'They seem so like us': The discursive representation of Ukrainian refugees in Western media

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Abstract

This paper investigates the discursive construction of Ukrainian refugees in 10 international media outlets following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in February 2022. The study draws on the methodological framework of the Discourse-Historical Approach within the Critical Discourse Analysis paradigm which is concerned with the role of language in manipulating users' perceptions and influencing their attitudes. The analysis investigates five discursive strategies outlined by Wodak (2001), namely referential strategies, predicational strategies, argumentative strategies, perspectivisation, and mitigation and intensification strategies. The findings reveal a distinctively favourable portrayal of Ukrainian refugees in contrast to the depiction of non-European refugees who are negatively predicated and dehumanised. The various discursive strategies employed serve to promote a sense of shared identity with Ukrainian citizens and to legitimise arguments in support of their cause by framing it as a humanitarian one. Simultaneously, the study reveals the implicit racism inherent in Western media discourse which advocates for the preferential treatment of people who are similar, while undermining and derogating the different 'other'. Ultimately, these findings highlight the role of such media representations in mobilising the European public to take action and offer concrete support to the displaced Ukrainian population.

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Introduction:

Following nearly a decade of political tension and unrest, February 2022 witnessed an escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that culminated in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The following events triggered what is considered to be the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the Second World War. Apart from the tens of thousands of casualties suffered by both parties, the conflict led to a large portion of the Ukrainian population being displaced. This crisis further had considerable reverberations beyond its local context. Indeed, not only was its impact felt globally in terms of economic repercussions, food shortages and a crisis in fuel supplies. More critically, the events garnered significant international attention on a humanitarian level as millions of Ukrainian civilians fled the war and sought shelter in other European countries.

This paper is concerned with the role of the media in the reporting of the conflict, particularly in terms of the favourable reception of Ukrainian refugees. Indeed, unlike the typically negative representations of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in public discourse (see Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Khosravinik, 2009, 2010; Rasinger, 2010; Rowe, & O'Brien, 2014; Santa Ana, 1999; Teo, 2000; van Dijk, 1991; Wodak, 2015; Wodak & Matouschek, 1993, etc.), it was striking on this occasion that Ukrainian refugees have tended from the outset to receive a rather different treatment, and it is this observation that motivated the present research.

In times of crisis, the way events and social actors are represented and positioned discursively can have critical implications. There are several strategies that specifically require particular attention when analysing discourses involved in the construction of identities. For that purpose, this study aims to address the following questions, drawing on the model put forward by Wodak (2001, 2015):

1- How are individuals, places and events named and referred to linguistically?

2- What traits, characteristics, qualities, and features are attributed to those social actors?

3- What arguments are used to justify the claims made?

4- From what perspective are these labels, attributions, and arguments expressed?

5- Are the speakers' and writers' utterances articulated explicitly, or are they intensified or mitigated?

6- Is there evidence of discriminatory or prejudicial discourse?

Literature review

In this section we will present an overview of relevant studies covering three main themes related to this research, namely the critical role of the media, the discursive manifestations of racism, and the representation of refugees and other incomers in public discourse.

Commenting on the importance and influence of the media, Fairclough (1989) notes that "the effects of media power are cumulative, working through the repetition of particular ways of

handling causality and agency, particular ways of positioning the reader, and so forth" (p. 54). In this connection, van Dijk (2006) discusses the concept of manipulation as a social, cognitive and discursive practice which is "exercised through text, talk and visual messages" (p. 361) and yields considerable influence on the minds of the public who is exposed to these discourses. van Dijk (2005) particularly highlights the crucial role of the media in shaping opinions about and attitudes towards immigration, asserting that "What people know about other groups, other peoples and the 'world', they largely know from the media" and that is precisely why "discourse plays a fundamental role in the formation of racist beliefs and in the discriminatory practices based on such beliefs" (pp. 9-10).

In his seminal work on racism in the media, van Dijk (1991) frames this phenomenon as "one of the most pernicious problems of white society" (p. ix), and underlines the role of language in the construction of a framework for the interpretation of events involving different ethnic groups. Importantly, van Dijk (2013) emphasises that

> Racist ideology and attitudes are not innate but learned, and so are the social practices of discrimination based on them. … Prejudices […] can only be acquired, legitimated and socially reproduced by discourse. Hence the relevance of the study of text and talk as a crucial component in the study of the formation and reproduction of racism in society (p. xvi).

Discussing the ways through which shared social representations are established, van Dijk (2005) argues that "racism is based on constructed differences of ethnicity, appearance, origin, culture and/or language" (p. 2).

Several studies have tackled the representation of refugees and migrants in various public forums. Wodak and Matouschek (1993) examine negative attitudes towards immigration in Austria through a study of political discourse, media texts and public conversations. Their findings reveal prejudiced representations of Eastern European migrants following the collapse of the communist bloc. Wodak (1996) discusses the argumentative strategies typical of anti-foreigner discourses involving focus on difference, deviance and potential danger. Baker and McEnery (2005) investigate the associations attached to refugees in a large number of texts published in 2003 in a range of British newspapers as well as in documents from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees website. Their findings reveal that "the term refugee carries a mainly negative discourse prosody" (p. 222). Gabrielatos and Baker's (2008) subsequent study examines the discursive construction of refugees and asylum seekers in a large corpus of British newspaper articles published between 1996 and 2005. Their analysis indicates a tendency to resort to negative representations in the form of topoi and metaphors that serve to reinforce a dominant discourse promoting a sense of moral panic in relation to refugees and other incomers. Taylor (2019) explores

the evolution of anti-migration discourse through a discussion of the rhetorical strategies used to label people involved in forced migration in the *Times* British newspaper over a period of 200 years.

