difficult Polish–Ukrainian historical relationship (Zessin-Jurek

2023b) or fuelled a moral panic around the perceived threat of Poland's 'Ukrainisation' (Demel 2023; Mazurkiewicz and Sygnowski 2024). This article aims to complement the research discussed here by analysing the functioning of both positive and negative narratives about Ukrainian migrants among ordinary Poles, juxtaposing them with analogous narratives about migrants from across the Belarusian border. Comparing their constructs will allow us to grasp the key elements that translated and still translate into different attitudes of Poles towards these two situations.

This article contributes to the existing literature by focusing on a relatively underexplored element in migration studies: the visions of the future held by receiving-society members regarding migrant groups. While some research has examined how migrants themselves imagine their future trajectories (see e.g. Pedersen 2024; Pine 2014), less attention has been paid to how such future imaginaries are constructed by host populations. These prospective imaginaries – whether optimistic, fearful or ambivalent – play a crucial role in shaping attitudes and help to explain both the durability and the transformation of dominant narratives over time. By comparing such visions across two distinct contexts, this article provides fresh insight into the deeper narrative structures underlying public opinion in Poland.

Theoretical framework and research methodology

The theoretical basis for the research presented in this article was the concept of 'narrative' as described by James Dennison in his meta-analysis on narrative research and its application in migration studies (2021). In his work, he defines narratives as 'selective depictions of reality across at least two points in time that include one or more causal claims' (Dennison 2021: 3). Narratives are thus the most often a description of the causal relationship between some past event (starting point) and the present – representing its outcome to some degree. For example, a negative narrative about the migration crisis of 2015–2016 interpreting it as a Muslim 'invasion' of Europe could link it to a source event, which could be the EU's overly liberal migration policy. However, as Dennison notes, narratives also often contain a third, crucial point in time: a vision of the future to which the outlined causal sequence could or should lead. Moreover, narratives always carry a normative element, a distinction between negative and positive events, a key division of the characters into 'heroes', 'villains' and 'victims' (Jones 2010), as well as some 'moral' or lesson of an ethical nature that can be drawn from the events thus depicted.

Behind the notion of 'narrative', there is also the assumption that the creation and choice of narratives is something inevitable and universal for all people, which is enforced by the disproportion between the limited cognitive capacities of humans and the almost infinite complexity of the world around them (Dennison 2021). The same narrative patterns, moreover, are normally used by the same people to explain different phenomena, acting as a kind of tool to order the chaos of reality. What determines that some narratives become more popular in society than others? Dennison lists several groups of factors. Firstly, what matters is, of course, the congruence of a given narrative, both internal and external – i.e. the extent to which the narrative agrees with the publicly available information about the reality being described at the time. Secondly, behind the popularity of a particular narrative in a given social group may be the interests of that group. Thirdly, a narrative is likely to become popular if it fits in with the pre-existing perceptions of the world of large social groups, with particular reference to their self-perceptions – a popular narrative should confirm them or at least not threaten them (Dennison 2021).

Speaking of the general correspondence between narratives and their adherent's pre-existing ideas, it is worth noting the striking similarities between the concept of 'narrative' and the concept of

'worldview' or 'cosmology' used especially in social anthropology (Descola 2005; Stoczkowski 2019; Viveiros de Castro 1999). They, too, constitute universal intellectual tools for dealing with the complexity of reality, containing a fixed axiology, an ontology (i.e. assumptions about the general properties of the world and the entities that inhabit it), an etiology (i.e. assumptions about the sources of these properties) and, finally, a soteriology, outlining a vision of the radical healing of the reality described (Stoczkowski 2005). It can be said that narratives, corresponding to visions of the world with their construction, are often their emanations – interpretations of particular phenomena derived from the foundations of a given worldview (Wilson 2005). For example, the aforementioned narrative interpreting the migration crisis of 2015–2016 as a Muslim 'invasion' of Europe and linking it to the irresponsible policies of the European Union fits easily into a broader conservative worldview that inscribes the liberal EU migration policy into a more general image of a 'rotten West' steeped in leftist ideologies and 'militant Islam', whose adherents seek to 'Islamise' Europe at all costs. In my research, I focus on analysing narratives around specific migration issues but it is worth bearing in mind that why a particular narrative is used by a particular person is often determined precisely by its compatibility with that person's professed more-general and fundamental worldview, from which the narrative may draw its juices (Dennison 2020; Oatley 1995). The idea that narratives reflect and reinforce broader worldviews is echoed in empirical work on Polish migration discourse, where seemingly spontaneous popular beliefs are often deeply entangled with broader cultural-political frames (Grabowska 2023; Zessin-Jurek 2022).

