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Female, Deserving, and European? The Changing European Migration Discourse in the Face of the Russia–Ukraine War

Elena Dück · Zina Weisner · Elodie Thevenin

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Abstract The initial response of the European Union (EU) to people fleeing Ukraine was unusually univocal and welcoming, culminating in the swift activation of the Temporary Protection Directive. This predominantly humanitarian response represents a special case and an outlier in terms of how the EU and its member states have responded to previous displacements. This paper explores the discursive construction that made this response possible, by looking at how forced migration from Ukraine has been characterised in the European political discourses. Drawing on discourse theory and critical migration studies, we assume that the discourse is marked by differences drawn along the lines of “race,” “gender,” and “distance,” which are linked to ideas about national identity and European values. In order to reflect the multilevel European discourse, we reconstruct the political discourse on the EU level as well as in two diverse cases, Poland and Germany. Our findings suggest that despite national differences and the presence of well-established tropes of deservingness, the European discourse is not only based on ideas surrounding vulnerability of the Ukrainian *Other* and the European *Self* but is also influenced by the perception of the threatening Russian *Other*. Especially in Poland, welcoming refugees from Ukraine is linked to security concerns, while the EU and German discourses stress the role of European values and solidarity. Thus, the acceptance

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of Ukrainian refugees should be seen as part of the overall European response to Russian aggression and not as a departure from its previous stance on migration.

Keywords Refugee protection · Refugee deservingness · Russia–Ukraine war · European migration discourse · European values

Weiblich, würdig und westlich? Der sich wandelnde europäische Migrationsdiskurs angesichts des russisch-ukrainischen Krieges

Zusammenfassung Die anfängliche Reaktion der Europäischen Union (EU) auf die aus der Ukraine fliehenden Menschen war ungewöhnlich einstimmig und einladend und gipfelte in der raschen Aktivierung der Richtlinie über vorübergehenden Schutz. Diese überwiegend humanitäre Reaktion stellt einen Sonderfall und Ausreißer in Bezug auf die Art und Weise dar, wie die EU und ihre Mitgliedstaaten auf bisherige Vertreibungen reagiert haben. In diesem Beitrag werden die diskursiven Konstruktionen analysiert, die diese Reaktion ermöglichten. Hierzu wird untersucht, wie die erzwungene Migration aus der Ukraine in den europäischen politischen Diskursen beschrieben wurde. Ausgehend von diskurstheoretischen Ansätzen und der kritischen Migrationsforschung nehmen wir an, dass der Diskurs von den Kategorien „Ethnie“, „Geschlecht“ und „Distanz“ geprägt ist, die mit Vorstellungen von nationaler Identität und europäischen Werten verbunden sind. Um den europäischen Diskurs auf mehreren Ebenen abzubilden, rekonstruieren wir den politischen Diskurs auf EU-Ebene sowie in zwei unterschiedlichen Fällen, Polen und Deutschland. Unsere Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass der europäische Diskurs trotz nationaler Unterschiede und des Vorhandenseins etablierter Tropen der Schutzwürdigkeit nicht nur auf Vorstellungen über die Verletzlichkeit des ukrainischen *Anderen* und des europäischen *Selbst* beruht, sondern auch von der Wahrnehmung des bedrohlichen russischen *Anderen* beeinflusst wird. Vor allem in Polen wird die Aufnahme von Flüchtlingen aus der Ukraine mit Sicherheitsbedenken in Verbindung gebracht, während die EU und der deutsche Diskurs die Rolle der europäischen Werte und der Solidarität betonen. Daher sollte die Aufnahme ukrainischer Flüchtlinge als Teil der europäischen Antwort auf die russische Aggression verstanden werden und nicht als Abkehr von der bisherigen Haltung zur Migration.

Schlüsselwörter Flüchtlingsschutz · Schutzwürdigkeit · Russland-Ukraine-Krieg · Europäischer Migrationsdiskurs · Europäische Werte

1 Introduction

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 not only disrupted the European order of peace but also challenged long-standing attitudes on how to deal with conflict and its consequences. All European Union (EU) countries, with the notable exception of Hungary, supported EU financial aid for Ukraine and

sanctions against Russia. Furthermore, EU countries quickly granted protection to Ukrainians fleeing their country. The EU's response has been unusually univocal and welcoming, culminating in the swift activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), which exempts Ukrainians from the regular asylum application process and allows them to move freely within the EU for 90 days. The quick, comparably unbureaucratic, and empathetic response of the EU countries stands in stark contrast to previous predominantly restrictive discourse and practices regarding migration and asylum. This draws attention to displacement from Ukraine as a special case and an outlier compared to how the EU has reacted to similar events previously. What is even more puzzling is that the Visegrad countries that strongly opposed harmonising EU migration policies and accepting more refugees in the past (Zaun 2022) are now among the leading countries hosting Ukrainians. However, what at first glance appears to be a shift, or *Zeitenwende*, in European migration policy might also point to

“[...] the risk of a pernicious development: the systematisation of a right of asylum à la carte in the EU—when it should be a universal and indivisible human right according to the Geneva convention and guaranteed by Article 18 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights” (Weisner and Courbon 2022).

