

Mediated Rhetoric of Recent Conflicts

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Unwanted encounters: Anti-Ukrainian rhetoric in the social media reception of migrants by the Polish far-right

Niechciane spotkania: retoryka antyukraińska w dyskursie polskiej skrajnej prawicy dotyczącym ukraińskich migrantów

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the anti-Ukrainian rhetoric concerning migrants in Polish social media based on the category of *topos*, as in Discourse-Historical Approach, in order to evaluate the threats and dangers generated rhetorically. The research material comprises a corpus of far-right anti-Ukrainian comments and posts collected from Facebook and Instagram profiles. Based on quantitative insights into the corpus, the paper conducts a qualitative study to classify the *topoi* and highlight specific rhetorical strategies employed by the far-right toward Ukrainian migrants. The analysis shows the patterns which the users of extreme discourses employ to verbalize and rationalize their disdain for the migrants. These present the Ukrainian migrants as a threat to Polish independence and social order, argue that the support they receive is undeserved, and present ruling politicians as inept and ignorant of the needs of Poles.

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza antyukraińskiej retoryki w mediach społecznościowych z użyciem kategorii *toposu* stosowanej w historycznej analizie dyskursu i ujawniającej zagrożenia wynikające ze sposobów użycia tej retoryki. Materiał badawczy stanowi korpus skrajnie prawicowych anty-ukraińskich postów i komentarzy zebranych na Facebooku i Instagramie. Do rozpoznania właściwości zebranego materiału wykorzystana została analiza korpusowa, następnie pogłębiona analiza jakościowa, która umożliwiła zidentyfikowanie *toposów* i sposobów ich użycia. W badaniu wyszczególnione zostały schematy, które werbalizują i racjonalizują niechęć do migrantów, wskazując, że migranci nie zasługują na otrzymywaną pomoc, przedstawiają ukraińskich migrantów jako wrogów polskiej niepodległości i porządku społecznego, oraz przedstawiają polski rząd jako nieudolny i niereprezentujący interesów Polaków.

Key words

topos, anti-migrant discourses, far-right, Ukrainian migrants, Discourse-Historical Approach
topos, dyskursy anty-migracyjne, skrajna prawica, ukraińscy migranci, historyczna analiza dyskursu

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1. Introduction

The Ukrainian migration crisis caused by the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022 put migration into the spotlight of media interest in the Polish public sphere once again. The Ukrainian refugees who came to Poland during the invasion received massive support from the public and the state (Dębicki 2024; Wanke 2023). This being said, while the mainstream discourse has been mostly unified in its pro-Ukrainian stance (e.g., Georgiou and Troszyński 2023; Zawadzka-Paluektau 2023), the Polish far-right movements have gone against the grain. Anti-Ukrainian discourses started to emerge in social media at the very beginning of the full-scale war (Tymińska et al. 2023). The radical movements found their niches across the social media platforms (e.g., radical parties and NGO profiles, or popular media comment sections), where fears and insecurities continued to fester and radicalize users.

This study aims to gain insight into the rhetoric of the Polish far-right anti-Ukrainian niches across several social media platforms. To provide the context for the study, we first show the background of the Ukrainian migration and the perception of the Ukrainian minority in Poland, as well as the peculiarities of the Polish far-right. In the analytical part of the text, we identify the general linguistic patterns and inspect the *topoi* employed to challenge the dominant discourse. Finally, we contextualize our findings by referring to the existing analyses of refugee crises and the rhetoric of other far-right and far-left movements.

2. Ukrainians in Poland

Migration from Ukraine to Poland accelerated in 2014, when the Russian Federation annexed Crimea. Political instability, armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine and economic hardship led to a steady influx of Ukrainian labor migrants. Between 2014 and 2021, Poland became their main destination due to proximity, cultural ties, and simplified access to the job market (Jaroszewicz and Eberhardt 2018; Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk 2022). It is estimated that by the beginning of 2022, 1.3 to 1.5 million Ukrainians had already been living or working in Poland. According to UNHCR data, just after the full-scale invasion of Russia against Ukraine in February 2022, by October 2022 over 7.4 million Ukrainian refugees left the country and 1.7 million of them then registered for temporary protection in Poland (Isla Rodriguez et al. 2022), which made this country the main destination for Ukrainian migrants (Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców 2023). The current population of Ukrainians in Poland consists of the economic migrants who entered the country before the full-scale war and of the refugees who arrived after February 24, 2022. A significant influx of refugees usually changes the demographic structure of society (Dębicki 2024), which is a challenge for the state, public institutions, and citizens.

Poles' attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees have fluctuated since the beginning of the full-scale war as the initial strong support for Ukrainian refugees declined over time (Kubiciel-Lodzińska and Kownacka 2023). In the research undertaken a year after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Długosz and Izdebska-Długosz (2023) show that a third of Poles believed that the influx of Ukrainians negatively impacted Poland because of price increases, unfair benefits and entitlements. The uneasy Polish-Ukrainian relations are also stained by distrust due to the Volyn-Galician massacre of the Polish minority perpetrated by Ukrainian nationalists of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UIA) during WWII. The continued admiration of Ukrainians for Stepan Bandera, a nationalist wartime leader of UIA who is associated with that ethnic cleansing, further exacerbates the tensions. The turn toward historical heroes is emblematic of popular mobilization for Ukrainian independence, especially that Bandera is also linked with anti-Russian resistance. However, due to the contradictions in how the historical events and figures are presented in Poland and Ukraine, the tensions remain. Moreover, when the presence of Ukrainian war refugees stopped being viewed as temporary, they began to be perceived by Poles as competitors (Długosz and Izdebska-Długosz 2023); this created space for the growth of anti-Ukrainian rhetoric online (e.g., Tymińska et al. 2023; Łuczaj 2024). Tymińska (2023) documents that the online anti-Ukrainian discourses indeed contain references to Polish-Ukrainian historical antagonisms, post-war displacement of Poles and the economic burden caused by Ukrainians.