I looked for the basic elements of such narratives in the qualitative data collected in the focus-group interviews. As they were conducted at a turning point in Polish–Ukrainian relations, they were particularly focused on exploring narratives about refugees and migrants from Ukraine, which is reflected in the construction of the research sample. However, the motif of the Belarusian border was also strongly present in all the interviews and was a constant point of reference. The sample consisted of 8 focus groups of 6 to 8 Poles with varying levels of education and socio-professional status. Half of the groups comprised young people (20–30 years old) and the other half older people (50–65 years old), as nationwide surveys have shown that one of the most significant socio-demographic variables differentiating attitudes towards refugees or migrants is age – younger Poles were generally less supportive of them than older Poles (Feliksiak 2021; Scovil 2023a). One interview was conducted with the younger group and another with the older group in each of the four selected cities: Warsaw, which received the largest number of Ukrainian refugees (Poland's Data Portal 2024); Wrocław, which has a particularly large number of Ukrainians in relation to the city's total population (Sobestjańska and Sopińska 2022); Rzeszów, a large Polish city near the border with Ukraine, which has been the centre of many ongoing events in Poland since the outbreak of the war; and Łowicz, a small city of fewer than 30,000 inhabitants, which was chosen for contrast, on the assumption that residents of small cities may have different experiences that are worth including in the study. In all groups, the discussion followed the same scenario and usually lasted about 2 hours.

The collected material was analysed using a qualitative approach inspired by grounded theory methodology. The analytical process began with open coding aimed at identifying recurring themes and expressions in participants' statements. These initial codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories, which were interpreted as elements of socially shared narratives. Following this bottom-up phase, the material was re-examined using an analytical framework derived from Dennison's (2021) work on migration narratives. Specifically, each narrative was broken down into its temporal structure (past–present–future) and the identification of its key figures: 'heroes', 'villains' and 'victims'. This combined approach made it possible to capture both the emergent structure of public attitudes and the

rhetorical strategies through which migration-related events were made intelligible by participants. The analysis focused not only on what was said but also on how certain positions were framed, justified and emotionally charged in group settings.

Ethical considerations and methodological limitations

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of research ethics. Participation in the focus-group interviews was entirely voluntary and all participants provided consent after being clearly informed about the study's purpose, the procedures involved and their right to withdraw at any time. As a token of appreciation for their time and involvement, participants received a modest financial compensation. All data were anonymised during transcription and analysis to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Participants were recruited with the assistance of a professional research agency and were selected to reflect variation in age, education level and socio-professional background. While this approach ensured a degree of diversity, the sample was limited to urban residents, which may have influenced the range of perspectives captured. Moreover, focus-group dynamics may have introduced elements of social desirability or conformity bias, particularly in relation to politicised topics such as migration. These limitations are acknowledged and taken into account in the interpretation of findings.

Taking all of this into consideration, we can argue that the use of FGIs was particularly well suited to the objectives of this study. The aim was not to measure individual attitudes in a statistically representative way but to explore how people collectively construct meanings around migration in a socially dynamic context. Focus groups provide access to naturally occurring group-level discursive processes, allowing researchers to observe how people negotiate, reinforce or challenge dominant narratives in interaction with others (Barbour 2007). This is especially valuable in research on politicised and morally charged topics, where group dynamics often reflect broader public debates. Moreover, focus groups are especially useful for capturing ambivalence, contradictions and negotiated positions, which frequently emerge in spontaneous discussion but which may remain hidden in individual interviews or surveys. As Morgan (1996) notes, focus groups enable the researcher to uncover not just what people think but how they think together, making them ideal for tracing the narrative contours of public opinion.

Narratives around the situation on the Belarusian border

Starting point

Both positive and negative narratives on the situation at the Polish–Belarusian border referred to the same point in the recent past, describing its origins in a rather similar – at a basic level – way: the influx of migrants to the Belarusian border was the result of a deliberate policy of the Belarusian authorities to bring people from the Middle East and Africa wanting to enter the EU and encourage them to cross the border illegally. Generally speaking, these actions were intended to destabilise the EU's eastern borders. Our interlocutors repeated the widely used media slogan of a 'hybrid war', waged by Kremlin-backed Belarus against the EU and of which migrant smuggling was supposed to be an important element. On these basic outlines of the situation, as the vast majority of interviewees agreed, such a vision was presented not only by the Polish government but also by the authorities of the EU (European Commission 2021).

Clear differences, however, were already marked in the socio-demographic characteristics and intentions attributed to the newcomers themselves. In the negative narrative, they were portrayed primarily as dangerous. It was emphasised that they were predominantly young, strong men: 'They are young men. The case of mothers or children was sporadic (...) You see such a young buck at the border, he has a mobile phone, what is this?' (Warsaw, 50–65 years old). In this citation, one can easily recognise a pattern already present in the negative narrative on Middle Eastern and African migrants coming to Europe in 2015–2016 (Bertram *et al.* 2017; Hargrave *et al.* 2023). At that time, the male gender of the arrivals, their youth and their threatening physical strength were also emphasised. The distinctive motif of the mobile phone is also worth noting. It complements the vision of the threatening migrant with an element indicating that he does not need help at all – not only are the people arriving in Europe young and able-bodied (and therefore can easily cope with whatever it is they are fleeing their countries from) but they also have new, expensive phones, indicating that they are in a relatively good material position. The religion of Islam, attributed to most or all migrants, also played a key role in the negative narrative, triggering a range of negative associations and further reinforcing the image of newcomers as a threat:

> *Over there, children are taught from a young age to walk around with rifles and now imagine what will happen here. (...) We have the right to demand from our government, from those who govern, that they ensure our safety so that I don't have to be afraid of refugees, install bars in windows, make entanglements. (...) They will murder Poles in the name of Allah* (Wrocław, 50–65 age group).