This raises the question of how refugees¹ from Ukraine were discursively constructed, making such a response possible. Based on previous research, we assume that the current reactions do not constitute a general break with the EU's migration regime but follow a well-established hierarchisation and (b)ordering along the markers of “race,” “gender,” and “distance.” The reactions reinforce the said logic, whereby the predominantly feminised refugees from Ukraine enable a “politics of pity” (Aradau 2004a) and constructions of vulnerability, rather than the usual politics of securitisation of migration and borders. Drawing on discourse theory (Doty 1993; Larsen 1997; Hansen 2006), we argue that policy changes such as the one observed in the case of Ukrainian displacement are connected to discourses that facilitate them. Thus, in this article we analyse how migration from Ukraine was constructed in the European² political discourse. To answer this question, we inductively reconstructed the political discourse on the EU level and on the national level in Germany and Poland, which we identified as diverse cases. In the following section, we introduce our conceptual framework and situate it in the existing literature. We then outline our methodological approach before presenting the results of our reconstructive analysis and interpreting them from a critical perspective. We conclude by summarising our findings and their implications for further analysis of EU migration discourses and practices.

¹ We use “migrants,” “refugees,” and “displaced people” as terms in this paper, acknowledging that they are politically charged and that they imply the possibility of a neat separation between people forced to flee and those leaving voluntarily. Although such a dichotomy does not reflect reality (Erdal and Oeppen 2018), there may be different legal statuses connected to each term.

² The term “EUrope” problematises frequently employed usages that equate the European Union with Europe and Europe with the EU. Furthermore, EUrope is not reducible to the institutions of the EU (see Stierl 2020).

1.1 Conceptual Framework: Identity and Difference in Migration Discourses

The unprecedented reaction of the EU towards the displacement of millions of people in the aftermath of February 24, 2022, quickly evoked comparisons with earlier instances of people fleeing to the EU. Based on the assumption that language is productive (Hansen 2006, p. 17), we use discourse analysis to better understand the “web of meaning” (Laclau and Mouffe 1987, p. 82) and how these discourses make certain policies possible (Doty 1993) and thereby reinforce power structures in the international system. Lene Hansen contends that foreign policy discourse “always articulates a *Self* and a series of *Others*” (Hansen 2006, p. 6), which also applies to migration policy discourses that are often closely linked to foreign policies and engage in a practice of boundary drawing by determining who belongs to the *Self* and who is the *Other*. As Stuart Hall points out,

“From within, Europe has always represented itself as somehow autochthonous—producing itself, by itself, from within itself; whereas we have always been obliged to ask, ‘How does Europe imagine its “unity”? How can it be imagined, in relation to its “others”?’” (Hall 2021a, p. 376).

While national identities are discursively produced, discourse also provides a framework for future policy decisions (Larsen 1997, p. 21). However, neither identity nor discourse *determine* future foreign policies. Rather, “privileged storytellers” (Milliken 1999, p. 236) seek to argumentatively link different elements of identity and behavioural preferences following the societally accepted logic of appropriateness. While discourses are always contested, the hegemonic discourse produces degrees of differences and temporal meanings that, in specific situations, facilitate or hinder certain actions. The question of difference and similarity becomes especially salient in the context of (forced) migration. How we imagine differences and similarities impacts whom we empathise with, which bodies we fear (Ahmed 2014, p. 68), and ultimately whose life is deemed worth saving (Butler 1993).

Critical security studies and critical migration studies have a long-standing tradition of pointing out the significance of social categories in the “politics of inclusion and exclusion” (Fauser et al. 2019) and the process of securitising migration (Bigo 2002; Huysmans 2006; Léonard and Kaunert 2020). Through securitisation, migration is constructed as an existential threat to the identity, cohesion, and way of life of the host community (Wæver et al. 1993). However, some migration and border studies scholars caution against overreliance on the securitisation literature and argue that the logics of “risk” or of “bordering, ordering, and othering” are more adequate to explain contemporary responses to migration movements (van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002). As Aradau (2003, 2004b) points out, the framing of human migration as a security issue categorises people on the move as either “risky” or “at risk.” Similarly, whereas some migration movements are “unwanted” (Lacy and van Houtum 2023) by European governments, some are “reluctantly accepted” (Carling 2011), leading to EU migration policies being shaped by “the political construction of migrant categories that are subject to different rights-regimes” (Mourão Permoser 2017, p. 2536).

Securitisation can also draw attention, and subsequently resources, to ethical issues (Floyd 2019), such as when migrants rather than the state/border become the referent object, and thus humanitarian migration policies and protection of refugees are the exceptional policies called for. However, as Moreno-Lax points out regarding EU border management, “[h]umanitarian vocabulary can [also] camouflage the most naked exercise of power and justify a divestiture of rights” (Moreno-Lax 2018).

In this regard, feminist and postcolonial approaches have critiqued the concept of security as inherently gendered and racialised by revealing how perceived dichotomies of masculine/feminine, us/them, and protector/protected are reproduced in certain security discourses (Stachowitsch and Sachseder 2019). These approaches therefore enable “an examination of precisely how otherness is produced through gendered, racialized, and sexualized discourses and then mobilized to justify various forms of violence and oppression” (Massaro and Williams 2013, p. 572). Post-colonial approaches particularly show how such constructions are bound to Western-centric perspectives on governing (in)security and the continuation of colonial legacies in security regimes (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2014). Authors have been scrutinising the racialised and gendered logic of EU border policies for years (Ali 2020; Hyndman 2000; Isakjee et al. 2020; Stachowitsch and Sachseder 2019; Sachseder et al. 2022; Wilcox 2017), while the humanitarian studies literature has discussed how protection norms (re)produce the gendered distinction and discursive construction of the “ideal victim(s)” (Hall 2020). Inspired by feminist scholarship (see Fineman 2008; Mackenzie 2014), an emerging research strand in migration and refugee studies focuses on the politics of vulnerability in refugee protection and resettlement (Freedman 2019; Welfens and Bekyol 2021; Welfens 2023).