Anti-Ukrainian rhetoric may well be fueled by the Russian disinformation campaigns (Zadorożna and Butuc 2024) and some of it has been absorbed by the Polish far-right movements, which purposely use this rhetoric to garner political support. Some organizations that do so include *Konfederacja*, a coalition of mostly radical right parties; some extremist movements, such as *Front* [Front], a pro-Russian party registered in 2023; *Rodacy Kamraci* [Fellow comrades], a nationalist, neo-fascist party registered in 2023 and delegalized in 2024; and smaller NGOs, e.g. *Wołyń Pamiętamy* [We remember Volyn], a foundation which organizes anti-Ukrainian campaigns and supports the production of anti-Ukrainian documentaries.

3. Far-right in Europe and Poland

“Far-right” is an umbrella term referring to “the ‘(populist) radical’ and ‘extreme’ variants of right-wing politics” used to identify collective actors “located on the rightmost end of the ideological left-right spectrum,” valued for its “aggregative property” (Pirro 2023, 103). Radical right and extreme right are both illiberal stances, but the radicals accept and operate according to the rules of democracy, while extremists openly reject them (Mudde 2019). Multiple studies show that far-right extremists currently pose a greater threat to democracy and social order in Europe than their far-left counterparts due to better organization, greater propensity for violence (extremists), and more effective mobilization (van Dongen 2021). Analyses also demonstrate that they are responsible for the erosion of democratic institutions and show tolerance of authoritarian tendencies and anti-democratic actions (Svolik et al. 2022). This aligns with wider concerns expressed by the Council of Europe (2023) that the spread of nativist and xenophobic ideologies, often disseminated through online media, fuels social divisions.

Far-right parties and movements have been present in Polish politics since the fall of communism in 1989, even though they were usually marginalized (Płatek and Płucienniczak 2017; Dudek 2023, 353–354). Over the last decade, these movements have gained recognition and support culminating in the electoral victories of the right-wing party Law and Justice in 2015 and in 2020. The consolidation of a few smaller right-wing parties contributed to a growth in voter support toward *Konfederacja*, a coalition that brings together various radical-right groups (*Nowa Nadzieja* [New Hope] and *Ruch Narodowy* [National Movement]) as well as the extreme right faction *Konfederacja Korony Polskiej* [Confederation of the Polish Crown]. The coalition solidified its role as a protest party, opposing the social policies of Law and Justice and contesting COVID-19 restrictions, winning 18 seats (out of 460) in Sejm in 2023 and collecting support (1.3 million votes) for its presidential candidate in 2020.

Far-right rhetoric is built on nationalism and traditional values, especially Christianity, national identity and history. This is visible, for example, in the research on the rhetoric of extreme right politician Grzegorz Braun (Kosman 2022). The far-right takes an anti-involvement stance in the Russian-Ukrainian war, which aligns with Russian interests and narratives (Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska 2022; Cichosz et al. 2024). These far-right positions typically employ the “us vs. them” opposition (van Dijk 2000), which some scholars label as national populism in this context. It is a basic political style, which creates horizontal and vertical oppositions between “us” and “them” (Taguieff 1995). The vertical dimension concerns distinguishing “the people” from “the elite” and the horizontal direction concerns defining insiders and outsiders of the group. “Us” are presented positively as sharing a way of life, and “them” as a threat thereto. In the case of the far-right rhetoric explored in this study, “us” means “the nation” and “them” primarily means Ukrainian migrants, but also (vertically) the international entities that support Ukraine (e.g., the European Union and the USA), the Polish government (Taguieff 1995), and “internal enemies”, i.e., Polish citizens who act against the national interest.

Łuczaj (2024) observes that while the discourses against Ukrainians do not garner much attention in the traditional media, they affect the social media platforms due to the fact that they weaken traditional media monopoly in creating narratives and enable the proliferation of discourses in opposition to the dominant ones. As a result, they might play a significant role driving changes in overall societal attitude toward migration. Łuczaj (2024) explores video platforms (YouTube and CDA.pl) using multimodal discourse analysis to describe the anti-Ukrainization discourse online as a specific radical sub-type of anti-Ukrainian discourse. His study finds a number of common allegations against Ukrainians: historical controversies, economic troubles, problems of internal and external state security, symbolic issues and geopolitical affairs.

Tymińska, Korpala and Sęk (2023) analyze the use of hate speech against Ukrainians and mention historical resentments and economic troubles, as well as “Ukrainization” being a part of alt-right discourse. They associate the concept with economic domination, advantages in access to social benefits, and “invasion” in the symbolic sphere; sometimes, Ukrainization is also employed to make claims regarding the shift in the ethnic structure of Poland or even “replacement” of Poles with Ukrainians. In the same report, the authors (Tymińska et al. 2023) identified over 90,000 posts from Twitter/X published between February 2022 and January 2023 which contained hate speech against Ukrainian refugees. The report emphasizes the impact of far-right politicians, leaders and activists of radical political movements, extremist publicists and some online content creators on propagating hate narratives.

In a related study, Liber-Kwiecińska (2023) identifies eight strategies of online trolling against Ukrainians in social media comments: role reversal (it is Poles who need help); announcing the end of help for Ukrainians; representing Ukrainians as burden for Poles; reference to negative experience with Ukrainians; discouragement; shifting responsibility; struggle against Ukrainization and conspiracy; and references to history. She argues that specific emotional responses are created through both content and form of the messages, particularly the fear of identity loss and material loss, the anger about unequal treatment, resentments due to the privileges the Ukrainians allegedly enjoy, and the pity for the Polish elderly and the youngest who do not receive due care because of the migrants. In terms of form, specific deliberate lexical and stylistic choices are employed (Ukraine written in lower case; derogatory language used to refer to Ukrainians, e.g., *ukry*; odd puns, e.g., Ukraine referred to as *upadlina*¹).

