Digital battleground: An examination of anti-refugee discourse on Twitter against Ukrainians displaced by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine
by Anatoliy Gruzd, Philip Mai, and Omar Taleb

Abstract
Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine has triggered Europe’s largest refugee crisis since World War II. In this case study, we investigate the prevalence and types of anti-refugee discourse about Ukrainian refugees on Twitter. Previous studies primarily focused on public discourse and attitudes toward racialized refugees and immigrants; the Ukrainian refugee crisis is unique in that it is one of the few instances of a recent refugee crisis involving people who do not come from mostly racialized communities. Using Communalytic, a computational social science tool for studying public discourse on social media, we automatically collected and identified toxic posts mentioning Ukrainian refugees during the first year of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. We focused on posts containing toxic language, as this is where we are most likely to find examples of anti-refugee sentiments. Based on a manual analysis of 2,045 toxic posts referencing Ukrainian refugees, the most prevalent ones were politically motivated and included partisan content (33 percent), followed by posts containing expressions countering anti-refugee narratives (20 percent). These findings highlight the escalating politicization and polarization of discussions about Ukrainian refugees both online and offline. Furthermore, 53 percent of the sample aligned with pro-Kremlin narratives against Ukraine. By exploiting anti-refugee sentiments and leveraging existing political and cultural fault lines in the West, pro-Kremlin messages on Twitter contribute to diminishing support for Ukrainian refugees, minimizing the severity of the war, and undermining international support for Ukraine.

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1. Introduction
According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2022), a record 100 million individuals around the world were forcibly displaced from their homes in 2022. Of these, 32.5 million became refugees. This unprecedented rise in the number of refugees has contributed to deepening political division in many host countries, but especially in the West. Framed as a crisis that these countries must contend with, the question of whether or not to accept refugees has become increasingly politicized (Krzyżanowski, et al., 2018; Przemysław, 2023). As a result, governments in host countries are increasingly reticent about welcoming refugees, giving rise to a host of new immigration laws and policies that contravene long-standing legal obligations under international conventions, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (Benhabib, 2020; 1951 Refugee Convention, n.d.). The polarization and politicization of refugee-related issues and policies are not solely driven by the rising number of refugees and asylum seekers; these processes are also driven, echoed, amplified, and shaped by public discourse in mainstream and social media (Ekman, 2019, 2018; Komendantova, et al., 2023; Ozduzen, et al., 2021).

In recent years, as trust in democratic institutions such as mainstream media and government has dipped to new lows (Newman, et al., 2023), social media has emerged as a key channel where the public goes to discuss and debate issues that matter to them, such as the influx of refugees in their country. People are turning to social media because of its unique characteristics, including the ability to find like-minded individuals, the lack of traditional gatekeeping structures, the ability to communicate anonymously, and the potential to have direct access to a large audience. While these characteristics have helped to make social media very popular, they have also turned social media platforms into a contested information space where actors with large followings, such as pundits, policy-makers, and journalists, can both influence and be influenced by public opinion on cultural and political issues (Phillips, 2018; van Dijck and Poell, 2015), including those related to refugees (Kelling and Monroe, 2023). As a result, social media can be a valuable source of observed data for examining public discourse on various topics of public concern. For example, observed data from social media can be used to study how narratives and counter-narratives about refugees are formed and how public policies, misinformation, and individual biases intersect and influence public discourse.

Prior studies show that refugee discourse on social media runs the gamut from being supportive to being out-and-out against refugees in any manner. Examples of how social media can support refugees’ plight include building awareness about the circumstances forcing their migration, soliciting donations, and other forms of support. Unfortunately, social media can also be used to undermine support for refugees. This often includes negative words and expressions, especially when discussing the social implications of refugee integration (Komendantova, et al., 2023). Examples of such discourse include toxic anti-social acts such as bullying, trolling, harassment, and hate speech intended to harm individuals or groups (Soares, et al., 2023). For instance, as a result of an increase in Arab and African refugees arriving in Germany in 2015, there was a notable spike in the number of inflammatory social media comments celebrating the deaths of refugees and expressing hostile or violent sentiments towards them (Faiola, 2016); these sentiments were further inflamed by some German media highlighting the cultural differences between locals and refugees (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016).

In this paper, we take a case study approach to examining social media discourse and sentiments directed at or about refugees from Ukraine who fled the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine has triggered Europe’s largest refugee crisis since World War II. We aim to identify and document the range of negative sentiments and attitudes towards this group of refugees on a popular social media platform — Twitter, recently rebranded as “X” by its new owner Elon Musk on 24 July 2023 (Zahn, 2023). Since the study period covers the time before this rebranding, we will continue to refer to the platform by its original name, Twitter. Our guiding research question is as follows:

What are the prevalent types of anti-refugee discourse in discussions about Ukrainian refugees on Twitter?

In asking this question, we aim to examine two unique aspects of this case. First, at the onset of this refugee crisis, mainstream media reported differences in the treatment of predominantly non-racialized refugees...
from Ukraine compared to those of Arab, African, or Indian descent, raising concerns about the potential preferential treatment of Ukrainians in European nations (Costello and Foster, 2022). This is distinct from previous studies that had primarily looked at public discourse and attitudes toward racialized refugees and immigrants (e.g., Aydemir, 2023; Reed, 2017).