In the context of the ongoing war on Ukraine, few systematic studies of the current phenomenon have been published. David De Coninck (2022) analyses the “refugee paradox” in the EU and the United States, attributing the different reactions to the perceived symbolic threat, ethnicity, and aggressor-based threat. Drawing on intergroup threat theory, he argues that compared to Afghans, Ukrainians are perceived as a low symbolic threat because they are seen as sharing the religion and values of American and European societies. Furthermore, “[a]lthough it is difficult to gauge to what extent ethnicity [...] shapes differential responses to Ukrainian and Afghan refugees, it undoubtedly contributes to an extent” (De Coninck 2022, p. 5). In a similar vein, Andrea Pettrachin and Leila Hady Abdou point to the perception of ethnic and cultural similarity, the perception of the war as being directed against Europe, and the depiction of Ukrainian defense as heroic and brave, thus appealing to “deeply conservative values” (Pettrachin and Hady Abdou 2022). Besides alleged cultural similarities and the nature of the aggression, the demographic differences from previously displaced persons might also provide a reason for the differences in treatment: More than 70% of refugees from Ukraine are women, whereas almost 70% of Syrian applicants were male (Denk 2023). While De Coninck, as well as Pettrachin and Hady Abdou, treat “racism” and “ethnic and cultural similarity” as two separate points, we argue that the idea of cultural similarity and belonging cannot be separated from racialised attributions. As Pettrachin and Hady Abdou themselves point out,

“Research has shown that anti-migrant sentiment is driven by the perception of cultural/ethnic difference and is thus inherently linked with dynamics of racialisation. Perception of cultural and ethnical difference, however, is also something that is constructed and shaped by communication” (Petrachin and Abdou 2022).

In their analysis of German migration policies, Bernhard Stahl and Anna Felfeli conclude that “the sudden political unity and the new scope for action [on the national and the EU level] reveal a racist and culturally hostile character of the past treatment of refugees” (Stahl and Felfeli 2022, p. 142). Similar conclusions have been drawn regarding Poland, where a rise in racist discourse has been documented since the alleged refugee crisis of 2015 and its politicisation, portraying immigration, and especially Muslim migrants and refugees, as a threat to Poland’s security and culture (Jaskułowski 2019; Kabata and Jacobs 2022; Schwell 2017; Thevenin 2019; Troszyński and El-Ghamari 2022). Others have argued that Poland’s support for Ukraine needs to be seen within the context of historical legacies and feelings of similar historical experiences (Babakova et al. 2022).

A recent book edited by Carrera and Ineli Ciger (2023) examines the EU’s policy responses to the displacement from Ukraine and the implementation of the TPD from interdisciplinary perspectives, including the “systemic unequal solidarity” (ibid., p. 4) and discrimination in the European asylum systems. Many of the contributions address the reasons for the activation of the TPD (Ineli Ciger 2023) and racialised border controls (Lacy and van Houtum 2023; Skordas 2023), whereas gender is addressed only in terms of the lack of a gender perspective in the TPD (Lashchuk 2023).

Although the European reactions to the Russia–Ukraine war have been widely discussed, there are no studies that systematically analyse and compare the migration discourse at the member state and the EU level. This paper aims to close this gap and to contribute to a better understanding of the multiple levels of European discourse. Furthermore, we show how underlying conceptions not only of “the other” but also of national and European identity enabled a reaction to the displacement from Ukraine that differed starkly from previous reactions. Based on the findings of previous research discussed above, we assume that inclusions into Europe or exclusion from it is the central differentiation made in European migration discourses and is closely related to markers of distance/proximity. Second, we expect race and gender to be strong markers linked to the deservingness of protection as well as to the riskiness associated with certain migration movements.

1.2 Method: Identifying Difference Within and Between European Discourses

The idea of Europe as a unity, despite its many differences, emerged gradually over centuries. However, the frontiers of Europe remain contested to this day, and with race as a “floating signifier” (Hall 2021b), not all Europeans are always perceived as *true* Europeans, as “West Europeans often regarded East Europeans as barbaric” (Hall 2018). While Europeanness is connected to belonging to the “West,” this self-perception is highly reliant on non-Western others. Furthermore, even within

“white” Europe there are internal others, especially Jews and women, who have been excluded for centuries (Hall 2018). This raises the somewhat difficult question about European identity and discourse.

While no single European identity is established within the EU (Wodak and Weiss 2005, p. 128), it is possible to reconstruct the ideas about European identity and values expressed by privileged speakers in the EU. Moreover, the EU is characterised by its multilevel structure, combining supranational and intergovernmental elements, which influences the way debates take place in the EU. Thus, we compare the discourse of EU actors (European Commission, European Council, EU Parliament) and two cases of EU member states, Germany and Poland. We selected these cases because, within the EU Germany and Poland accepted the greatest number of Ukrainians in total numbers (Statista 2023). This contrasts with Poland’s anti-migration stance in the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015, while Germany was perceived as particularly welcoming to people fleeing the Syrian civil war. We opted for this approach to reflect the multilayered structure of the EU and to be able to explore whether and how the EU level discourse is reflected on the national level, and vice versa.

To answer our research question, we analysed parliamentary debates and political speeches addressing the issues of the “Ukraine war,” “migration,” “displacement,” and “refugees.” Our analysis focuses on the first year after the full-scale invasion. However, we included the debate of the German Bundestag about the anniversary of the *Zeitenwende* on March 2, 2023, moving slightly out of this time frame. We analysed two debates in the European Parliament in addition to four communications from the Commission and two from the Council, six debates in the German Bundestag, and six in the Polish Sejm. We used MAXQDA (VERBI Software, Berlin, Germany) to inductively code the debates. Furthermore, we identified the most important “privileged storytellers” and included their additional remarks, speeches, and utterances. In the analysis of our results, we focused on four areas that had emerged as key elements in the debates: the description of the war and Russia, the characterisation of Ukrainians, the differentiation between refugees, and, finally, European values. Moreover, by comparing the three cases, we were able to tease out similarities and differences across the EU migration discourse. Before a description of our analysis, the following section provides a brief overview of the policy responses to the Ukrainian displacement.