Muslims were associated with terrorist attacks, a general increase in crime or simply the threat of physical violence. However, there was also concern about the 'cultural threat', especially the forced conversion to Islam: 'Islamists want to convert us. And that is the problem' (Rzeszów, 50–65 age group). Here, too, the narrative overlaps in essential elements with the anti-immigrant narrative of 2015–2016, when the influx of migrants to Europe was described as an 'Islamic invasion' or 'jihad' (Bachman 2016; Bertram *et al.* 2017; Szałańska 2020).

Finally, in the negative narrative about the situation on the Belarusian border, newcomers were also attributed with 'wrong' motivations, again distancing them from the image of people deserving help. In addition to the will to convert Europeans to Islam, they were said to have financial incentives: 'They only treat our country as a transit country, because they want to go to other countries where there are allowances' (Wrocław, 50–65 age group). Significantly, they were said to not even want to earn better wages in rich Western countries but to count on welfare benefits – which, again, fits in with the image of the 'social jihad' forged in 2015–2016 (Bertram *et al.* 2017). The aversion was undoubtedly reinforced by the assumption that the poorer Poland, which does not offer such high allowances, is merely a 'transit country', rather than an attractive destination in itself.

The negative narrative also included a motif that was absent in 2015–2016: among the young menacing men of Muslim faith, there were also said to be 'Russian agents' who wanted to enter Poland to sow chaos there. Reconstructing the basic normative layer of this narrative, we can conclude that the role of 'villains' was played by both migrants and the Belarusians behind them and, to an even greater extent, by the Russians pulling the strings. Poles, on the other hand, played the role of 'victims' of the Kremlin's deception.

In the positive narrative, newcomers from across the Belarusian border are presented with sometimes polar opposite characteristics and different motivations. Above all, they are spoken of as women rather than men. As one young Pole from Wrocław said: 'In my opinion, we should also give them some help. They are also people, they are also women' (Wrocław, 20–30 age group). This again

shows how important a role the gender dimension plays in arousing social sympathy (Hargrave *et al.* 2023). Women are, in this case, more 'human' and therefore worthy of humane treatment. Unlike menacing, more 'animalistic' and unpredictable young men, they are presumed to have a vulnerability which, on the one hand, is more in keeping with the image of the 'victim' and, on the other, does not allow them to be associated with any real threat.

Due to this narrative's vision of newcomers as primarily vulnerable women (often with young children), their motivations seem inherently honest, as they fit into the image of someone seeking help or a haven. Although, as mentioned at the beginning, adherents of the positive narrative shared the belief that an unfair, suspicious practice of the Belarusian authorities was behind the appearance of migrants at the border, at the same time they emphasised that these persons fell into a kind of 'trap' and were completely unaware of the game into which they had been drawn. Despite being caught up in the harmful proceedings of the Belarusian–Russian 'villains', the migrants thus remained innocent 'victims'. On the other hand, the category of 'villains' was partly joined in this narrative by the Poles themselves, who were insensitive to the abuse of people seeking help.

The present moment

Let us now turn to a description of the second point on the timeline of both narratives, i.e. the present moment. The negative narrative is dominated by the image of a border defence against the onslaught of Muslim migrants. It corresponds, additionally, to the image of Poland as 'the bulwark of Christendom' defending Europe against the world of Islam, which is firmly rooted in the Polish imagination – this metaphor became popular during the Polish clashes with the Ottoman Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries but never quite left the national consciousness (Tazbir 1973, 1987). The figure of the 'victim' (Poles) and the 'villain' (migrants, Belarusians, Russians) is now joined by the figure of the 'hero', which includes border guards and soldiers. This image was further reinforced after the time of the survey when, in the summer of 2024, a young Polish soldier was killed on the border (Kacprzak and Zawadka 2024).

The positive narrative, on the other hand, emphasised the individual fate of the newcomers, countering their collective treatment and trying to free them from the context of the 'hybrid war' or their ethnic and religious identity and to present them simply as people in need. In this narrative, the figure of the 'victim' (migrants) and the 'villains' (Belarusians and Russians of course but, actually, the 'insensitive' Poles come to the fore here) is also joined by the figure of the 'hero', in which the volunteers who help the migrants fit in. An excellent illustration of this narrative was Agnieszka Holland's film *Green Border* (2023), in which volunteers acting in defiance of the state authorities are portrayed as unambiguously heroic, while the role of 'villains' is played by border guards – both Polish and Belarusian – as well as ordinary Poles who are insensitive to the injustice suffered by migrants. The migrants, on the other hand, are presented without exception as good, sincere and often well-educated people. In the focus interviews which we conducted, these two narratives – the narrative of defence of the border and the narrative of compassion – often clashed, leading to strong emotional outbursts on both sides:

– *If I were the minister of the army, I would order them to shoot.*
– *But there are mothers with children there too…*
– *These are just soldiers in uniform, in women's bodies. They are soldiers.*
– *What about the children?*
– *Also. If one or the other died, the third one would think twice* (Rzeszów, 50–65 age group).