Another notable aspect of this case is that the Kremlin and its supporters are known to have frequently promoted polarizing topics (Doroshenko and Lukito, 2021; Karlsen, 2019), including those related to refugees and immigrants (Llewellyn, et al., 2018; Suk, et al., 2022), as part of their larger efforts to destabilize Western democracies by exacerbating existing anti-refugee sentiments and isolationist attitudes. For example, in the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, pro-Kremlin social media accounts pushed unsubstantiated claims that Ukrainian refugees were taking advantage of welfare services in countries like Germany (Alieva, et al., 2022; Morris and Oremus, 2022). This type of active measure is often carried out as part of an Information Operation (IO) campaign, referring to targeted actions undertaken by state actors (in this case by the Russian government) to engender an information space supportive of their larger objectives (e.g., undermining trust in democratic institutions). While attribution of social media posts to a larger IO is not possible with limited data available via public sources, we seek to explore the extent to which the types of narratives and claims about Ukrainian refugees on Twitter may play into the Kremlin’s IO against Ukraine and its citizens.

Twitter is particularly relevant when examining public discourse on polarizing topics such as refugees because the European Commission found it to have one of the highest rates of mis/disinformation posts compared to other major social media platforms at the time of this research (European Commission, 2023). This makes Twitter users, both within the EU and beyond, particularly vulnerable to misinformation and opinion manipulation on topics such as refugees and immigrants. In addition, Twitter has been shown to be a platform that attracts hate speech toward refugees (e.g., Arcila-Calderón, et al., 2021; Demirdis, 2023; Erdogan-Ozturk and Isik-Guler, 2020). Regardless of whether these expressions of hate are authentic or part of an IO, it is critical to study this information space for public reporting on the prevalence of hate speech targeting refugees and to promote more informed discussions on this topic.

To examine anti-refugee discourse on Twitter, we started by automatically identifying messages containing toxic language and referring to refugees from Ukraine during the study period (24 February 2022 — 22 February 2023). We focused on posts with toxic language as we anticipated this is where the majority of anti-refugee sentiments would be expressed. Next, we conducted a manual content analysis of the collected data to determine the prevalence and types of frames employed by users when discussing issues concerning Ukrainian refugees. As Iżak (2019) highlighted, public discourse frequently serves as a mechanism for legitimizing social power through language, controlling meanings to assert dominance, and potentially excluding alternative perspectives. Therefore, our overarching objective is to understand how these frames might influence public discussions and societal attitudes surrounding refugees.

The following section reviews relevant literature that also used content analysis to study discourse about refugees and immigrants.

2. Framing of refugee-related issues

Previous research has predominantly focused on understanding how news outlets frame discussions about refugees. This is understandable, considering the mediating and influential role of news media in setting policy agendas and shaping public attitudes on various topics, including refugee-related issues. In reviewing this literature, we aimed to identify common “frames” — an actor’s perspective(s) on an issue — that could help inform our content analysis of Twitter posts concerning Ukrainian refugees. While the examined papers did not exclusively center on social media content, we posit that their methodologies for analyzing discourse related to refugees can be adapted to social media data.
Although there is no consensus on a specific set of frames and their definitions in the literature, as they are continually evolving, the negative portrayal of refugees and immigrants typically involves the following frames: health risks or security (i.e., portraying refugees as dangerous), cultural threats (i.e., refugees seen as threatening local culture), integration challenges (i.e., the belief that refugees do not want to or are not able to integrate into the host country), administrative costs (i.e., refugees perceived as a burden on the local economy), nationalism and the notions of “good” vs “undesirable” refugees (i.e., certain groups of refugees viewed more favorably than others) (Douai, et al., 2022; Kelling and Monroe, 2023; Reed, 2017).

Conversely, positive frames regarding refugees encompassed perspectives such as morality (i.e., the belief that assisting refugees is morally right), human rights (i.e., advocating for refugees based on their universal human rights), and recognizing the positive impact on the local economy (e.g., featuring success stories).

The following reviews select papers examining how news outlets frame issues related to refugees in the U.S. and EU, with a particular focus on papers offering a foundation to establish the coding scheme used for our analysis.

To analyze frames used by news outlets in the U.S. writing about Muslim immigrants, Reed (2017) conducted a content analysis on 50 news articles published during the 2016 U.S. presidential election from right-leaning, centrist, and left-leaning publications. Four overarching frames emerged from his analysis: 1) the risk of immigrants; 2) the human rights of immigrants; 3) immigrants’ ability to integrate into the host society; and, 4) the political response. Comparing the prevailing frames used by each news outlet to their political leaning, Reed found that right-leaning outlets typically frame immigrants as threats to Western society, while left-leaning publications tended to highlight immigrants’ universal human rights. Centrist publications were found to align more with left-leaning outlets, but included a wider spectrum of political responses.

Whereas Reed (2017) focused on partisanship in media, a more recent study by Douai, et al. (2022) examined how the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis was framed in local newspapers in the U.S. before and after the Paris terrorist attacks by ISIL extremists on 13 November 2015. The researchers identified the following frames: national security, human interest, administrative, and global responsibility. Frames such as “human interest” highlighted the humanitarian view of supporting refugees (see also Lavenex, 2001; Nickels, 2007). The authors discovered that the national security frame became more prevalent following the Paris attack while the global responsibility frame declined in prominence. Overall, Douai, et al. determined that U.S. local media diminished the role of the U.S. in accommodating refugees, emphasizing the administrative costs and security threats that came to be associated with Syrian refugees.

In an analysis similar to Douai, et al. (2022), Moen-Larsen (2020) identified security, humanitarian, integration, and nationalist frames in the analysis of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) refugees’ representation in three Russian newspapers (Rossiiskaya Gazeta [Российская газета] — an official daily directly from the Russian government, Izvestiya [Известия] — a pro-government publication, and Novaya Gazeta [Новая газета] — an opposition outlet). One of the key findings is the “securitization” of discourse about refugees in news media or political statements in Russia. The overarching focus on security often painted refugees as illegal or an existential threat that could overwhelm Europe.

In the context of discussions about Ukrainian refugees, Mäenpää (2022) conducted a content analysis of articles from German broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) and Al Jazeera following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. One of the main findings showed that an identity-related frame around “European supremacy,” as seen through the lens of in- and out-group narratives, often positioned Ukraine and Ukrainians as being politically and socially closer to the European Union by focusing on the broad similarities between Ukrainian refugees and citizens of EU countries.