2 European Policy Responses to Displacement from Ukraine

The EU’s reaction to people fleeing Ukraine was closely linked to the reaction to the full-scale invasion itself. Besides military support for Ukraine as well as far-reaching sanctions and their consequences for the EU’s economy, dealing with the displacement of people from Ukraine became one of the most pressing issues. Only days after the invasion, the Council of the European Union activated the TPD,³

³ Denmark opted out of the activation of the TPD and is hence not bound by its application (European Union 2022).

which grants beneficiaries a residence permit and access to employment, education, accommodation, medical care, and social welfare, as well as the ability to move freely within the EU (European Commission 2023). This protection status applies to all Ukrainian citizens as well as to third-country nationals who have resided in Ukraine with an international or national protection status. Not covered are third-country nationals with a regular permanent residence in Ukraine (European Union 2022). The EU Commission had initially proposed that the latter group, e.g., students from Africa and Asia, should also be entitled to protection status (Carrera et al. 2022); however, this proposal was overturned by the Visegrad countries, Poland in particular (Barigazzi 2022). Overall, the temporary protection system provided a means of channelling a very large and rapid movement of people into routes that were safe and legal.

Poland, followed by Germany, accepted the largest total number of people fleeing Ukraine during the first year of the war (UNHCR 2023). It was up to the discretion of EU member states to implement a separate national regulation in line with the TPD. Germany decided to accept all refugees from Ukraine, regardless of their nationality, and did not set an upper limit (Welt 2023). Poland promptly enacted a law providing assistance to Ukrainian nationals who arrived in the country on or after February 24, 2022. However, there were reports of persons of colour being singled out at the Polish border (Tagesschau 2022a; Babakova et al. 2022; Wihtol de Wenden 2022). While the African Union condemned such racist practices (African Union 2022), Polish politicians promptly emphasised their support for all people fleeing the war.

In Germany and Poland, people from Ukraine, in contrast to refugees from other parts of the world, are allowed to freely choose where they want to live and are not subject to mandatory central housing. Because there are already many asylum applicants and people living under subsidiary protection in Germany, invoking the TPD created a de facto privileged class of refugees.⁴

The TPD was created, but not applied, in 2001 after the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia as a tool to deal with exceptionally high numbers of people fleeing their countries (“mass influx”), which put undue stress on the EU countries’ bureaucracies (European Commission 2023). Although advocates had been calling for its activation in 2015, it was not enacted in this case, “as it was deemed as too ‘politically’ unrealistic” (Carrera and Ineli Ciger 2023, p. 4) because not all EU countries were willing to host displaced persons from Syria. Although Germany was internationally perceived as welcoming to refugees in 2015, the so-called welcome culture was rather short-lived, and a backlash could be observed (Dück 2023). According to Christiane Fröhlich, the German perception of immigration as a crisis is closely linked to the idea of not being a country of immigration (2023),⁵ which has been the continued hegemonic discourse in Germany (Stahl and Felfeli 2022). Fröhlich concludes that Germany’s reaction in both 2015 and 2022 can be considered (brief)

⁴ Advocacy groups have long been calling for easier access to employment and decentralised housing for asylum seekers (Kropp 2022).

⁵ Given the crucial role of immigrants (“guest workers”) in rebuilding the country after the Second World War, this perception is remarkable.

exceptions to the rule of the discourse of not being a country of immigration (2023, p. 17).

Historically, Poland has been a country of emigration, with a radical change primarily related to immigration from Ukraine after the recession in 2009 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014—a change that remains strongly politicised (Józwiak and Piechowska 2017). Since 2015/2016, the national-conservative government has refused to participate in a European mechanism for distributing refugees (Jaskulowski 2019). In 2021, the Polish government declared a state of emergency when people from conflict-affected countries in the Middle East and Africa arrived at the Polish–Belarusian border, with the well-documented involvement of the Lukashenko regime, leading to a highly securitised response and a humanitarian crisis in the border region (Hargrave et al. 2023). Only 6 months before the Russian invasion, a survey found that “[...] a majority of Poles [were] opposed to admitting migrants of any kind” (Jacoby 2022). In contrast to the “Belarus border crisis,” Polish authorities and society demonstrated solidarity in their response to the influx of individuals fleeing Ukraine (Karakiewicz-Krawczyk et al. 2022). The media portrayal of Ukrainian refugees in Poland remained neutral, if not positive, especially when compared to the reception of refugees from other regions of the world (Zawadzka-Paluckta 2022). Thus, the reactions to the displacement from Ukraine showed a clear change from Poland’s previous stance on immigration.

Against this background of European responses to the Russia–Ukraine war, the subsequent displacement, and a brief illustration of how these responses differed from previous reactions to migration and displacement, we now present the results of our analysis of how such a response was justified and made possible.

3 The European Discourse on Migration After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Our inductive analysis shows that while the markers “race,” “gender,” and “distance” are important for legitimising the policy responses, the role of Russia as the aggressor and the nature of the war are dominant topics, which we discuss first. Second, we identified the description of Ukrainian refugees and, third, the discussion about differentiated treatment of refugees as overarching topics. A fourth category that emerged was the “European values” that are frequently invoked in the discourse.