In the above quote, we see the kind of rhetoric into which the basic assumptions of both narratives were translated. The proponent of the positive narrative tried to 'humanise' the migrants, stripping them of any particularities or context of events and painting an image of a mother with children lost in the forest between Poland and Belarus, evoking universal sympathy and a desire to help. The proponent of the negative narrative did the exact opposite – dehumanising migrants, reducing women to 'soldiers in women's bodies' (simultaneously masculinising their image), refusing to look at them outside the context of the 'hybrid war' and calling for the extremely brutal treatment of them. It is important to mention that, in addition to the two dominant narrative positions, some respondents expressed more ambivalent or internally conflicted views that did not fit neatly into either category. For example, they acknowledged the difficult situations faced by migrants, while simultaneously voicing concern about the state's ability to maintain control – or expressing doubts about the motivations of those arriving. However, the logic of the dispute has always ultimately pushed them into the rhetoric of one narrative or the other.

Vision of the future

As the rhetoric of the representatives of the positive narrative was based on abstracting from the broader political context and the particularities of migrants, it also did not contain a clear vision of the future, calling, instead, for acts of compassion 'here and now'. This was quite different in the case of the negative narrative, in which the vision of a potential future – the third point on the narrative timeline – to which the events described could lead was quite elaborate. If Poland failed to stem the influx of migrants, it would not only face chaos and an increase in crime but the very identity of Poles would be threatened. Examples of the unsuccessful integration of migrant communities in Western Europe served as a negative reference point and the image of demographic 'domination', which would involve the replacement of the country's indigenous population by a rapidly growing group of Muslims, also recurred:

> *Muslim women do not have one child but a minimum of three, this is their Muslim doctrine. Muslims have flooded France. A French woman will give birth or not, one child and that's it. Soon there will be an even bigger increase of Muslims, there will be more of them than native Frenchmen and this is happening because they don't want to join the Christian civilisation or any other and they are promoting their culture. (...) Just like in Germany, there are 7 million Turks, so they can set up a state within a state. (...) In France, there are not only Turks but also Sudanese, Libyans, Moroccans and it's almost 40 per cent of the population now. Two or three decades and they will already be on a par* (Warsaw, 50–65 age group).

Of course, our interviewees' estimates were greatly exaggerated – in France, for example, the Muslim community makes up not 40 per cent but around 10 per cent of the country's population (Insee 2023). This kind of exaggeration is, however, very characteristic of people who fear Muslim immigrants, as shown, for instance, by measurements of the so-called 'ignorance index' conducted by the British centre Ipsos MORI (2016). Meanwhile, the motif of 'demographical dominance' resembles once again the narratives of 2015–2016, when opponents of the admission of Middle Eastern and African migrants claimed that the newcomers were unusually lustful and eager to reproduce (further reinforcing the dehumanising, animalistic image of strong, menacing young men), sometimes calling it a 'sexual jihad' (Bertram *et al.* 2017).

In conclusion, the negative narrative about the situation on the Belarusian border had a clear advantage over the positive narrative in that it had an elaborate vision of the future. As I will argue further, it is the visions of the future contained in the narratives that play a key role in sparking the imagination of their audience and followers. A narrative that is devoid of such an explicit vision will usually tend to be less compelling to broad publics. The absence of such a vision also points to significant flaws in the construction of the narrative as a whole, resulting from the escape from broader reflection on geopolitical and security issues.

Narratives around the situation on the Ukrainian border

Starting point

The positive and negative narratives on the influx of Ukrainian refugees to Poland also started from the same point in the past – February 2022 – describing the origins of the current situation in an even more similar way. As mentioned in the introduction, immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the reception of refugees from these regions was supported by 94 per cent of Poles (Feliksiak and Roguska 2022) and, for a brief moment, there was virtually no room in the Polish public space for separate narratives on the ongoing events. Our respondents' accounts of the first weeks of the influx of Ukrainian refugees were also very consistent with each other, forming a single, coherent story. What were its recurring themes?

Firstly, in every focus group, respondents expressed satisfaction and pride in how Polish society reacted to the influx of Ukrainian refugees in the first weeks after the outbreak of war. It was often emphasised that the Poles behaved exactly as they should have behaved. The metaphor of a well-passed exam kept recurring: 'We passed the exam with a five (Rzeszów, 50–65); 'We, as citizens, ordinary people, passed the exam' (Łowicz, 50–65 age group). Some respondents also admitted that the reaction of Poles to the event came as a (positive) surprise to them, as it conflicted with their self-perception as an intolerant, closed-minded nation, as well as a divided and uncooperative one.

When asked what was behind such a vivid reaction from Poles, respondents often spoke of a spontaneous moral impulse, a simple empathy towards people who were fleeing death: 'We did not help the Ukrainians, we helped people in need' (Wrocław, 50–65). This abstraction from the context and the particularities of the people who were helped brings to mind the pattern that was present in the positive narrative about people from the Belarusian border. Just as, there, the role of the 'heroes' of the narrative was played by volunteers helping 'people in need' and thus fulfilling an obvious moral duty, here the category included virtually all Poles, millions of whom helped Ukrainians in one way or another.