To examine if and how frames used by news outlets appear in citizen-level discussions on social media, Kelling and Monroe (2023) analyzed Facebook comments in response to local news articles about refugees in two U.S. cities: Lancaster, Pennsylvania and Roanoke, Virginia. Both had similar demographics and leaned conservative. The authors found that the frames used in citizen-led discussions about refugees depended on the refugee-hosting experiences of the local population while noting that, in general, citizen-
led discussions tended to use identity-related frames; that is, “us vs. them.” Examples of identity-related frames include depicting refugees as members of another group, referencing symbols or religious practices attributed to refugees, and the use of ethnic slurs and stereotyping.

As the previous literature demonstrates, security frames were more prevalent in news coverage of refugees and immigrants (see also Beck, 2017; d’Appollonia, 2015). In contrast, the news coverage of Ukrainian refugees and citizen-level responses to news about refugees in the U.S. on Facebook featured a stronger identity-type framing. Knowing how different stakeholders in society frame a particular group of refugees or immigrants will help us understand potential barriers to the successful integration of refugees in a host country.

Similar to Kelling and Monroe (2023), we plan to apply a frame analysis to Twitter posts to see whether discussions about Ukrainian refugees on the platform follow more security-focused, identity-focused, or other types of framing. Following the literature review, we developed a coding schema to identify prevailing frames based on narratives concerning Ukrainian refugees, as frames often manifest in posts as narratives (Aukes, et al., 2020). Figure 1 shows how we mapped the frames identified in the literature to the narratives we coded in our dataset.

![Figure 1: Mapping frames to narratives (codes).](image)

Note: Larger version of Figure 1 available [here](image).

The first code, “C1: Ukrainian refugees are untrustworthy/dangerous,” applies to posts that frame Ukrainian refugees as a security risk to the host country. It draws on the following frames from the literature: “Security” (Douai, et al., 2022; Kelling and Monroe, 2023; Moen-Larsen, 2020), “National Security” and “Crime” (Reed, 2017).

The second code, “C2: Ukrainians are racist or ungrateful,” accounts for instances in which Ukrainians were accused of discriminating against racialized individuals either in Ukraine or other European countries.
It also includes instances in which Ukrainians are alleged to have been disrespectful of local customs in the host country. This code draws on Reed’s (2017) “Cultural Threats”, and Kelling and Monroe’s (2023) “Identity” frames.

The third code, “C3: Ukrainian refugees are abusing the system,” is used to account for posts claiming Ukrainian refugees exploit publicly funded support systems in the host country or challenge their status as genuine refugees. It generally follows Douai. et al.’s (2022) “Administrative”, Moen-Larsen’s (2020) “Integration”, Reed’s (2017) “Integration into community”, and Kelling and Monroe’s (2023) “Economics” and “Legality” frames.

The fourth code, “C4: Preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees,” draws on Moen-Larsen’s (2020) “Nationalist” frame to capture perspectives that perceive some ethnic groups as posing a greater threat than others to the host country. This code also incorporates the notion of the “good refugee” (Clark, et al., 2024), applying when Western countries are accused of viewing Ukrainian refugees as “good,” “ideal,” or “desirable,” in contrast to refugees from other countries who may be racialized.

The fifth code, “C5: Expression of countering,” is introduced to account for and document expressions denouncing racist, nativistic, and hateful remarks against refugees. Following Kelling and Monroe’s (2023) “Morality” frame, this code views refugees from a human rights perspective. It also builds on the notion of counter-speech and the work of Chaudhry and Gruzd (2020), Garland, et al. (2020), Rieger, et al. (2018), and Schäfer, et al. (2024), who studied how people use social media to counter racist and hate speech.

The next section details how we collected and sampled posts about Ukrainian refugees and how we iteratively refined and expanded our initially proposed coding schema.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection

To collect and analyze data for this study, we used one of the built-in data collector modules available within Communalytic, a computational social science research tool developed by the Social Media Lab at Toronto Metropolitan University for studying online discourse (Gruzd and Mai, 2023). Specifically, we used Twitter’s Academic API via Communalytic to collect public posts that mentioned the word “Ukraine” and either “refugees,” “immigrants,” or “asylum seekers” in 10 European languages. Search terms were selected to capture posts specifically discussing refugees and immigration in the context of Ukraine. We considered but ultimately excluded the term “displaced” (as in “displaced people”) to minimize the inclusion of potentially false positives when posts referred to internally displaced individuals. The full search query is listed below:

(Ukraine OR Україна OR Україна OR Ucraina OR Украйні OR Україна OR Україна OR Ucratia OR Ucrania OR Oekraïne) (immigrant OR refugee OR “asylum seeker” OR иммигрант OR беженец OR проситель убежища OR іммігрант OR біженець OR шукач притулку OR Flüchtling OR Asylbewerber OR réfugié OR demandeur d’asile OR rifugiato OR richiedente asilo OR пристежовалец OR uprchlík OR žadatel o azyl OR requerente de asilo OR refugiato OR solicitante de asilo OR vluchteling OR asielzoeker)

The languages used in this search query included English, Ukrainian, Russian, German, French, Italian, Czech, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch. These languages were selected because they are widely spoken in
In total, we collected 811,933 posts shared between 24 February 2022 (the date of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine) and 22 February 2023 (nearly a year after the invasion). Figure 2 displays the daily counts of posts in the dataset. As expected, there was a significant spike at the beginning of the invasion and a smaller spike around the anniversary date. Since our focus is on identifying distinct frames in the dataset through content analysis, we excluded retweets (reposts) and any other duplicates. After the cleaning process, 103,956 posts remained in the dataset for further analysis.