3.1 The Exceptionality of War and the Common Enemy

The war was consistently condemned as an unprovoked act of aggression and a breach of international law (Duda 2022a; European Commission 2022a; Haßelmann 2022 [Green Party]). The situation in Ukraine was repeatedly referred to by politicians as “a war,” “an invasion,” “a conflict,” and an “aggression” (e.g., Ćwik 2022). Furthermore, on the EU level and in Germany, a distinction was made between the Russian people and Putin: “Because Putin, not the Russian people, has opted for war” (Scholz 2022a). This points to the innocence and hence deservingness of Ukrainian refugees, as they are not responsible for the situation. While the

“perpetrator of this war is Putin,” Polish officials also pointed out the role of Belarus in the aggression against Ukraine: “Lukashenko is undoubtedly an accomplice of the aggressor” (Kumoch [2022](#)).

The war was seen as an attack on the rules-based international order and a threat to the European security architecture (European Commission [2022b](#)). In Germany, this was closely linked to a debate about an increase in military spending, as well as the necessity to deepen European integration in the military sector and the importance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO; Scholz [2022b](#)). The debates included personalised descriptions of people affected by the war (Baerbock [2022](#)), connected to calls for international action (Baerbock [2022](#)) and for holding Russia accountable for its act of aggression (European Commission [2022a](#)).

Furthermore, shock and disbelief about war “in the middle of Europe” (Meuthen [2022](#)) were expressed. These interpretations were linked to the idea of the war as a struggle for democratic order itself:

“In Kiev, Kharkiv, Odessa and Mariupol, people are not only defending their homeland. They are fighting for freedom and their democracy, for values that we share with them. As democrats, as Europeans, we stand by their side, on the right side of history” (Scholz [2022a](#)).

Poland’s determined support for Ukraine in the fight against the Russian invasion is in line with its reluctance to establish links with Russia due to historical domination (Góra, Mach, and Styczyńska [2022](#)). When emphasising solidarity from the Polish public towards refugees from Ukraine, the Polish president recalled this difficult past:

“And there really was that reflex of solidarity from us Poles then [...]. This is also a question of historical memory in Poland. We know what Russian invasion means, we know what Russian captivity means” (Duda [2023a](#)).

Speakers stressed the high numbers of people displaced (European Commission [2022d](#)) within just a few days and repeatedly mentioned that this was the largest displacement since World War II (Duda [2022a](#)). Some also mentioned that the number of people hosted by EU member states was already higher after just a few weeks of the Russian invasion than in all of 2015 and 2016 (Johansson [2022a](#)). Furthermore, the situation was described as “unprecedented,” “exceptional,” “challenging,” or “urgent,” enabling “extraordinary measure[s]” (Lenaers [2022](#) [European People’s Party/EPP]).

Overall, the war was perceived as a European issue and discursively linked to historical grievances. The refugees were thus not external others, but victims of an act of aggression against Europe, which was also reflected in the characterisations of Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. Thus, there was a common enemy that needed to be fought in solidarity with Ukraine and among EU member states, as well as in close cooperation with Western allies (NATO). The speakers established an urgency for action through accounts of the horrific and unjust nature of the war, and also because of its proximity to the EU. Although Russia was othered in this discourse, a clear distinction between the Russian people and Putin’s regime was made in the

German discourse. In Poland, on the other hand, the othering of Russia was more pronounced.

3.2 Neighbours, Victims, Heroes: Characterisations of Ukraine, Ukrainians, and Refugees from Ukraine

In all cases, the geographic and cultural proximity of Ukraine and the EU was stressed. Ukrainians were described as fellow Europeans, friends, and victims, and also as courageous and determined. European Council President Charles Michel described Ukrainians as “innocent victims” (Michel 2022) who were “resisting fiercely and heroically” (ibid.). In a similar vein, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock referred to the Ukraine people as “innocent” and “brave” (Baerbock, quoted in Welt Online 2022), and the Minister of the Interior pointed out that “[...] we all feel that this war is so close to us. There are close family ties. Many refugees are being cared for by friends and relatives” (Faeser 2022). In Polish political discourse, in addition to the geographic and cultural proximity, Ukrainians—repeatedly referred to as “brothers and sisters”—were also described as close to Poles in terms of their comparable experience of Soviet/Russian domination.

When refugees from Ukraine were mentioned, the most common description was that they were “mainly women and children.” In the German discourse, however, some prominent speakers such as the chancellor (Scholz 2022b) also mentioned men among the victims, and the foreign minister referred to families as victims (Baerbock 2022). Furthermore, in particular, but not exclusively, members of the Green Party connected female victimhood to sexual violence: “Women are being raped, children are being kidnapped and soldiers on both sides are losing their life” (Ahmetovic 2023 [Social Democratic Party/SPD]). In Poland, refugees fleeing Ukraine were often described as being extremely vulnerable. The Polish president denounced the many deaths and the violence committed by Russia in Ukraine, notably against children:

“It is impossible to tolerate the fact that children are dying, it is impossible to tolerate the fact that housing estates are bombed, that people are being killed. This is something terrible—something that Europe has not seen on this scale since World War II. And indeed, it is absolutely devastating” (Duda 2022a).

In a similar vein, Minister Mariusz Kamiński referred to “defenceless Ukrainian citizens who fear for their lives” (Kamiński 2022). Similarly, the Polish president stressed that the situation was extremely clear regarding the status of people reaching Poland, hence prompting assistance:

“We understand this very well, that people are fleeing from the war. Everyone can see what is happening, the Poles can see what is happening. They welcome the newcomers with open hearts—our neighbours. We try to help as best we can” (Duda 2022c).