Respondents often emphasised that it was 'ordinary people' – such as themselves – who spontaneously threw themselves into helping, rather than, for example, the Polish state: 'First of all, no one waited to see if something would be done top-down, everyone went on the spot, everyone helped as much as they could' (Rzeszów, 50–65). Our interviewees also liked to emphasise that Poles stood out for the scale of their aid compared to other European nations: 'They debated in the European Parliament what it would look like if a country was attacked and how to help it and Poland showed them how to do it. They debated for a good few years and didn't know how' (Rzeszów, 20–30). The respondents also drew satisfaction from the fact that they had proved to be 'better' than the Western states, which are often cited in the Polish public debate as a certain model for the country. This time it was to be reversed; it was the Poles who showed Western Europeans 'how to do it' and aroused the admiration of those they

often admire themselves. As an elderly resident stated: 'Everyone was amazed, the whole world was amazed by us' (Łowicz, 50–65 age group). Thus, as we can see, the image of ordinary Poles as 'heroes' was very much anchored in both positive and negative narratives around the influx of refugees from Ukraine.

As for the Ukrainians, at this point they fitted perfectly into the narrative model of the 'victim' – predominantly women with children coming from a Slavic and Christian culture that was 'non-threatening' to Polish identity. There was also no doubt that they were fleeing Russia's aggression; no one suspected them of any dealings with the 'villain', as was the case with the people from the Belarusian border, who were accused of knowingly taking part in a 'hybrid war', smuggling Russian agents into their ranks, etc. Ukrainians inscribed themselves all the more firmly in the role of 'victim' as they experienced aggression from one of the main 'villains' in Polish history, experiencing something that Poles themselves had experienced in the past:

> *Poles are very attached to history, a lot of this patriotism is instilled in us, we are also taught about our Polish martyrdom. So, a lot of people feel attached to our history and also empathise with what these people from Ukraine went through* (Rzeszów, 20–30 age group).

In a sense, the events of February 2022 were not entirely new to Poles and immediately fell into a deeply rooted interpretative pattern, passed on from generation to generation. Just as Russia had been the 'villain' before, the Ukrainians easily fitted into the role of 'victim' occupied by the Poles in Polish martyrdom, which was made possible by both a commonality of experience and a certain basic cultural proximity.

The present moment

The positive and negative narratives begin to diverge significantly in the description of the second point on the narrative timeline – the present. The status of the Ukrainians, in particular, becomes contentious: are they really 'victims' or are they also a kind of 'villain'? For, as time passes, Ukrainians cease to be seen as abstract and featureless 'people in need'; they are equipped, in the negative narrative, with several concrete characteristics. In particular, attention is drawn to those traits that make Ukrainians start to fall short of the conventional image of the war refugee. Their affluence and, in some cases, even richness, manifested in expensive clothes or luxury cars, was the most often mentioned in this context (see also Babakova *et al.* 2022):

> *There were these mothers crossing the border with children in their arms and everyone wants to cry when they see a child being harmed but, let's face it, rich people came here, with a lot of money, contacts, bought flats here, moved around in fancy cars* (Wrocław, 50–65 age group).

In the above quote, there's the characteristic opposition between 'mothers with children' and 'rich people' – one can imagine a wealthy mother fleeing a war-torn country with her children but she just does not fit into this ideal image of a war refugee (and therefore into the narrative role of 'victim'). As we remember from the analysis of the negative narrative about newcomers from the Belarusian border, young men do not fit into it even more strongly. Thus, for many respondents, every young Ukrainian man they encountered in Poland was further evidence that they were dealing with a kind of fraud: 'But also, lots of guys built like tanks came here and stay' (Wrocław, 50–65); 'The media talks about heroic

defence and here we see young guys on the streets' (Warsaw, 50–65). In reality, there were virtually no adult men among the Ukrainian refugees arriving in Poland due to Ukraine's ban on their leaving the country (Chmielewska-Kalińska, Dudek and Strzelecki 2023) and the scale of their presence in Poland was significantly exaggerated by proponents of the negative narrative, in a similar way that the negative narrative about people from the Belarusian border exaggerated the proportion of Muslims in Western Europe.

It was not only certain socio-demographic characteristics that would distance Ukrainians from the role of 'victims' but also their attitude. Respondents often accused them of being demanding and ungrateful for the help they received. The prevalence of such an image is also indicated by more recent research conducted for the Mieroszewski Dialogue Centre on a nationwide sample (Mazurkiewicz and Sygnowski 2024). Many of our respondents felt that their state allocates millions to help people who are often in a much better financial situation than themselves but who cynically take advantage of the opportunity. It is worth noting that this attitude not only distanced Ukrainians from the image of the 'victim' (and brought them closer to the 'villain') but also ridiculed the Poles' sacrifice from the 'starting point' of which they were so proud. The Poles were increasingly transforming from 'heroes' into 'victims'.

Many respondents claimed that Ukrainians represent unfair (because favoured by the state) competition for Poles in various fields: in the labour market, the housing market and even in access to public services such as health care. As one resident of Rzeszów's 50–65 age group recounted:

> *In every office there are signs saying: 'Ukraine, Ukraine'. I approached the lady and said: 'Well, what about us? Should we wait in line?' A lady from Ukraine came – a young girl – and she was accepted in 3 minutes because she is from Ukraine – and I have to wait? Is that how you treat your own citizens?*

These were fairly widespread sentiments – as data from the Migration Policy Centre shows, around four in ten Poles agreed with the statement that the Polish government treated Ukrainian refugees slightly or much better than them (Dražanová and Geddes 2022). This provided highly conducive grounds for the popularisation of a negative narrative. Research from other countries demonstrates that the spread of the perception of the preferential treatment of refugees is often a primary factor leading to the rise of anti-refugee sentiment (Hargrave, Mosel and Leach 2020; World Vision 2022).