Figure 2: The daily number of posts in the dataset.

3.2. Automated detection of toxic messages

The next step was to identify toxic posts that likely expressed anti-refugee sentiments. Defining and detecting toxic language can be challenging due to its culturally sensitive and context-specific nature. Prior studies used toxicity as a proxy for a wide range of online anti-social acts, including hate speech, rudeness, incivility, offensive remarks, and stereotyping (Kenski, et al., 2020; Kwon and Gruzd, 2017; Rossini, 2022; Southern and Harmer, 2021; Theocharis, et al., 2016). In this study, we took a user-centric approach to identifying toxicity by assessing the impact that a post might have on a conversation based on input from social media users. Specifically, we relied on Google’s Perspective API, a machine learning classifier, which was trained on millions of online comments by asking three to ten human coders to flag if a comment was “rude, disrespectful, unreasonable, or otherwise somewhat likely to make a user leave a discussion or give up on sharing their perspective” (Perspective API, n.d.).

Earlier iterations of the Perspective API faced criticism for inaccurately assigning higher toxicity scores to non-toxic posts related to one’s identity, such as those containing LGBTQ+ terminology (Hosseini, et al., 2017; Jain, et al., 2018). The latest version has shown higher accuracy (approximately 80 percent) in
detecting offensive language (Jigsaw, 2019; Pavlopoulos, et al., 2019). Perspective API has been applied and independently validated in several empirical studies (Delisle, et al., 2019; Hopp and Vargo, 2019; Kim, et al., 2021; Mittos, et al., 2019; Obadimu, et al., 2019; Pascual-Ferrá, et al., 2021).

Perspective API is designed to detect toxicity in online conversations by analyzing each post and predicting the perceived impact that it might have on a conversation. Based on its analysis, the API automatically generates a toxicity score, ranging from 0 to 1 for each post in the dataset. Posts with a score closer to 1 indicate a higher level of toxicity. For our study, we focused on posts that received a score of 0.6 or above, resulting in a final sample of 2,045 posts. Per Perspective API’s documentation, a score of 0.6 means at least 60 percent of users would perceive the message as toxic.

By selecting 0.6 as the threshold to examine potential toxic posts, we wanted to capture a broader range of anti-social expressions, prioritizing a more comprehensive review over a review of only the most severe cases. However, we acknowledge that this choice increases the likelihood of potentially introducing false positive results in our final dataset. We addressed this by manually reviewing all posts (n=2,045) that met the 0.6 threshold requirement following the steps outlined in the next section.

### 3.3. Manual content analysis of toxic messages

To identify predominant frames within posts flagged by Perspective API as potentially toxic, we developed a comprehensive coding schema for manual content analysis. The coding schema was developed in two stages: an initial deductive stage, followed by an inductive stage. The iterative coding process spanned seven months (April-October 2023). Throughout this period, the two primary coders, including one of the coauthors and a research assistant, underwent training and independently applied the coding schema. They held weekly meetings to discuss coding experiences and fine-tune definitions as narratives and claims expressed in the posts became more apparent. In instances of disagreement between the two primary coders, a third coder (the lead author) served as tiebreaker during the final phase of coding. The result of the two stages is the creation of a new coding schema consisting of thirteen codes (see Table 1).

In the initial deductive stage, we proposed five codes (C1-5) designed to document narratives about Ukrainian refugees related to the frames identified in the literature (see Section 2).

In the inductive stage, we focused on posts that did not explicitly present a narrative related to refugees but were still relevant to the case study (e.g., posts addressing the broader conflict). The coders met regularly to discuss these cases, determining the implicit socio-political content and the prevailing tone within discourses concerning Ukrainian refugees and the Russia-Ukraine war.

Following this inductive process, the code “C6: Politically motivated/partisan content” was added. This code draws on literature detailing how refugees are politicized by partisan groups (Krzyżanowski, et al., 2018; Przemysław, 2023) and state actors, like the Kremlin, who use political polarization to undermine public trust in Western institutions (McIntosh, 2015; Mölder and Sazonov, 2020).

Considering the focus on Ukraine, we added the code “C7: Discredit the Ukrainian government and institutions” to assess the extent to which the Ukrainian government and institutions might be targeted on social media. Examples include posts promoting narratives of corruption, racism, or violence among Ukrainian officials or military (e.g., Tolz and Hutchings, 2023).

Next, we introduced the “C8: Discredit Western media” code to account for posts questioning the credibility of Western media, alleging bias towards or against Ukrainian refugees, or spreading misinformation about the war (e.g., Dogan, 2005; Liashuk and Vychavka, 2022; Lischka, 2019).

As its name implies, the “C9: Call for donations/accommodation for refugees from Ukraine” code categorizes posts appealing for donations, accommodations, or taxpayer-funded support to Ukrainian refugees. Prior research has shown how not-for-profit and government organizations relied on social media to solicit donations (e.g., Gruzd, et al., 2018; Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012). Talabi, et al. (2022) also found...
that Nigerian refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine turned to social media to seek help, whether it was for financial aid or to find shelter. Drawing from the previous literature, we wanted to see the extent to which Twitter was used as a tool for donations and related calls for support.

The “C10: Information sharing and news coverage” code was added to account for and categorize posts sharing news stories, announcements, and links to news sites without a particular emphasis on refugees from Ukraine. Immigrants and refugees often use social media as an information source to inform their decisions and follow news before, during, and after migration (e.g., Dekker, et al., 2018; Miconi, 2020). At the same time, social media, in general (Kümpel, et al., 2015) and Twitter, in particular, are popular places for sharing breaking news on a wide range of topics (Hu, et al., 2012; Petrovic, et al., 2013), including the coverage of the “refugee crisis” in different parts of the world (Cooper, et al., 2021).