4. Methodology

The empirical material for this study consists of posts and comments from Instagram and Facebook posted between 2022 and 2024, forming this study's dataset (henceforth ANTI-U), collected through snowball sampling, which is a somewhat opportunistic approach to data acquisition (Veszelszki 2017). The initial posts gave us leads to the sources with similar rhetoric based on hashtags or references made by the users, including communities where anti-Ukrainian discourses are prevalent, i.e., specific Instagram profiles such as *patoukraina*, or social media of far-right political parties and politicians (e.g., *Konfederacja* and Grzegorz Braun). We also found anti-Ukrainian comments under posts of (controversial and often attacked) organizations that monitor racist and xenophobic behaviors, which attracts attention and attacks of far-right commenters (e.g., *Ośrodek Monitorowania Zachowań Rasistowskich i Ksenofobicznych* [Center for combating racist and xenophobic behavior]).

The ANTI-U dataset amounts to 220 Polish-language posts and comments (5800 words) and only includes content with argumentation; we disregarded short responses (e.g., one-word comments and emoticons). The passages selected as examples for the qualitative analysis were also anonymized and translated from Polish into English with minor modifications to secure their grammaticality and readability. Since the extent of available data was very limited, our corpus does not allow for some more size-sensitive corpus-based approaches, such as collocation

1. These negatively charged neologisms are used as nominations of Ukrainians and Ukraine. In our understanding, *Upadlina* potentially blends several lexemes: *UPA* (Ukrainian Insurgent Army, in Poland associated with genocides on Polish citizens during WW2); *upadłość* (being decrepit); and *Ukraina* (Ukraine). *Ukry* is an augmentative (and therefore pejorative) form of the word *Ukraińcy* (Ukrainians).

analysis. The passages are also fragmented, oftentimes expressing only a part of thought or argument; we excluded the ones that were too vague or ambiguous. Despite the sample being small, we find it representative of the far-right rhetoric in the context of Ukrainian refugees. The study also uses a larger special purpose social media corpus in Polish (130,000 words) compiled in the CORECON project (henceforth CORECON-PL-S) as a reference corpus to highlight specific areas that we then explore qualitatively.

This study first conducts a corpus analysis of the ANTI-U dataset with *Lancsbox* (Brezina et al. 2020) to highlight patterns that we later explore via discourse analysis (Gillings et al. 2023). We employ log-likelihood based keyness analysis for ANTI-U and CORECON-PL-S corpora, which makes it possible to compare the frequencies of specific terms between two datasets to rank the most meaningful lexical differences between them. Log-likelihood not only emphasizes the exclusive terms, but also those that occur throughout both datasets in high frequencies, but are represented more strongly in one (Gabrielatos 2018). This allows us to show that patterns of use of lexical units are not isolated, but rather constitute a discourse structured around specific thematic domains. We also use *Hatespeech* tool created by Clarin-PL (Kocoń et al. 2021), which employs NLP to evaluate the offensiveness of texts based on fixed criteria (offensive language, slurs and negative attitudes), which allows us to check the extent to which our two corpora differ in terms of their use of hate speech, treated as a feature of anti-Ukrainian rhetoric.

The analysis of the *topoi* is based on the framework established in Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Kienpointner 1992; Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Wodak 2015), which treats *topoi* as a type of informal argumentation that relies on experience, applied knowledge, and practical reasoning. *Topoi* associate certain arguments with conclusions drawn by following a specific reasoning pattern particular to a given claim (e.g., the *topos* of burdening employs the notion of a group or an entity that in some way causes difficulties for another group). In defining each *topos*, we follow the pattern of warrants connecting premises, e.g., if *x* then *y* (Kienpointner 1992). As Krzyżanowski (2010, 85) notes, “the aim of the [*topos*] analysis is to: (a) arrive at a typology of *topoi* specific for the analyzed discourses, and (b) define the actual scope and qualitative features of different arguments constructing different expressions of identity, also by means of arguing in favor or against certain individual or collective ideas.”

We find DHA suitable for our purposes due to the fact that it aims at analyzing discourse within historical and social contexts (Wodak and Meyer 2016), and far-right discourse often refers to history, national myths and ideology. DHA helps us show how the past narratives are used for legitimization of current ideologies

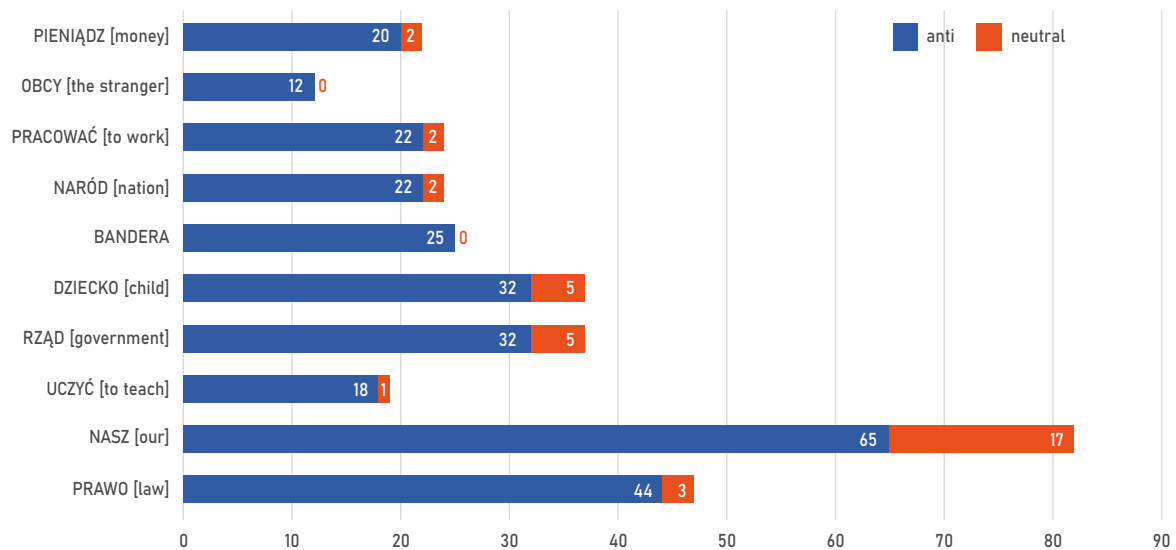
(e.g., nativism, nationalism); for example, Wodak (2021) shows how references to history (e.g., national myths, cultural fears) can be effective in far-right populist rhetoric to promote anti-immigrant policies. Moreover, DHA allows for mapping of universal rhetorical strategies (e.g., references to national safety) as well as for more local historical context (Wodak and Boukala 2015), which is bound to the references to Polish-Ukrainian history here.