The theme of rivalry between Poles and Ukrainians recurred also in the interesting context of romantic relations, as there were particularly many young women among the refugees. They aroused some concern among young Polish women, as the following statement shows:

> *Ukrainian girls, I'm not saying all of them but most of them, are so much more confident, while we, as Polish women, are very insecure. And it's even the Ukrainian girls themselves who say that they invest in themselves, in their looks, in all that and, because of that, they demand more from others around them. (...) In general, the way they walk, the way they dress* (Wrocław, 20–30 age group).

Perhaps competition in this field – combined with competition in the labour market, e.g. in the beauty industry – would explain the particular reticence of young Polish women towards refugees from Ukraine that was observed in surveys (Scovil 2023b; Theus 2023). Interestingly, some studies showed that, during the 2015–2016 migration crisis, it was Polish men who were more reluctant to accept migrants from the Middle East and Africa than women (Flis 2016). As men, in turn, dominated among this group of migrants, these results suggest that perhaps somewhat similar mechanisms were at work here.

In the negative narrative about Ukrainians, there were also themes similar to those of the negative narrative about newcomers from the Belarusian border: Ukrainians were to contribute to the increase in crime, did not integrate and disrupted public order. At this point in the narrative timeline, Russians remain the 'villains' of course but recede into the background (as does the context of the war itself), again not unlike the narrative about people from the Belarusian border. The main 'villains', around whom the narrative focuses and to whom it assigns the most attributes, become the newcomers themselves.

Let us now return to the positive narrative and its description of the present moment. There are far fewer re-evaluations here in relation to the starting point – Ukrainian refugees remain the narrative 'victims' and Russians the main 'villains' – the context of war also remains more present here. The role of Poles as 'heroes' is challenged to the greatest extent. Many respondents noted that, after the initial acts of solidarity, the Poles were becoming increasingly closed and less willing to help. They compared this sometimes to the attitude of Poles towards Middle Eastern migrants as far back as the migration crisis of 2015–2016. One Warsaw resident saw the change in Poles' attitude towards Ukrainians as an unpleasant return to the 'norm' and a confirmation of her fears:

> *I thought then that, if some time ago, we didn't let Syrians into Poland, we would only let in some families who really need to escape and that this would end. (...) I thought to myself that it would return to normal in a moment. (...) This euphoria lasted for three months* (Warsaw, 50–65 group).

Advocates of the positive narrative about Ukrainian refugees were, of course, confronted with reports of problems caused by these latter in Poland, as highlighted in the negative narrative. However, they generally considered the scale of these phenomena to be exaggerated and sometimes considered them to be fictional. For example, one interviewee from Rzeszów countered the opposing side's accusation that Ukrainian refugees are rich not by trying to prove that there are no wealthy people among them but by showing that it's not an argument against helping them: 'I believe that, regardless of wealth, if a person comes here, needs help, then we should help her. If it's just housing because she needs peace, well, I try to do my best to meet her needs. Because rich people need peace too' (Rzeszów, 50–65).

At this point, the 'heroes' of the positive narrative are, above all, the Ukrainians fighting bravely at the front, as they had already managed to prove their worth on the battlefield. At the same time, the positive narrative includes a motif of interest more frequently – by defending themselves against the Russians, the Ukrainians are pushing back the threat of a Russian invasion of Poland and it therefore pays to support them by also helping their refugees: 'If we don't help, well, the Russians will be in Warsaw. It's a no-brainer, Putin and his crew are desperate people' (Warsaw, 50–65).

Vision of the future

Finally, let us look at the third crucial point on the narratives' timeline, i.e. the visions of the future. In the negative narrative, the long-term presence of Ukrainians in Poland was said to potentially lead to many economic, cultural and political problems. It was emphasised that the influx of refugees was a burden on the country's economy and especially its social-security system. There were also claims that, as time goes by, Ukrainians will become more competitive in the Polish labour market and, just as they are currently mainly doing simple, low-paid jobs, they will start to displace Poles from better-paid jobs: 'They will speak better Polish and will steal jobs from many Poles' (Wrocław, 20–30 age group). Some respondents also spoke of the threat posed by the spread of the nationalist ideology of 'Banderism'

among Ukrainians. This refers to the so-called 'Banderists' – members of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists who orchestrated the genocide of Polish civilians in 1943–1945 in Volhynia, among other areas. As an older respondent stated: 'I am afraid of Ukrainians because I know how fierce they are. *365 Ways of Murdering Poles in Volhynia.* Please read this book. I recommend it' (Rzeszów, 50–65).

Many respondents also feared that, if the Ukrainian community grows, at some point they will lose the motivation to integrate into Polish society and will start to create a kind of 'state within a state'. Once again, Western Europe appeared to be a negative point of reference here. The imagination of respondents was particularly stimulated by reports of immigrant enclaves, over which the Western states have allegedly lost control. Some even floated visions of the indigenous Polish population being replaced by immigrants, something that was supposedly already taking place in Western countries:

> *– Yes, I am afraid because, as I said at the beginning, right now we're still under the pressure of these events, we're still imbued with this pain of theirs, with the desire to help. But when all this stabilises, they'll start to multiply here, to put it colloquially...*
> *– And settle down.*
> *– Start families, yes.*
> *– There are already 16 dialects in London.*
> *– They are similar, but they are not us. That's about it. I'm afraid of this replacement of the Poles.*
> *– You see what's going on in London, over the years the Englishmen have been replaced...*
> *– The Prime Minister is Indian, the owners of many facilities are Indian* (Rzeszów, 50–65).