The “C11: Pro-Ukraine and Anti-Russia” and “C12: Anti-Ukraine and Pro-Russia” codes were introduced for instances where more specific codes did not apply. The decision to group “Anti-Ukraine/Pro-Russia” and “Anti-Russia/Pro-Ukraine” was made because some posts could have been categorized as either or both. For example, the following posts could be interpreted as either Anti-Russia or Pro-Ukraine:

Down with Putin, down with imperialism, and down with war profiteers and frauds. Full support to the people of Ukraine. Our country contributed to this conflict, so we should welcome every refugee who wants to come here.

Similarly, the post below could be seen as either “Pro-Russia” or “Anti-Ukraine”:

Mr. Putin (man of God) keep tearing down these racists in #Ukraine. Africans, Indians, and Iraqis must be permitted on those refugee trains and buses.

Lastly, posts that did not fit the above codes were coded as “C13: Other.”

The sample posts above and those included later in the paper are paraphrased for privacy reasons and to limit their discoverability. If a post references a user handle of a public figure (such as a politician or an elected official), the handle is kept for context, but the rest of the post is still paraphrased.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Coding schema.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Code</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1: Ukrainian refugees are untrustworthy or dangerous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2: Ukrainians are racist or ungrateful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
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<td>C5</td>
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<td>C7</td>
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<td>C9</td>
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<tr>
<td>C10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Results

Despite achieving a “substantial agreement” level with a Kappa value of 0.632 ($p<0.001$), the two primary coders encountered disagreements in coding 614 out of 2,045 posts. The third coder successfully resolved most disagreements (528 out of 614). Consequently, the final coded dataset comprised 1,959 posts, with 86 posts excluded due to conflicting codes across all three coders. Table 2 shows the distribution of codes for these posts (1,959 out of 2,045; 96 percent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Number of posts</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C6: Politically motivated/partisan content</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5: Expression of countering</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C13: Other</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11: Pro-Ukraine/Anti-Russia</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4: Preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3: Ukrainian refugees are abusing the system</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2: Ukrainians are racist or ungrateful</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7: Discredit the Ukrainian government and institutions</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1: Ukrainian refugees are untrustworthy/dangerous</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8: Discredit Western media</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C12: Anti-Ukraine/Pro-Russia</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9: Call for donations/accommodation for refugees from Ukraine</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C10: Information sharing and news coverage</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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| Grand total |       | 1,959 | 100% |

Section 4 provides an overview of the types of thematic narratives that emerged from our coding and analysis of the data. We excluded “C9: Call for donations/accommodation for refugees from Ukraine” and “C10: Information sharing and news coverage” from the discussion below as both contained fewer than 10 posts.

4.1. “Politically motivated/partisan content”

This is the most prevalent code in our dataset, with 33 percent of all posts labeled as politically motivated or containing partisan content. These posts discussed the war in Ukraine through a political lens, often using the refugee crisis as a basis for criticizing individual politicians or ministers in Western countries, either for doing too much or too little to help Ukrainian refugees. For example, the following post criticizes former British Home Secretary Priti Patel for mishandling the influx of refugees from Ukraine.

@pritipatel Absolute disgrace for not setting up a refugee route as thousands escape Ukraine.

4.2. “Expression of countering”

This was the second most prevalent code, associated with 20 percent of all posts in the dataset. Posts labeled with this code indicate users directly or indirectly challenging or rejecting negative discourse or verified/unverified claims about refugees. More specifically, these posts contained profane and explicit language when challenging claims related to the war, Ukrainian refugees, and various political responses, as illustrated in the example below.

@AFP This place isn’t a refugee camp, it’s a processing facility for Ukrainians forcibly sent to fascist Russia. FUCK YOU, RED CROSS. I’m at a loss for words.

One common strategy users employed to counter negative discourse towards refugees was the use of personal anecdotes and references to lived experiences, as shown below.

Can every American just shut the fuck up? I live right next to #Ukraine, and I just talked to a Ukrainian refugee family opting for Vienna over Budapest. You know nothing about this region or our history with and . So shut up!

Expressions of countering also included narratives that seek to undermine support for Ukrainian refugees, such as alleging that Ukrainian refugees are racists, as shown below.

@username as if skin color determines who’s a legitimate Ukrainian citizen, student, or refugee. That’s some racist bullshit. They’re all escaping the war in Ukraine, first and foremost.

4.3. “Other”

This was the third most frequently used code, linked to 18 percent of all posts in the dataset. These posts included toxic language directed towards non-Ukrainian (or not just Ukrainian) refugees (e.g., racist remarks about “illegal immigrants”), sarcastic posts without a clear stance, false or misleading statements,
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or statements that do not align with any other codes.

@username @RealCadanceO He’s a refugee from Congo who, after benefiting from Ukraine for years, now won’t defend it. He should be deported back to Congo. He’s a parasite!

While not directly related to our primary research question, which aims to examine discourse about Ukrainian refugees, the significant presence of this code in our dataset demonstrates that discussions about refugees from Ukraine on Twitter are not limited to just this specific group. Twitter users often frame this topic in the context of other refugee groups.

4.4. “Pro-Ukraine and Anti-Russia”

Six percent of posts in the dataset expressed pro-Ukraine or anti-Russia sentiments; however, they were too broad to fit into any other codes, particularly those with a stronger focus on refugee-related issues. While initially coded as a separate category, “Anti-Russia” posts were later grouped with “Pro-Ukraine” posts due to the strong overlap in their stance regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, both portraying Ukraine as a victim and Russia as an aggressor.

The following is an example of a “Pro-Ukrainian” post expressing sympathy for Ukrainians, horror at the impact of the war, outrage at support for other causes but not Ukraine, and enthusiastic calls to defend Ukraine.