We concur with the criticisms (Žagar 2010) of the use of the concept of *topos* in DHA due to its fuzziness and lack of scholarly rigor. At the same time, however, we find it suitable for our purposes due to its openness and flexibility. It has also been widely applied in the analyses of discourses on refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, and migrants (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; KhosraviNik 2014) in Canadian (Mustafa et al. 2021) and British contexts (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008; O'Regan and Riordan 2018). In this paper, we rely on the typology of *topoi* based on the study by Reisigl and Wodak (2001), which aptly captures nationalist discourses in the existing studies (cf. Bennett 2018; Rheindorf and Wodak 2020; Tsakona et al. 2020). To minimize the risk of subjective interpretations, we coded the data independently, after close reading, and solved discrepancies together. We are aware that the historical dimensions and *topoi* can be selectively referenced in the data; therefore, we base our analysis on similar research on anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and far-right rhetoric, which we explain in the discussion section.

5. Quantitative analysis

Clarin-PL's *Hatespeech* tool (Kocoń et al. 2021) indicates that in the CORECON-PL-S, the data are mostly unmarked. The tool, set to be moderately sensitive, tagged 25.1% of the ANTI-U sample as hate speech, in contrast to 0.5% found in the CORECON-PL-S. This is a strong indicator that the anti-Ukrainian entries do not align with the samples of general social media discourse in terms of standard language use. While this result alone is unsurprising, it highlights the degree of negativity that ANTI-U corpus contains. Given how prevalent hate speech was in ANTI-U, our next step was to find the thematic domains around which hate speech revolved. We compared the two lemmatized corpora based on log-likelihood, which produced a list of keywords which stood out in the anti-Ukrainian discourse. In Figure 1, the order of words is based on keyness rankings and relative frequencies predicted per 10,000 words have been provided for both corpora due to different corpus sizes. ANTI-U corpus is in blue and the CORECON-PL-S corpus is in orange. Only selected keywords are shown.²

2. Words such as *kurwa* [here: whore, as it is used directly to describe a person], *smród* [odour], *nierzqd* (promiscuous sexual activity; also used to jokingly refer to *rzqd* [government] as unruly by the addition of *nie*-[non-] prefix) and *zaraza* [plague] were also shown to be key for the anti-Ukrainian discourse; dehumanizing and depreciating discourses however remain outside the scope of this study.

Figure 1. Selected highest ranking keywords from the anti-Ukrainian corpus

Based on these data points (Figure 1) and the concordances thereof, we distinguished several categories that function within the anti-Ukrainian discourse, which aided us in annotating the corpus later. Firstly, the populist, horizontal “us-them” distinction is visible based on the use of the words such as *nasz* [our] and *naród* [nation] that are contrasted with *obcy* [the stranger]. Secondly, the anti-Ukrainian comments make ample use of the highly controversial figure of Stepan Bandera and the historical context that he evokes. Thirdly, migrants’ impact on education is emphasized, as indicated by the words such as *dziecko* [child] and *uczyć* [to teach]. Then, legal and political matters are brought up by the notions such as *prawo* [law] and *rząd* [government]. Finally, the impact of Ukrainians on the job market and economy is also discussed through the terms such as *pracować* [to work] and *pieniądz* [money]. Having generated these core categories, we independently annotated the corpus with relevant topic areas (i.e., education, national identity, economy, historical references, government), allowing for those to co-occur per selected corpus entry. This classification was applicable to the vast majority of our data.

6. Qualitative analysis of *topoi*

We found that the anti-Ukrainian resentment toward migrants in our data is mainly confined to five of the *topoi* proposed in Reisigl and Wodak’s typology (2001): *topos* of threat, *topos* of burdening, *topos* of justice, *topos* of culture and *topos* of history. The comments in this particular discourse focus on several key areas indicated by the corpus analysis (education, national identity, economy,

historical references, government). The *topoi* naturally overlap, as employing the *topos* of history by referring to, e.g., the case of the Volyn massacre also embodies the *topos* of threat. Our classification of the data is therefore based on the most prevalent *topos* identified in each passage.

6.1. *Topos* of threat

The *topos* of threat is the most general one of the set; in their discussion, Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 70) present it as follows: “if a political action or decision bears specific dangerous, threatening consequences, one should not perform or do it. Or formulated differently: if there are specific dangers and threats, one should do something against them.” In the context of this article, allowing migrants from Ukraine to enter and stay in Poland constitutes the threat and, as noted by Liber-Kwiecińska (2023), threats to important values generate negative emotional responses. The *topos* does therefore co-occur with every other *topos* where the migrants are presented as threats to self-governance, safety, economy, and education. As it is so commonplace, we discuss this *topos* throughout our further analysis.