The construction of this “ideal-typical refugee” is facilitated through the construction of the *Other*, the “making of the bogus refugee” (Mountz 2010). Members of the European Parliament from conservative-right/far-right groups directly contrasted

“women, children, and the elderly” from Ukraine with “illegal immigrants coming from the south via the Western Balkan route—mostly young men” (Gál 2022 [non-attached member/NI]):

“The activation of the temporary protection mechanism [...] is allowing us to welcome and *help real refugees: women and children fleeing war, while fathers, sons and husbands courageously remain to defend their country* [cursive emphasis was added]. It is they, as we have been saying for years, to whom we must open the doors wide [...], but firmly barring them to traffickers and criminals” (Tardino 2022 [Identity and Democracy/ID]).

Similarly, Alternative for Germany (AfD) representatives in the German Bundestag argued, “Now Germany is getting to know *real refugees, women and children, with passports, grateful and willing to return*” (Curio 2022, emphasis added). On the other hand, Social Democrats, Greens, and members of the Left Party stressed the importance of welcoming all people fleeing from Ukraine no matter their nationality, skin colour, or gender. Many also emphasised more generally that all people fleeing war, violence, and persecution worldwide should be able to receive protection in the EU:

“Refugees from Ukraine deserve our unconditional support, no matter how long, no matter how many. But let me be very clear. Being forced to flee means the same misery, despair and fear wherever you are in the world. Let this war at our doorstep not distract us from the needs and rights of refugees from other countries” (Strik 2022a [Greens/European Free Alliance, Verts/ALE]).

This was the case in the German Bundestag as well, where the AfD was called out and scrutinised by members of the other parties for pitting different groups of refugees against each other (Yüksel 2022 [SPD]; Breimann 2022 [Christian Democratic Union]).

In Poland, the past domination of the Soviet Union was discursively used as a basis for the Polish government to justify its support for Ukraine through military aid and assistance to refugees, while at the same time stressing the differences within the EU:

“[...] in Western Europe they are completely unaware of what Russian aggression means, people don’t realise what Russian imperialism means. Here, in Ukraine, in the Baltic states, in Poland, in other countries that were once behind the Iron Curtain, in the Soviet sphere of influence, people know these concepts perfectly, they know what Russian imperialism, Russian occupation means” (Duda 2022b).

This way, unlike migrants from the Middle East and Africa, Ukrainians were represented as part of an “us” against a “them” embodied by Russia. Although race was not explicitly mentioned, by juxtaposing Ukrainians with racialised migrants, it became clear that they were perceived as white and hence unmarked. Thus, their race did not need to be discussed, and they could be included in the European Self. Likewise, the distinction between Ukrainians and people on the Polish–Belarusian border was based, in Polish governmental figures’ speeches, on the idea that the

former were “true” refugees whereas others were migrants. Hence, the discursive construction of Ukrainians as (culturally) close to Poles impacts their reception and support in Poland. Ukrainian “refugees” are thus framed as vulnerable and culturally similar, whereas “migrants” are most often viewed as potentially dangerous and culturally other. Overall, one can conclude that the image of the “refugee” appears less ambiguous in the case of the Russia–Ukraine war compared to previous displacement crises. There seemed to be limited room for contestation over this image, particularly in the early stages of the war. Additionally, the importance of gender, specifically the predominant presence of women, children, and elderly individuals among Ukrainian refugees, characterised the discourse, which is consistent with research showing that gender has influenced the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, as they are perceived as more vulnerable and less threatening than adult men (Babakova et al. 2022). In general, dominant narratives around refugees in Poland, which are largely supported by the Law and Justice (PiS) government and echoed in conservative media, tend to distinguish between “real” and “fake” refugees, with the latter being deserving of Poland’s support (Hargrave et al. 2023; Zessin-Jurek 2022), a differentiation that is also made in the German far right but was contested in the parliamentary discourses on the national and the EU levels.

3.3 Debating Differential Treatment Within and Across Displacements

While the solidarity in response to the displacement from Ukraine and, at the EU level, particularly the activation of the TPD, was welcomed, there was also direct criticism of discrimination in relation to the Ukrainian case itself and also in comparison to other displacements.

On the EU level, voices from the left admonished that the TPD was neither fully adequate for all refugees from Ukraine nor a solution for the lack of a coherent EU asylum and migration policy. Several speakers brought up the fact that the TPD was not applied equally to all those fleeing Ukraine and stressed that there should be no discrimination against non-Ukrainian nationals (Rego 2022 [The Left/GUE/NGL]).

At the same time, the dominant discourse by the EU Commission and the Council was that the accounts of discrimination at the EU borders were also used by Russia in its information warfare. As Commissioner Johansson put it, “Don’t believe Putin’s lies. If you are running from Putin’s war, you are welcome here in the European Union” (Johansson 2022a). Similarly, members of the European Parliament from Poland also labelled such reports as “fake news” and stressed the important work that Polish border guards were doing. In Germany, Interior Minister Nancy Faeser ensured protection for all people fleeing, while at the same time stressing that non-Ukrainians would leave Germany quickly:

“The vast majority of the refugees are Ukrainians. People from other countries who already had a permanent right of residence in Ukraine bring this status with them. [...] They also do not have to go through an elaborate asylum procedure. For example, in the case of young Indians who studied in Ukraine, we see that they mainly want to return home quickly” (Faeser, quoted from Tagesschau 2022b).

This differentiation of refugees fleeing Ukraine was particularly present in parliamentary debates, as it allowed the political opposition to address the issue. The left-wing opposition notably also criticised the Polish law, which explicitly mentioned help towards Ukrainian citizens:

“A major flaw in the project is the reference of aid only to Ukrainian citizens. Citizens of other countries are also fleeing the war. They are discriminated against because of their citizenship in all areas regulated by the bill (...). This is unacceptable and also unconstitutional” (Senyszyn 2022a [Democratic Left Alliance/SLD]).