I’m Afghan and never supported @ashrafghani or the rest because they were crap from the start. Cheers to @ZelenskyyUa and Ukraine. I’d rather die defending Ukraine than be a refugee now.

“Anti-Russia” posts made broader calls to ostracize the Kremlin, Russian people, and generally portrayed Russia as an enemy. For example, the post below attacks Russian President Vladimir Putin, accusing him of crimes such as rape or genocide.

@MFA_RUSSIA @RUSEMBUSA
@RUSEMBASSYKABUL @RUSEMBIRAN
@RUSEMBSYRIA @unwomanchief @unwoman @unicef
@refuges Russian atrocities include lies, child and woman abductions, a horrific human trafficking nightmare, widespread rape, torture, mass killings, and state-sponsored terror. All because of Putin.

4.5. “Preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees”

This code was applied to six percent of posts expressing concerns that Ukrainian refugees or Ukraine itself received undue financial support or other forms of assistance from the West. This included posts stating that Ukrainian refugees are treated more favorably in host countries compared to local citizens or non-Ukrainian refugees, with examples ranging from simplified entry requirements to the implementation of assistance programs specifically dedicated to Ukrainians.

@username Just the usual hypocrites eager to welcome white European refugees from Ukraine but reject those from the Middle East or Africa. They’re just covert racists!

Some of these posts also suggested that the money given to Ukrainians should be spent on domestic affairs, like housing and healthcare, as demonstrated by example below.
Countries are willing to shell out 1,000 euros a month for each Ukrainian refugee @Webdenews but only allocate 850 euros for their own sick and pensioners who have been paying into health insurance for years. Germans continue to be foolish!

Finally, not all posts labeled with this code were overtly anti-Ukrainian; some engaged in “whataboutism.” These posts alluded to or decried how racialized refugees from Afghanistan, Rwanda, and other predominantly non-white countries do not receive support in Europe as the Ukrainians do.

It’s not only the Palestinians getting bombed; other countries are also engulfed in war and grappling with severe crises and mass displacement. But no one gives a shit about them because they aren’t white! The situation in Ukraine is terrible, but it’s even more catastrophic for others.

4.6. “Ukrainian refugees are abusing the system,” “Ukrainians are racist or ungrateful,” and “Ukrainian refugees are untrustworthy/dangerous”

These three codes describe different expressions of anti-Ukrainian refugee sentiments.

The most common in this grouping were four percent of all posts that questioned the legitimacy of Ukrainians’ refugee status and suggested that they were taking advantage of financial or relocation support, as demonstrated by the following post.

A Ukrainian refugee in Germany has this to say to the taxpayers: “German people complain that we do nothing and don’t work. I’m a refugee from Ukraine, and honestly, I don’t give a fuck. You have paid, are paying, and will keep paying. If you don’t like it, go protest. I still don’t give a fuck.”
@georgegalloway

This code also included criticisms of men fleeing Ukraine, such as posts calling Ukrainian men cowards, stemming from the Ukrainian government’s decision to bar men between the ages of 18–60 from leaving Ukraine (Waldie, 2022).

The second most common code in this grouping referred to three percent of posts accusing Ukrainians of being racist towards racialized minorities, as shown in the following post.

How does it make sense for this Ukrainian refugee woman to claim she feels unsafe in UK because there are too many Muslims and blacks, when her own country is at war? That s*** doesn’t make any f****** sense.

Posts accusing Ukrainians of being ungrateful were also included in this code. For example, the following post suggested that Ukrainian refugees do not appreciate the support they receive from the local population.

#Ukraine go home! We don’t need any refugees here. If you can’t be grateful for our hospitality, you’re more than welcome to fucking leave.

The third code in this grouping related to two percent of all posts describing violent crimes, such as rape, allegedly committed by Ukrainian refugees. For example, the post below perpetuates the narrative that
Ukrainian refugees are a physical threat to the host country’s citizens.

Ukrainian refugee at the Dresden hotel drove drunk with his friend’s 12-year old daughter to assault her!

4.7. “Discredit the Ukrainian government and institutions”

This code was assigned to three percent of all posts in the dataset and applied to posts specifically directed at the government, elected, or appointed officials representing Ukrainian society, rather than Ukrainian citizens or refugees. These included claims that the Ukrainian government neglected their citizens, refused to negotiate a ceasefire with Russia, or supposedly ordered attacks on refugee convoys. While some posts under this code included personal attacks on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, others made more general accusations of corruption against the Ukrainian government or past presidents, as shown in the post below.

@username Tragic to see this war driven by a handful of wealthy, corrupt Ukrainian presidents lied their way into power, causing deaths. With Russia at war with the US & EU in Ukraine, safer for people to flee to refugee camps than to stay and be killed. :( 

4.8. “Discredit Western media”

Two percent of the posts in the dataset expressed distrust of mainstream media organizations, often linking to the original news article from the organization being criticized. Below is a sample post coded under this category that accused Western media of being too pro-Ukraine and biased in their coverage of the war.

@username Calling yourself an anti-fascist? Your brain must be scrambled by MSNBC or you’re just spewing NATO nonsense.

Some of these posts accused media outlets of having a left or right-wing agenda, or supporting select politicians, as illustrated in the example below.

@FoxNews Dumb take. You’re just trying to distract everyone to help Putin. The GOP, FoxNews and Trump are basically on #TeamPutin and have helped him go after Europe.

4.9. “Anti-Ukraine and Pro-Russia”

Only two percent of the posts explicitly expressed negative sentiments towards Ukraine, its military, or leadership. While they contained keywords related to refugees, these posts were not explicitly related to Ukrainian refugees, as shown in the post below.

The only thing more ridiculous than someone flying one Ukraine flag is someone flying three. If you’re that into Ukraine and what it stands for, why not call up the Russian Embassy and ask them to send the Ukrainian Azov regiment POW to stay at your place as a refugee?