6.2. *Topos* of justice

The occurrence of the *topos* of justice is to be expected in anti-migrant discourses. The newcomers often receive attention and care, with abundant resources, including time and money, being devoted to their aid. This understandably generates tensions, as many underprivileged or poorer groups native to a given country to which migration occurs feel that they deserve those resources far more than the newcomers. This is also one of the reasons for the declining support for refugees in Polish society (Długosz and Izdebska-Długosz 2023; Dębicki 2024). In our data, the *topos* of justice is often employed to present a situation as generally unfavorable to Poles and benefitting Ukrainian migrants in their stead. It was shown that the sceptical attitude toward Ukrainians is correlated with a negative evaluation of one’s own economic situation and with predictions of its further decline (Długosz and Izdebska-Długosz 2023). Examples below showcase several instances of this *topos* being used in our data.

- (1) dla Ukrainy są pieniądze a dla polaków nie! A dlaczego, rozdzielać pieniądze zaległe od Unii. Dla Polaków nie ma nic, bo to wasze polityków źle zarządzenia. Dla kogo służyć i polscy politycy? Na pewno nie Polakom służycie i pomagacie! Co z wami jest nie tak. Samowola gdy nie ma kto uczciwie rządzić. [For Ukrainians there is money, for Poles there is not! So why, why divide the money from the EU. For Poles, nothing, because of your politicians’ poor resolutions. You surely do not serve or help Poles! Something is wrong with you. Lawlessness rules when there is nobody honest out there to govern.]

- (2) A ja KURWA musiałem wyjeżdżać z własnego kraju za chlebem bo „mój kraj” nie był w stanie mi nic zaoferować prócz pracy na czarno za 10 zł na godzinę. [And I FUCKING had to leave this country to make ends meet because “my country” could not offer anything but illegal work that was paid 10 zlotys [2.5 EUR] per hour.]
- (3) Tak jesteśmy dyskryminowani ale naród wybiera określone osoby, na czele z Dudą i Kidawą-Błońską co krzyczą „sława ukrainie” i jeszcze inni z parlamentu. [Yes we are discriminated against, but the nation chooses specific leaders, such as [President] Duda and Kidawa-Błońska [Marshal of the Senate] who then scream “glory to Ukraine” alongside the others from the parliament.]
- (4) Rząd doprowadził do tego że Polacy stają się rasistami i to w większe mierze wobec ukrainców, za dużo im pomagając i zapominając że są również Polacy w potrzebie. Oni czują się w Polsce Jak u siebie a Polaków Jak obcokrajowców. Niestety dla rządu jest to czysty biznes. [The government has made Poles into racists, mainly toward Ukrainians; it helped them too much and forgot that Poles are also in need. They feel like it's their country in Poland and Poles are the actual foreigners. Sadly this is just sheer business for the government]

This exact attitude, presenting migrants as the undeserving beneficiaries of government's support, can be found in example (1). This exemplifies the vertical dimension of national populism (Taguieff 1995), creating the “us-them” opposition between politicians and citizens, foregrounding the government that is responsible for the injustice and shifting migrants to the background throughout (1), (2), (3) and (4). These examples point to specific agents, including the conservative president, who allow for these injustices to continue. The hyperboles and generalizations such as “lawlessness rules” in (1) and “the government has turned Poles into racists” in (4) assert catastrophic (and fictional) outcomes of the government's decision making. Some comments employ contrasting in the horizontal “us-them” manner, e.g., “For Ukrainians there is money, for Poles there is not!”

Contrasting is also visible in quote (2) that embodies the ironic bitterness that frequently appears when the *topos* of justice is employed: a Pole who had migrated abroad to seek work sees their country giving benefits to foreigners. The commenter distances themselves from the state through using quotation marks for “my country.” Once again, the “us-them” opposition is created to emphasize that Ukrainians in Poland are treated better than Poles themselves. The argument is based on the premise that Ukrainians are receiving at least enough support to make ends meet, while honest citizens in the past did not. The comment is personalized (just as in (3)): the author presents themselves as a victim, with the upper-case swear word further contributing to the emotional load of the message.

As showcased in (4), even relative equality of opportunity is not viewed as just in anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. The idea of “Poland first” permeates the discourse, calling for the focus on Polish needs rather than those of “the others.” At the same time, role reversal occurs (same as in (3)), indicating that Ukrainians have taken place that should have belonged to Poles and are given the opportunities that Poles

never had access to (2). This resonates with what Liber-Kwiecińska (2023) refers to as resentment in her discussion on trolling.

6.3. *Topoi* of burdening, finances and abuse

Discourses that employ the *topos* of burdening will maintain that, if burdened by something, a specific entity, group or the whole nation, should do what is necessary to reduce or remove the source of that burden (Wodak and Reisigl 2001). What constitutes a burden here might vary, ranging from generating financial issues (*topos* of finances); taking unjustified advantage of the aid provided (*topos* of abuse); to producing challenges in specific institutions, such as education (which we discuss separately in the section devoted to the *topos* of culture).