In the above excerpt, we see a distinctive, seamless transition from the description of the growth of the Ukrainian community in Poland to the vision of the supposed 'replacement' of the English by the Indians in London. That's a very similar motif to the vision of 'Islamisation' threatening Europe, mentioned before. A counterpart to this notion, in fact, appeared in one of the interviews, namely the term '*Ukropolin*', with the vision of Poland subjugated to the Ukrainians behind it: 'If there is such an influx here as there has been so far, and if they settle here, then we can live in Ukraine. (...) In *Ukropolin*, as some people say (...) We can just be under their rule' (Łowicz, 50–65).

However, the vision of the future, from the negative narrative about Ukrainians, differed from the negative narratives about Middle Eastern and African migrants on at least one important point: the proponents of the former did not generally claim that Ukrainians in need should be turned away. They realised that, in the context of the ongoing war, it was, nevertheless, in Poland's interest to help Ukrainians. The answer, therefore, was not to close the borders – as in the case of the Belarusian border – but to implement a rigorous model of integration that would ensure that the Ukrainian community in Poland did not escape government control, as was to be the case with immigrant communities in Western Europe.

A strong emphasis was placed on the requirement to learn the Polish language and to adopt the customs of Polish society. Essentially, the aim was to prevent Ukrainians from imposing their customs: 'To be honest, I don't know much about Ukrainian culture but I just don't want anyone to impose their ideologies on anyone' (Warsaw, 20–30). Some respondents also mentioned the memory of the Volhynian massacres as a possible obstacle to the integration of Ukrainians into Polish society. There were, however, suggestions that certain symbolic gestures – such as the apology by the Ukrainian president – could remedy this.

What did the positive narrative's vision of the future look like? Respondents often cited the demographic benefits of many young Ukrainian women and children remaining in Poland. Economic

benefits related to increased competition in the market, Ukrainians setting up businesses or bringing in Ukrainian professionals were also pointed out. Above all, however, attention was drawn to the fact that Ukrainians can do the low-paid jobs that Poles no longer want to do:

> *From what I know from my friends in England, when Brexit happened, it turned out that the English are lazy, they don't want to do these simple jobs, on construction sites and so on. And we now have such a situation that Ukrainians can do it* (Rzeszow, 20–30).

This pragmatic tone, appealing to the Polish interest, is already significantly different from the positive narrative about people from the Belarusian border, which was dominated by the language of moral obligation and completely lacked the language of benefits, the vision of the future and the references to positive economic or demographic changes that the influx of migrants could lead to.

Some also suggested that progressive Polish–Ukrainian rapprochement could contribute to the forgetting of old grudges – above all, the Volhynian massacre. There were also claims that this could lead to a permanent alliance between the two countries, which would prove extremely beneficial to Poland and improve its position in the international arena (in the words of one Rzeszów resident, it would make Poland a 'superpower'). However, the importance of the integration of Ukrainians into Polish society was emphasised. The prevailing opinion was that Ukrainians who choose to live permanently in Poland should be treated in the same way as Poles – i.e. have both the same rights and the same obligations towards the state. Although adherents of the positive narrative also frequently mentioned the need to assimilate to the language and customs of Polish society, some emphasised that they would not mind the development of Ukrainian schools, clubs, orthodox churches and even entire neighbourhoods in Polish cities, citing the positive examples of Polish schools in England or China Town in New York becoming a tourist attraction.

To conclude this section, the importance of the visions of the future should be underlined: often, respondents did not speak only about what migrants had done but, rather, about what they would do. In the case of Ukrainians, the positive narrative included future scenarios involving work, schooling, integration and becoming 'one of us'. In contrast, people crossing the Belarusian border were often associated with uncertain, threatening or deliberately ambiguous futures, including fears of crime, terrorism or social burden – the positive vision of the future was absent or vague. These forward-looking frames are powerful: they not only reflect current emotions but also help to anchor who is deemed worthy of help or rejection.

Conclusions

The previous sections examined the main narratives surrounding the situations at the Belarusian and Ukrainian borders, drawing on the collected data. It is now worth returning to the initial questions and considering why, in the case of the people from the Belarusian border, the negative narrative was so prevalent and, in the case of the newcomers from across the Ukrainian border – at least initially – the positive narrative dominated. Let us start with the former issue, using Dennison's (2021) list of factors determining the popularity of the narrative cited in the theoretical section.

Firstly, congruence. The negative narrative about people from across the Belarusian border simply agreed with more publicly available information on the subject and subsequent media reports only added to its credibility. News of attacks on border guards or, finally, the murder of a Polish soldier at the border, found simple explanation within the negative narrative whereas, within the positive narrative,

they were somehow not supposed to happen, given its vision of migrants as defenceless 'victims'. The negative narrative was also more internally congruent, taking the presented cause-and-effect sequence into the future and presenting a vision – consistent with its other elements – of the dangers that might await Poles and the EU due to the influx of migrants. Meanwhile, in the positive narrative, the vision of the future was either absent or vague. That is no coincidence for, if the positive vision of the future based on the reception of migrants had been more clearly articulated in the narrative, it would have been difficult to reconcile with the narrative's vision of the source event, namely the criminal activity of the Belarusian regime. Even assuming that the migrants themselves were harmless, their admission would undoubtedly fuel Belarus' illegal trafficking of people into the EU and, indeed, open the door to further hostile actions of this country.