Posts that were overtly supportive of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine or echoed pro-Kremlin claims, such as alleged genocide against Russian-speaking Ukrainians, were also included in this grouping.
Mr. Putin (man of God) keep tearing down these racists in #Ukraine. Africans, Indians, and Iraqis must be permitted on those refugee trains and buses.

5. Discussion

In this section, we discuss the significance and implications of the two most prevalent codes, which comprise over 50 percent of the dataset. These were “C6: Politically motivated/partisan content” and “C5: Expression of countering.” Additionally, we will discuss codes that align with the Kremlin’s IO campaign against Ukraine that state actors and partisan groups may exploit to exacerbate societal divisions in host countries.

5.1. Politically-driven posts

As noted earlier, one-third of the posts were assigned the “C6: Politically motivated/partisan content” code. Posts in this group framed Ukrainian refugees and the war through a political lens. Authors of these posts leveraged the crisis to signal partisan opinions and engage in personal attacks. Ukrainian refugees were used as a pretext for publicly attacking government officials and Western institutions, such as NATO, and the United Nations. U.S. President Joe Biden was one of the primary targets of these posts as he was frequently criticized for his financial support for Ukraine while allegedly neglecting domestic policy issues. Likewise, Tory party leadership in the United Kingdom like former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, former Home Secretary Priti Patel, and current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak were heavily attacked on Twitter for being unprepared to deal with the refugee crisis and their general lack of leadership.

The politicization of Ukrainian refugees follows a pattern observed in other geo-political events that involved the massive displacement of people. For example, the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis became political fodder during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and pushed politicians, media, and the public to debate countries’ responsibilities to MENA refugees fleeing conflict (Douai, et al., 2022; Scribner, 2017). Concurrently, the rise of right-wing, populist rhetoric in Western countries has exacerbated anti-refugee sentiments, portraying refugees as a cultural and physical threat to host countries, or undeserving of financial support (Gessler and Hunger, 2022; Wodak and Krzyżanowski, 2017). We see this reflected in our dataset in the form of right-wing and right-leaning posts accusing U.S. politicians of prioritizing the well-being of Ukrainian refugees over American citizens, echoing comments made by populist politicians like former President Donald Trump and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. Domestic challenges such as healthcare, housing, and employment often buttress these broader anti-refugee sentiments, and help to further xenophobic and isolationist attitudes in the West. Refugees are increasingly positioned as the “other,” threatening economic stability in Western democracies (Volkan, 2018).

Ukrainian refugees privilege certain advantages that may not be available to racialized refugees in the European Union, including access to social welfare in countries like Germany that inflamed tensions with host country citizens (captured as “Preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees” in the codebook). Whereas racialized refugees have been othered on the premise of race and religion (Zagi, 2021), the toxic discourse around predominantly white Ukrainian refugees suggests that migration, in general, has devolved into a polarizing, politically-driven debate.

Politicizing refugees undermines global solidarity for victims of forced displacement, and forestalls compliance with the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol. Online anti-social political rhetoric against Ukrainian refugees may also increase hard-right support; mainstream media reported on the phenomenon of right-wing politicians in the United States turning against sending additional aid to Ukraine (Cerda, 2023; Draper, 2023). Enos (2023) noted that political actors can leverage the polarization nature of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee discourse to build or strengthen their political base. Another concern of
Digital battleground: An examination of anti-refugee discourse on Twitter against Ukrainians displaced by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. We will revisit this concern in more detail and relation to other codes in our codebook in Section 5.3 below.

5.2. Expression of countering

This subsection discusses the implications of how countering was used. One-fifth of the posts directly or indirectly challenged negative discourse and claims (unverified or verified) about Ukrainian refugees and the war. The prevalence of this code highlights users’ willingness to confront anti-social online behavior directed at a marginalized group. For example, posts using racist language that paint Ukrainian refugees as discriminatory towards racialized groups in European host countries elicited countering on Twitter. This aligns with prior research that found social media users are more likely to challenge others when posts attempt to insert and normalize the use of racist language in discourse (Coles and Lane, 2023).

While countering racist, nativistic, or hateful posts may be done with good intentions, this action can backfire by making the user who is countering appear angry and threatening. This is particularly likely when using toxic language, as it can lead to a negative evaluation of the user’s character. For instance, a study by Howard, et al. (2020) found that Black Americans who speak out against racism on social media are viewed as less likable. Even though previous studies have examined how others perceive individuals who are engaged in counter-speech based on their race or gender (Wilhelm and Joeckel, 2019), it is unclear whether a negative evaluation occurs in cases of predominantly non-racialized refugees and their allies.

We also observed that one of the main persuasion strategies used to counter anti-Ukrainian refugee discourse was invoking firsthand experiences. This may increase a user’s perceived credibility (ethos) or appeal to emotions (pathos), per Aristotle’s rhetorical theory (Murphy, 1974). User responses appealing to logic and reason (logos), such as challenging false or misleading information by linking to credible sources of information, were not as prevalent. This is also supported by research into affective responses to disinformation, such as Barfar’s (2019) finding of less cognitive thinking in response to partisan disinformation and greater “anger and incivility.” In a related work, Chen, et al. (2021) similarly found pathos strategies more common against misinformation-laden posts.

Since our focus was on toxic posts, we have not examined the prevalence of “prosocial” countering, which features more educational content and links to credible sources. Nevertheless, previous work suggests that prosocial countering is not common on Twitter. For example, Ray, et al. (2021) found that users were more likely to use anti-social (as opposed to “prosocial”) intervention strategies when responding to racist and hateful comments on Twitter. The researchers attributed this finding, in part, to Twitter’s interface affordances, which make it difficult to view full conversation threads, resulting in messages appearing out of context. This is a likely contributing factor in our case; however, the extent of its impact on our data is outside the scope of the current study.