- (5) Tak jest tu jest Polska nie ukropl!!!! Dość utrzymywania obcokrajowców z naszych podatków niech wracają do siebie 90 % Ukrainy funkcjonuje normalnie. [Yes this is Poland not ukropl [blend of Ukraine and Poland]! Enough of paying for foreigners with our tax money, make them go back to their country where 90% of Ukraine functions normally.]
- (6) Uchylić pomoc dla cudzoziemców bez żadnego kryterium dochodowego - nawet dezterter, pracujący i zarabiający olbrzymie pieniądze może bez problemu dostać od 700 do 1400zł miesięcznie przez 12 miesięcy, jeśli tylko zapisze się na kurs jęz. Polskiego. A Polak do uzyskania dopłaty za prąd nie może broń boże przekroczyć paru groszy ponad głodowe kryterium. [Revoke help for foreigners who declare no income - even a deserter who works and makes huge money can easily get from 700 to 1400 PLN [160 to 320 EUR] per month for 12 months, all they need to do is sign up for a course in Polish language. And for a Pole to get electricity subsidized, they can't be making even a few cents above the pathetically low criterion.]
- (7) Jeśli są miliardy dla obcego państwa, to jeśli ma się coś znaleźć to każdemu ale każdemu Polakowi, który pracował w tym kraju przed 89' i po....Bo to nasi Dziadkowie i Ojcowie podnosili ten kraj że zgłiszcz ||wojny to Oni wyparowało żyły, [...] chcą nam domy zabrać o które dbamy o które walczymy każdego dnia dla dzieci i wnuków. [If there are billions to give to a foreign state, something should also be given to each and every Pole who worked in the country before 1989 and afterwards... Because when our Grandfathers and Fathers were breaking their backs, trying to restore this country from ashes, They worked extremely hard, [...] they want to take our houses which we fight for every day for our children and grandchildren.]

In our data, the *topos* of finances often co-occurs with the *topoi* of abuse and justice. Ukrainian migrants are said to be taking what should instead have been given to Poles, heavily emphasizing once again that the government is not logically distributing money and privileges. Comments such as (1), (6), and (7) construct their arguments in a similar fashion, also evoking the *topoi* of justice and finances. In (7), appeal to ethos is employed: Polish nationals are said to need the money and benefits as much as the migrants do, but also to deserve it more, because their “Grandfathers and Fathers were trying to restore this country from ashes”; then, the appeal to pathos further emphasizes the injustice: “we fight for every day for our children and grandchildren.”

The use of the *topos* of abuse in comment (6) shows the ease with which Ukrainians can receive money regardless of their needs, with its second part implying that they do not hesitate to abuse the system. Comment (5), on the other hand, argues that Ukrainians are staying in Poland for no reason other than the financial benefits. This is built on the false assumption that Ukraine is a safe place to live in and stay at, which is presented as a fact and thus forced into the common ground. Similarly, in (7) the comments overgeneralize the situation by framing all Poles as struggling financially, which the government is said to be oblivious of: this again showcases the vertical dimension of national populism.

6.4. *Topos* of culture

Topos of culture is employed when in a discourse, a group “being the way it is” (Reisigl and Wodak 2001) endangers another group’s identity. In our data, the *topos* of culture was mainly used in relation to the issues of national identity and the educational system, both of which were often presented as threatened or even already forfeited.

- (8) Aha, czyli w każdej polskiej szkole będą uroczystości z okazji świąt państwowych Ukrainy,. Sale będą zajęte na dodatkowe lekcje , czyli nasze dzieci będą miały zajęcia do ...21:00. Już teraz szkoły pracują na dwie zmiany. Już widzę tych ukraińskich nauczycieli i naszych dyrektorów wchodzących im w cztery litery. A i jeszcze będą okolicznościowe gazetki sławiące...,no kogo? Zgadnijcie. I to za wasze pieniądze, polscy rodzice. [Yep, so in all Polish schools, events will be held on all Ukrainians national celebrations. Rooms will be occupied for additional classes , so our kids will have classes until ...9 PM. Schools are already running on two shifts. I can imagine all those Ukrainian teachers and our headmasters licking their boots. And we will get occasional school newspapers which sing the praises of...,guess whom? [Bandera]. And all this for your money, Polish parents.]
- (9) Tu jest Polska i jak obcy jest w Polsce niech się uczy polskiego i naszej historii i niech każdy dureń który wchodzi na wyżyny o tym pamięta jak chcą uczyć ukraińskiego niech uczą po godzinach jak nasze dzieci się uczą w innych państwach mam dosyć wchodzenia innym w dupę a jak im się nie podoba niech spadają z kąd przyszli. [This is Poland and when a foreigner is in Poland they should learn Polish and our history. Any prancing moron should remember about this when they say we should teach Ukrainian language, which should be done after hours the way our children learn abroad I am done licking others’ arses and if they don’t like it, they can crawl back to the hole they came from]
- (10) Tu jest POLSKA, NIE UKROPOL! PIĄTKA Konfederacji Korony Polskiej: 1. Wstrzymanie pozwoleń na pobyt stały oraz nadawanie polskiego obywatelstwa Ukraińcom. Zaostrzenie kryteriów nadawania obywatelstwa polskiego. 2. Żadnego „komponentu ukraińskiego” w polskich szkołach. Pełna polonizacja dzieci ukraińskich. Obniżenie dotychczasowych praw mniejszości ukraińskiej w Polsce do poziomu praw mniejszości polskiej na Ukrainie. 3. Obowiązkowe podpisanie Lojalki Antybanderowskiej przez każdego obywatela Ukrainy. 4. Świadczenia socjalne tylko dla Polaków i dzieci obywateli polskich. Żadnych transferów pieniężnych i materialnych na Ukrainę. 5. Natychmiastowa deportacja wszystkich ukraińskich przestępców na Ukrainę, dość utrzymywania obcokrajowców w polskich więzieniach. #StopUkrainizacjiPolski #StopBanderyzacjiPolski #ŻebyPolskaByłaPolska [This is POLAND, not UKROPOL! The FIVE [fundamentals] of Konfederacja: 1. Revoke the permanent stay

permits and stop granting Polish citizenship to Ukrainians; 2. No “Ukrainian component” at Polish schools. Complete Polonisation of Ukrainian children; Revoke the rights of Ukrainian minority in Poland to the rights of Polish minority in Ukraine; 3. Signing the anti-Bandera loyalty oath by all Ukrainians; 4. Social benefits exclusively for Poles and their children. Zero material and financial support abroad; 5. Immediate deportation of all Ukrainian criminals to Ukraine – enough with keeping foreigners in Polish prisons. #StopUkrainizationOfPoland #StopBanderisationOfPoland #ForPolandToRemainPolish]