Against this background, the Polish president stressed that everyone fleeing Ukraine was treated equally (Duda 2022c). However, the stark contrast in treatment was explained by markers such as skin colour, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, and cultural/linguistic proximity (Ochojska 2022 [EPP]). This was also addressed by the Left and the Green Party in the German Bundestag:

“You are ignoring people, who do not have a Ukrainian passport, that are male or queer, old people, people with disabilities, people who worked or studied in Ukraine. Flight has many faces. Flight is not only white and female” (Pahlke 2022 [Green Party]).

It was also pointed out that EU member states that were previously against hosting refugees were now welcoming refugees from Ukraine. Particularly, the case of Poland and the situation at the Polish–Belarussian border were often mentioned (Barrena Arza 2022 [GUE/NGL]). In Poland, the government was criticised by the opposition for this differentiated treatment of Ukrainian versus other refugees:

“I appeal to the government to get a grip and stop appropriating the merits of Polish society [...]. It is the Poles who are helping because they are empathetic, and what you really think about refugees can be seen at the Polish–Belarussian border” (Senyszyn 2022b [SLD]).

Most of the speakers in the European Parliament addressed the response to the displacement from Ukraine as being different from previous “migration crises” (Bonafè 2022 [Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats/S&D]), raising the question of why the TPD was not activated for the crises in Syria and Afghanistan (López Aguilar 2022 [S&D]; Urtasun 2022 [Verts/ALE]). Therefore, many speakers in the European Parliament expressed the hope that this would be a turning point in EU migration policy:

“Countries that have traditionally been opposed to welcoming migrants have now opened their doors. [...] This is the moment for a turning point, let’s start with this unity that we have managed to create in order to finally reform our asylum system, to create a system that can also withstand present and future crises” (Bartolo 2022 [S&D]).

While it was acknowledged in the German discourse that Central European countries and especially Poland had accepted a high number of refugees (Faeser in Tagesschau 2022b; Scholz 2022b), the turning point that seemed to be desired most

by the German government was not a new EU migration policy but rather a deepening of military cooperation and a stronger European pillar within NATO (Scholz 2022b).

3.4 Unified and Welcoming: Characterisations of the EU, Europe, and European Values

Descriptions of the European response often went hand in hand with references to European values, linked to the concepts of democracy, freedom, and equality, as well as to the EU as a cradle of human rights and compassion. These descriptions often offset Europe with a non-democratic other: “Unlike the authoritarian Kremlin regime, we respect the rule of law, and only by upholding our values, we can win this war” (Strik 2022b [Verts/ALE]). The German chancellor also included the rule of law in his description of European values and openly addressed the conflict about the rule of law within the EU (Scholz, 2022b). European Union values were often mentioned to respond to the allegations of differential treatment. In a statement after meeting with Polish Prime Minister Mateusz, Michel thanked

“[...] the Polish people for working very hard to guarantee safe passages for Ukrainians, for European citizens, but also for citizens coming from third countries all around the world without any discrimination. [...] it is very important to make our EU values clear. You gave a strong guarantee—and thank you for that—of zero discrimination. We are making sure that there are safe passages for all who would like to cross the borders” (European Council 2022, p. 1).

Europe itself was commonly referred to as a “provider of protection,” “a safe haven,” a “refuge,” “a place of peace,” and “welcoming.” The TPD was framed as a symbol representing a humanitarian and welcoming response (e.g., European Commission 2022c). The univocal response and unbureaucratic acceptance were applauded by EU and German officials (Johansson 2022b; Faeser in Tagesschau 2022b). Due to continuous disagreements in the EU about hosting refugees and sharing responsibility, on the EU level the decision to activate the TPD was framed not only as an altruistic deed but as more of a “win-win,” with advantages for protection seekers and member states since there were now clear rules and funds available for assisting member states hosting large numbers of displaced people (e.g., European Commission 2022a). While the TPD was discussed quite extensively on the EU level, this was not the case for national discourses.

Therefore, welcoming refugees from Ukraine also had a strategic component and was understood by the EU as part of its overall response to the Russian aggression and was presented in one line with sanctions (Scholz 2022b) or framed as “part of a comprehensive set of EU actions responding to the Russian military incursion into Ukraine” (European Commission 2022a).

The concepts of unity and solidarity were stressed profusely at the EU level (Johansson 2022a). They became tools in the fight against Russia, and it was underlined that Putin failed to instrumentalise the displacement because of the unified and solidaric response by the EU to it (e.g., Bilčík 2022 [EPP]). Because solidarity was connected to many things in the discourse—solidarity with Ukraine, solidarity

with refugees, and solidarity among EU member states—it became an empty signifier. In the German Chancellor’s speeches, solidarity was understood less as towards refugees than between EU countries (Scholz 2022b).

In the Polish discourse, solidarity was also seen as solidarity within the EU, yet it was more prominently discussed regarding NATO. According to the Polish president, the war was enabling NATO and EU member states to get closer to achieving the same aim, i.e., supporting Ukraine in its fight against Russia: “[...] Putin actually united NATO and, as a result, also united Europe” (Duda 2023b). Zooming in on NATO, the Polish president criticised the fact that “Putin wanted to Finlandize NATO,” yet pointed out, paraphrasing U.S. President Joe Biden, that “instead he has NATOized Finland and Sweden” (Duda 2023b). As a result of the war, both NATO and the EU were seen as strengthened by the Polish president: “[...] despite all the threats, despite the aggressive attitude of Russia and its authorities—we are together, we stand by Ukraine in solidarity, we speak with one voice. And this is the strength of the Western community, the NATO community and the European Union” (Duda 2022a). Faced with Russia as a security threat, the Polish authorities therefore looked more to the Transatlantic Alliance than to the EU.