5.3. Anti-refugee discourse and pro-Kremlin narratives

This subsection details the prevalence of pro-Kremlin narratives among the analyzed posts. Since we worked solely with publicly available data, we cannot link specific messages to the Kremlin’s activity on Twitter due to a lack of attribution data. Instead, we will assess the prevalence of the types of narratives known to be propagated by the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin accounts on social media based on prior literature. While only two percent of the posts were overtly anti-Ukraine and pro-Russia, we assess that 53 percent of our sample play into pro-Kremlin narratives, as outlined below.

Kremlin-backed IO often operates along political fault lines and is characterized by the broader goal of chipping away at the American-led neoliberal world order by discrediting Western institutions like NATO through divisive narratives on social media (Mölder and Sazonov, 2020). Examining our dataset, we find that 33 percent of the posts shared politically motivated, partisan content aligning with such narratives. In addition, two percent of the posts specifically attempted to discredit Western media.
The Kremlin’s IO is also known to rely on anti-immigrant discourse (Llewelyn, et al., 2018), appealing to right-wing users who may amplify messages echoing populist and isolationist views concerning Western support of Ukraine. Twelve percent of posts in our dataset feed into similar narratives characterizing Ukrainian refugees as being parasitic to host countries. They are coded as “Preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees” (six percent), “Ukrainian refugees are abusing the system” (four percent), and “Ukrainian refugees are untrustworthy/dangerous” (two percent).

Other documented narratives used by the Kremlin to undermine the Ukrainian government include topics such as “rampant Nazism” among Ukraine’s political class, sovereign claims to Ukraine (“historical Russia”), and Russophobia in Ukraine (Anton, 2023; Darczewska, 2014; Tolz and Hutchings, 2023). Examining our dataset, we find that six percent of posts broadly relate to such narratives, alleging that Ukrainians are racist or ungrateful (three percent), or discrediting the Ukrainian governments and institutions (three percent). While we do not claim that the Kremlin is behind each of the 53 percent of our sample, our results demonstrate that a substantial percentage of posts align with pro-Kremlin narratives, intentionally or unintentionally. Left unchallenged, such narratives may legitimize pro-Kremlin claims in the eyes of influential stakeholders, such as policy-makers and journalists, who frequent Twitter. Such claims and narratives may also indirectly influence public opinion offline, as they are reproduced in mainstream or partisan media outlets, further advancing the reach of the Kremlin’s IO.

6. Conclusions and future work

Examining public discourse about Ukrainian refugees on social media lets us observe how narratives and counter-narratives about refugees are formed and shaped in the information space. The presence of media, journalists, politicians, policy-makers, and other stakeholders makes Twitter an important information space to examine discourse around Ukrainian refugees.

Our research question asked about the types and the prevalence of anti-refugee discourse about Ukrainian refugees on Twitter. Based on our analysis of toxic posts, the most prevalent posts involving Ukrainian refugees were politically motivated/partisan content (33 percent) and expressions of countering anti-refugee narratives (20 percent). Both types of posts reflect the increasing politicization and polarization of discourse around Ukrainian refugees online and offline.

Furthermore, we assessed that 53 percent of the sampled posts align with narratives associated with the Kremlin’s IO against Ukraine. By leveraging anti-refugee sentiments and capitalizing on the existing political and cultural fault lines in the West, pro-Kremlin messages shared on Twitter are helping to erode support for Ukrainian refugees, downplay the severity of the war, and undermine international support for Ukraine. This finding is consistent with previous research on the Kremlin’s IO that identified similar pro-Kremlin narratives on social and mainstream media (Collins and Korecki, 2022; Crișan, 2019; Pamment, 2023). Such narratives undermine political unity in the West, particularly in the EU, where most Ukrainian refugees settled, especially when they are amplified by far-right political actors and parties (Ivaldi and Zankina, 2023).

This case study, while not generalizable beyond the specific case of Twitter and the topic of Ukrainian refugees, contributes to the growing body of literature documenting alarming trends in the politicization of refugee and immigrant-related topics by partisan and state actors. This case study also demonstrates the vulnerability of open discourse on sites like Twitter to manipulation and reminds us why we cannot rely solely on social media to gauge public sentiment on topics of public concern.

From a methodological perspective, our results highlight the need for a nuanced approach to detecting and interpreting toxic posts, considering both the individuals who posted them and the intended targets. For example, our analysis revealed that some toxic posts, as flagged by Perspective API, were attempting to
counter anti-refugee narratives by employing harsh language or quoting insulting words spoken by others. While this does not take away from the utility of using automated techniques to analyze this type of data, it does underscore the importance of carefully examining the context and intent behind posts and the value of mixed methods when analyzing social media data. Through a manual review, we can more accurately identify anti-social behavior while avoiding the mischaracterization of users advocating for justice or raising awareness about critical issues.

Finally, the study points to future avenues of research in this area. First, since we only analyzed posts in selected languages (English, German, French, Italian, Czech, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, Ukrainian, and Russian), future work should expand this analysis by incorporating additional languages, such as Polish and Turkish, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the online discourse about Ukrainian refugees in the EU. Second, our study only examined text-based communication. Future research will need to explore the use and role of visual content, such as photos and videos (including those generated by AI), in spreading anti-refugee content on social media. Additionally, inquiry into how much pro-Kremlin discourse is directly propagated by state actors compared to civilians in Western countries echoing these narratives would further insights into Kremlin-backed IO. Finally, we only focused on discourse shared on Twitter. Future work can validate our findings by analyzing other social media platforms, such as Telegram and TikTok, which are also used to discuss the war in Ukraine. Analyzing and comparing narratives across platforms will provide a more holistic view of a broadening digital battleground and the discourse surrounding Ukrainians and refugees from other countries.

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