With the incoming migrants, many children came who then attended classes in Polish schools: this called for certain reforms that would allow the newcomers to adapt more easily to the new conditions. In the anti-Ukrainian circles, the idea of adjusting the existing education system to the migrants has been met with strong pushback. Comment (8) employs a hyperbole that stresses the imagined degree of changes and the (envisioned) dire consequences of allowing Ukrainian educators to change the Polish curriculum. Comments like (8) do also employ *topoi* of burden and finances by manufacturing threats that such reforms might bring. The *topos* of threat is extremely potent here, as the overgeneralized, exaggerated arguments present a grim alternate reality if the Ukrainian migrants’ presence in Poland is not addressed: children staying at school until “9 PM” on the one hand and the curriculum idolizing the contentious figure of Stepan Bandera on the other (“singing the praises of...,guess whom?”). Comment (9), employing the argument of “this is Poland,” generates a normative obligation for Ukrainians to unconditionally assimilate.

The *topos* of culture is also employed by the discussions on “stopping Ukrainization of Poland”/“deukrainization of Poland.” In examples such as (10), the idea is circulated that “Ukrainization of Poland needs to be stopped,” presupposing that Poland has already been undergoing the process. The loss of national identity due to the incoming migrants is heavily emphasized here, bringing in the themes of what Reisigl and Wodak (2021, 71) refer to as over-foreignization: it is linked to the *topos* of threat of racism and employed in arguments that pertain to being overwhelmed by “the strangers.” These ideas align with the other examples: (8) and (9), which present the migrants as a powerful force capable of taking over the country.

Example (10) is also key, as it is taken directly from the official Facebook profile of the extreme right party *Konfederacja Korony Polskiej*, which then was a part of the *Konfederacja* coalition. The entirety of the quoted statement openly condemns the Ukrainian migrants by targeting them specifically and proposes to introduce heavy legal restrictions on their ability to exist in Poland. The utter radicalism and harshness of these proposals seems to escalate the urgency of addressing the perceived Ukrainian threat to the Polish identity, employing the *topoi* of culture and threat.

6.5. *Topos* of history

The *topos* of history refers to learning from the mistakes of the past. As Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 70) put it, “because history teaches that specific actions have specific consequences, one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation (allegedly) comparable with the historical example referred to.” Employing the *topos* of history produces arguments in which the historical development prefigures how a current group or phenomenon should be understood and dealt with, which sometimes facilitates the concurrent use of the *topos* of threat:

- (11) Kiedy wreszcie znikną symbole oprawców, którzy masowo mordowali Polaków, pokażcie mi gdzie są flagi polskie na Ukrainie, może zapytajcie banderowca Sadowego czemu Lwów nie jest udekorowany polskimi flagami? [When will we get rid of the symbols [Ukrainian flag] of tormentors who committed mass murder on Poles, show me where they flew Polish flags in Ukraine, ask that banderite, Sadovyi, why Lviv is not decorated with Polish flags?]
- (12) Wysłałbym pro ukraińskich polityków, zaczynając od prezydencika Dudy razem z jego orderami. Niech tam na Ukrainie rozda swoim Banderowcom. [I’d send all pro-ukrainian politicians there [to war], starting with our little president Duda and his medals. He can give them away in Ukraine to all those Banderites.]

Given the particular case of Poland and Ukraine, the historical context is easy to abuse (see “Ukrainians in Poland” section). Throughout the anti-migrant discourses we have analyzed, it was extremely common to refer to all Ukrainians as Banderites (see Figure 1). The *topos* of history permits to present all Ukrainians as genocidal monsters whose only goal is to continue the slaughter of Poles. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the Ukrainian officials are shown as being reluctant to condemn historical figures that Poles perceive as highly controversial, such as Bandera and Shukhevych. For instance, a large wave of slating comments framing all Ukrainians as Banderites occurred when multiple conservative outlets reported that the statue of Shukhevych in Lviv was scheduled for renovation (Winogrodzki 2024).

Example (11) abuses the metonymy of “flags standing for entire nations” by equating all Ukrainians with “tormentors who committed mass murder on Poles,” meanwhile associating the Ukrainian flag itself with oppression. This constitutes the appeal to historical trauma that suggests continuity of the nationalistic aggression from the past. Flag as a symbol is also used to show the postcolonial view: the example of Lviv is brought up, which in the past lay within the Polish territory. Finally, the imperative clause “show me where they flew Polish flags in Ukraine” boldly accuses Ukrainians of no reciprocity by implying that there is not even one Polish flag to be found there, which is factually wrong.

7. Discussion

The discursive patterns we have identified align with the rhetoric employed in the existing research on disinformation, propaganda and far-right discourses on migrants outside of Poland. The anti-Ukrainian rhetoric infused with hate speech and negative *topoi* resonates with the tone and content of Russian propaganda – the deliberate proliferation of misleading information on Ukraine and Ukrainians by Russian agents. Some comparative studies undertaken in Poland and Moldova (Zadorožna and Butuc 2024) show typical Russian disinformation tactics: fueling internal discord, promoting suspicion of the West, amplifying societal emotions (in the case of Poland, e.g., showing Polish citizens as treated unfavorably in the distribution of social benefits or access to public healthcare), leveraging various social media (e.g., Facebook or Telegram), endorsing pro-Russian narratives or proliferating anti-Ukrainian conspiracy theories (e.g., about sending Polish troops to Ukraine, or an upcoming referendum to incorporate Western part of Ukraine to Poland).