4 Conclusion: No *Zeitenwende* in the European Migration Discourse

Our analysis shows that similar topics emerged in the EU discourse; however, there were also differences in the respective national discourses. Furthermore, the parliamentary debates show that migration remains a highly contested issue. While right-wing speakers are likely to refer to Ukrainians as “real refugees,” left-wing speakers in particular, but not exclusively, tend to contest this differentiation and warn against pitting different groups of refugees against each other. In both national discourses, the issue of people fleeing Ukraine was also linked to their “usefulness” (Klaus 2020) in the labour market.

In the German discourse, helping Ukrainians was more often connected to Europe and European values than to the closeness between Germany and Ukraine. Overall, in Poland, the focus on NATO and the common enemy Russia was stronger than in Germany, demonstrating concerns about Poland’s own security. At the EU level, debates about the newfound unity on migration in the case of Ukraine were used to highlight the importance of reaching agreement on the reform of the EU migration and asylum policy. In all three cases, the portrayal of gender, e.g., women and children as victims, was a central motive, which is not surprising given the demographics of the people arriving from Ukraine, as was the fit with perceptions of the “ideal-type” refugee. At the same time, solidarity was a strong motive in the discourse, especially at the supranational EU level. However, it had already become an empty signifier being attached to various objects.

Rather than a *Zeitenwende* in EU migration and asylum policy, our findings indicate that, despite national differences, European discourse follows well-established paths of “bordering, ordering and othering” (van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002). First, the fact that mostly female and underaged Ukrainians fled the war while men had to stay to defend the country seems to further increase the worthiness of protec-

tion of “their” women and children. At the same time, the fact that young Ukrainian men did not have the option to leave the country was omitted from the debates. This silencing helps to uphold masculinised ideas about the international system and nation-states themselves, stressing that it is heroic to defend and die for a country. The notion of the innocent civilian is thus based on deeply rooted gender essentialisms, leading to stereotypical ideas of vulnerability and refugeehood by seeing “women and children” (Enloe 2014) as victims at the expense of non-fighting men (Carpenter 2020). Furthermore, our analysis also reveals an important paradox between policy and discourse: On the one hand, Ukrainians were described as “ideal-typical” and “real refugees.” On the other hand, on the EU level, it was stressed that often they did not wish to apply for asylum, as they could move on to friends and family (European Parliament 2022). The double standard for refugees to be “vulnerable” and in need but at the same time demonstrate capacities to become proactive, independent, and emancipated in terms of assimilability, economic performance, and cultural “fit” (Welfens 2023) is one of the multiple paradoxes that refugees face in European asylum and migration systems.

Second, the EU framed the displacement from Ukraine as a component of a broader geopolitical crisis at Europe’s doorstep. The European discourse shows a strong identification with the struggle of the Ukrainians, including various statements that highlight “a community of values” and claim that Ukrainians were not only defending their country but also “our freedom.” The construction of the Russia–Ukraine war as a turning point or *Zeitenwende*, in which one must choose the “right side of history” (Scholz 2022a), hints at a resurfacing of discursive Cold War elements. On the societal level, this “the-enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend” view leads to an increased willingness to support Ukrainians—at least temporarily, especially in Poland. On the political level, the practice of accepting refugees is also crucial for the EU to uphold the self-construction of a haven of liberty and freedom, thus strengthening European soft power (Kleist 2022) and a self-construction against an authoritarian other.

Finally, the changes and differences in dealing with forced migration from Ukraine to EU countries highlight the fact that “Western” reactions to the consequences of war cannot be reduced to matters of capacity but are inherently political decisions. The EU’s reactions emphasise that questions of international security are “intelligible only in relation to the vulnerability of the self” (Aradau 2004b: 402). Our analysis reveals not only the construction of “deservingness” and “Europeanness” but also the politics of “inclusion and exclusion.” Refugees from Ukraine are constructed as “worthy,” both as a signal to Russia and because of their perceived deservingness. This is not just a result of a “politics of pity”: The proximity of the war and the broad consensus on Russia as a common enemy enabled the construction of the necessity for hosting Ukrainian refugees as part of the overall security response. At the same time, this allowed Europe to construct itself as humanitarian, liberal, and solidary, in contrast to Russia. Our results show that while race, gender, and proximity are important categories in the discourse, the perception of the war and the adversary is crucial in the case of the Russia–Ukraine war. While this is connected to the sense of proximity, it also leads to the linkages of specific national grievances, especially in the case of Poland. Future research

on migration discourse should thus also take into account the (lack of) description of the conflicts leading to displacement. This also raises the question of whether and how deservingness of protection is constructed in cases in which war is not the cause of displacement. Furthermore, the instability and often short-lived nature of inclusive migration discourse raises the question of which descriptors become salient under which circumstances. The question of belonging and Europeaness in the case of Ukraine is fragile. The adaptability of migration discourses and erosion of solidarity are exemplified by the current legal changes in Poland, which, while extending the TPD, also cut some social benefits for Ukrainian refugees, and there are discussions about similar cuts in Germany. Thus, the welcoming response to the Ukrainian displacement is not related to a *Zeitenwende* in migration policies but is part of the overall European response to the war. Rather than breaking with the underlying logics of the EU migration system, it reinforces them, leading to debates about the use of implicit or explicit criteria in refugee protection that result in a two-tier asylum system.

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