Secondly, group interests. While the negative narrative included an elaborate vision of the dangers of letting migrants in, the positive vision did not present the potential benefits of accepting migrants (economic or demographic ones), overshadowing them with the language of moral duty.

Thirdly, the negative narrative was solidly based on perceptions already widespread in Polish society, like negative opinions on Muslims and, to some extent, the old vision of Poland as the 'bulwark of Christendom', defending Europe against Islam. The positive narrative, on the other hand, not only lacked similar support but also threatened the positive self-perception of many Poles, who traditionally attributed hospitality to their nation (Omyła-Rudzka 2015).

The case of migrants from the Ukrainian border is more complicated. Here we are dealing with two internally and externally congruent narratives – initially only the positive one fulfilled the condition of external congruence with publicly known facts but, as the presence of Ukrainian refugees in Poland prolonged and tensions between them and Poles increased, solid grounds for a negative narrative emerged. Both narratives appeal to the interests of large social groups, foregrounding respectively the benefits and dangers that could affect millions of Poles due to the presence of Ukrainians in Poland. Finally, both find support in perceptions widespread in society even before the war, such as the belief that Russia poses the greatest existential threat to Poland or the image of Ukrainians as Stepan Bandera sympathisers hostile to Poles.

Thus, just by analysing the structure of the narratives about Ukrainian refugees, it is difficult to predict which one might become dominant over time. Probably this will be determined by the most changeable group of factors influencing the popularity of the narratives cited by Dennison, i.e. external congruence – new, publicised facts may tip the scales one way or the other. Does this mean, however, that, in the unfavourable circumstances of a protracted conflict and growing Polish–Ukrainian tensions, Poles' attitudes towards refugees from Ukraine may become as reluctant as those towards people from across the Belarusian border or those from the 2015–2016 migration crisis? In this case, the construction of the narratives provides some clues. Even if the negative narrative about Ukrainians was to become dominant in Polish society, it does not focus on isolating them – unlike the negative narrative about newcomers from across the Belarusian border. Instead, it emphasises the imposing of a restrictive model of integration into Polish society. Analysing the securitisation of migration from different directions, Polko (2025) notes that, although migrants from the MENA region and Ukraine were both securitised, the narratives about these groups differed markedly in intensity and justification, as reflected in Polish political and media discourse. The relative cultural proximity between Ukrainians and Poles, as well as commonly shared interests – or a common enemy – are still a solid barrier against the completely exclusionary narratives that became so popular so quickly in the face of the situation on the Belarusian border.

One of the key insights emerging from the study is that divergent narratives about the situations on the Belarusian and Ukrainian borders are rooted not only in their perceived origins but also in imagined trajectories – how the future (or potential) presence of migrants in Poland is envisioned. Respondents frequently expressed long-term expectations or fears: whether the newcomers would integrate, remain dependent or challenge the existing social order. These future-oriented narratives acted as justifications for either inclusion or exclusion and, in some cases, shaped perceptions of who deserved help in the present. This forward-looking dimension of public opinion appears to be a powerful explanatory factor in understanding the asymmetry between the Ukrainian and Belarusian cases.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that, while this article focuses on how ordinary people talk about migrants, these narratives do not emerge in a vacuum. As suggested several times, they are deeply influenced by political messaging, media framings and institutional discourse. For example, shifts in public attitudes towards migrants since 2015 have coincided with intensified securitising language in the state-controlled media and political speeches (Kowalczuk 2015). Even the more humanitarian discourse observed in 2022 was often aligned with state interests and national identity constructions. Acknowledging these upstream influences is crucial for understanding how certain perceptions become dominant, plausible or emotionally resonant in society. In particular, Polish public debate has been strongly shaped by polarised media ecosystems, with outlets such as TVP or TVN acting as echo chambers that amplified one-sided framings of the border events (Szylko-Kwas 2023; Zessin-Jurek 2023a). Political elites across the spectrum have also strategically employed migration-related narratives to advance their agendas. It is precisely through these mediating structures that respondents' future-oriented narratives were formed, showing that individual voices are inseparable from broader discursive and institutional dynamics.

Notes

1. Used here for brevity, the term 'migrants' refers, in the article, to individuals arriving in Poland from across both the Belarusian and the Ukrainian borders, without implying their legal or moral equivalence.
2. This article draws on the concept of securitisation as developed by the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998), which views security not as an objective condition but as a discursive process. According to this perspective, security emerges when an issue is framed as an existential threat that justifies extraordinary measures and legitimises actions beyond the normal rules of politics. In this sense, security is not a given state of affairs but a socially constructed narrative, shaped by language, context and institutional authority. The term 'securitisation narrative' is used here to describe discursive patterns in which migration is presented not as a humanitarian or social challenge but as a threat to national identity, order or sovereignty. This approach does not exclude the existence of real threats but emphasises that what counts as a threat is always the outcome of interpretation and framing.

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