As showcased in this study, anti-Ukrainian rhetoric is sometimes presented as a distinctive feature of the far-right discourse; however, the hostility and anti-immigration attitudes similar to those described herein were also observed by Taradejna (2024) in the discourses of far-left parties. This creates a convergence of far-left and far-right perspectives on the Ukrainian issue, which is not confined to the Polish context. Fagerholm (2024) analyzes the responses of 26 far-left and 33 far-right parties in Europe (*Konfederacja* included) to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and concludes that while mainstream and centrist parties mostly aligned with the West in this conflict, radicals and extremists from left and right sympathized with Russia; however, in these cases, their reasons to do so stemmed from different premises: national sovereignty and isolationism for far-right and pacifism, anti-militarism, and anti-Americanism for far-left. According to Taradejna (2024), the assertion that all of the Ukrainians are entitled to receive help and benefits was also undermined by the Polish far-left parties. The rhetoric was based on the notion that many of them were “tourists,” rather than “real refugees,” and were thus supposed to return to Ukraine.

Our study has found that the far-right anti-Ukrainian rhetoric employed numerous references to the Volyn massacre and Banderism. Likewise, the discourse of the Polish far-left often evokes these themes, as well as Ukrainian nationalism. This nationalism, in their opinion, is not a historical fact, but the living ideology of many current Polish inhabitants of Ukrainian origin, which poses an active threat to Poles and Poland. Taradejna (2024) shows that basic premises about the war influence how Ukrainians are described in the discourse of the far-left in Poland, including labelling Ukrainians as Banderites and fascists, which aligns with the rhetoric of the far-right movements that we discuss in this paper.

Other studies on far-right attitudes toward migrants show findings similar to ours. Štefančík et al. (2021) examines the speeches by the members of Slovakian far-right nationalistic party ĽSNS, whose agendas are similar to those of *Konfederacja*. Throughout the speeches by the party's MPs, several anti-migrant *topoi* are employed that align with our analyzed data. In the studies about Slovenia, Greece and United Kingdom (Štefančík et al. 2021; Boukala 2021; Kader 2016), the *topos* of economic threat is used to indicate the envisioned consequences to the population (with financial subsidies for the original citizens being revoked in favor of the migrants) and the loss of rights by the citizens to accommodate the migrants. The migrants are similarly displayed as a threat to independence and the integrity of the state and securitization is proposed as a solution to the issue. The way in which these *topoi* make their appearance is very pervasive and consistent throughout the studies.

Ukrainians in ANTI-U sample are collectively presented as “bloodthirsty Banderites,” generating strong associations with genocide and violence. Many previous studies highlight that such associations are commonly exploited by the far-right to generate and rationalize the fear and hatred toward the migrants. For example, the *topos* of culture is consistently employed against Muslim migrants (e.g., by pigeonholing Muslims as “Satan-worshipping pedophiles,” Štefančík 2021, 738). Bennett's (2018) analysis of UKIP's rhetoric also highlights how Muslim migrants were all equated with Jihadists and primarily presented as a threat to safety, stability and economy. Similarly, Kader (2016) highlights how the British far-right anti-Muslim discourse establishes the link between radical Islam and Nazism, which it later exploits to create generalizations about Muslims as such. Our corpus data, as well as the study by Lipińska and Jemielniak (2025) show that demonizing Ukrainians as “the violent other” works in the Polish context, as these same conceptualizations are now being circulated in the discourses produced by the far-right social media users.

8. Conclusion

Understanding the populist discourses and rhetoric of the far right enables more nuanced policy interventions, informed public debate and effective countermeasures. Our findings indicate that in the far-right social media discourse, Ukrainians are presented as an aggregate that collectively adheres to a fixed set of dangerous norms and shares similar anti-Polish goals. Through the use of *topoi* of threat and history, figures and organizations from the past with whom Poles have very negative associations (e.g., Bandera) are evoked to rationalize the disdain toward the migrants. The language used in these discourses is abundant

in overgeneralizations, hyperboles, appeals to emotions (especially based on historical trauma), oversimplifications and false or manipulative assertions. In a similar context, such attitudes have been found in the analyses of far-right discourses about Islamic migrants (Bennett 2018; Boukala 2021; Kader 2016; Štefančík 2021). Ukrainian migrants are also presented as a real, pronounced threat to Polish independence, with many remarks claiming that Poland itself might even be beyond recovery. These findings are consistent with the study by Łuczaj (2024) and the research of Liber-Kwiecińska (2023).

Our findings are worrying in the context of the growing support for the Polish far-right. The aim of far-right argumentation is not only to counter the immigrant crisis: the rhetoric is also used to undermine politicians, government, and media professionals, which coalesces as distrust among citizens. In the Polish case, this opens cracks in social trust and social cohesion, allowing the pro-Russian narratives and disinformation to proliferate (Cichosz et al. 2024). This, in turn, further polarizes the society, perpetuating the above-mentioned distrust.

Alongside threats, Polish far-right politicians propose solutions. For a long time, the postulates of the *Konfederacja* coalition have included limiting the social benefits for Ukrainian refugees, which has recently become a part of mainstream political agenda. The case of the extreme right party *Konfederacja Korony Polskiej* of Grzegorz Braun showcases how far a legitimate, reasonably large political party can take the anti-migrant agenda and employ a broad repertoire of rhetorical devices to further their own political ends. Here, the proposal is to cut any support for Ukrainian migrants who are openly presented as a real, pronounced threat to the autonomy of Poland as a country. We believe, however, that this rhetoric might be dangerous, as it has the potential of partly derailing the discussion from the real geopolitical threat, which is the ongoing invasion next door.

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