Finally, a recent study conducted by Walter and Fazekas (2022) presents an interesting take on the process of othering within the European context. Noting that media coverage is a determining factor in the process of constructing the 'other', the authors analyse the portrayal of EU citizens in news media in contrast to British citizens and non-EU immigrants in the context of the Brexit referendum. The process of othering is defined as the way similarities and differences are established in the representation of people, which can lead to the inclusion or exclusion and marginalisation of individuals based on group identities. The aim of Walter and Fazekas's study is to explore the role the media play in the exclusion of others by portraying them as being different from the ingroup. Their findings reveal that, although EU citizens share many common features with UK citizens, they were in fact predominantly portrayed in a similar manner to the well-established outgroup of immigrants.

Data and method

This study is concerned with the coverage of the Ukrainian refugee crisis at the outset of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, through a study of selections from 10 international media outlets from across the ideological spectrum. The data set comprises 14 excerpts from the commentaries of reporters, anchors, editorialists, political analysts and other media figures during the first few weeks of the conflict. The selection criteria took into account the ideological position of the respective outlets in order to provide a balanced distribution and ensure the sample's representativeness. Thus, the discourse selections include 6 reports from left-leaning media outlets (*CNN, New York Times, NBC, CBS, Al Jazeera English, La Sexta)*, 5 from right-leaning news outlets (*The Daily Telegraph, BFM TV)*, and 3 from centrist outlets (*BBC, ITV*). The respective political positions of these outlets were identified according to and corroborated by two media-bias rating resources, *Ad Fontes Media, Inc.* and *AllSides* [TM]. This choice of data thus serves to investigate the nature of the coverage afforded across the political spectrum.

The methodological framework adopted for this purpose draws on the Discourse-Historical Approach propounded by Wodak (2001, 2015) within the Critical Discourse Analysis paradigm. Critical Discourse Analysis is a multidisciplinary approach that views language as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1989, 1995). One of the central concerns of this approach revolves around the critical potential of language which can influence users' attitudes, manipulate their perceptions and

often lead to the construction of particular world views and ideologies. This makes this approach particularly well suited to the study of media discourse.

Many studies within the Critical Discourse Analysis tradition have examined the representation of foreigners, refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers as specified in the previous section. Several analytical categories have been proposed in the process to account for the representation of these groups in discourse. This study will specifically analyse the corpus according to the five discursive strategies outlined by Wodak (2001) and Reisigl and Wodak (2016), namely in terms of *referential strategies* (naming)*, predicational strategies* (attribution)*, argumentative strategies* (topoi)*, perspectivisation,* and *mitigation* and *intensification strategies.*

Nomination strategies explore the way individuals, social groups, objects, phenomena and actions are referred to. *Predication* involves the characteristics and qualities attributed to csertain social actors, events and processes. The study of *argumentation* examines the topoi used to justify certain claims. *Perspectivisation* reflects the speaker's point of view and position. *Intensification and mitigation* are strategies that relate to the illocutionary force of utterances.

Analysis and discussion

The following section will analyse the representation of Ukrainian refugees according to the five discursive strategies listed above. All emphasis in the quoted selections is mine unless otherwise specified.

1- Nomination:

At the referential level, both social actors and geographical entities are named through the geopolitical anthroponym "European" which serves to construct a sense of shared identity. Ukrainians are referred to as "*European* people" (David Sakvarelidze, *BBC*), "like any *European* family" (Peter Dobbie, *Al-Jazeera*). Similarly, Kyiv is represented as "a *European* city" (Charlie D'Agata, *CBS*), "une ville *européenne*" (Ulysse Gosset, *BFM TV*), while Ukraine is also framed as "a *European* country" (Daniel Hannan, *The Daily Telegraph*).

This membership categorisation device helps create an emotional rapprochement by bringing the Ukrainian population closer, thus naturally generating more empathy.

2- Predication:

In relation to predicational strategies, this section will investigate the characteristics and qualities attributed to individuals/groups, events and entities through the use of adjectives, appositions, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and comparisons.

First, in terms of social actors, in addition to the representation of Ukrainians through their geographical affiliation (Europeans) as noted above, other predications serve to portray them in various roles.

One of the most conspicuous strategies involves their depiction as victims deserving sympathy. David Sakvarelidze on the *BBC* indeed deplores the sight of Ukrainian "*children* being killed every day with Putin's missiles, helicopters and rockets", while a Spanish reporter on *La Sexta TV* resorts to a physical description (these *children* are blond with blue eyes) which he simultaneously contrasts with "the ***other*** *children* that we've become accustomed to see suffer on TV" in a dehumanising stereotypical representation of foreign victims of conflicts.

Another predicational strategy works to establish Ukrainians as citizens of a modern, developed country. *Al-Jazeera*'s Peter Dobbie for instance highlights the socio-economic status of Ukrainian refugees: "What's compelling is just looking at them, the way they're dressed. … these are *prosperous, middle-class people*". French commentators on *BFM TV* also note similarities in terms of lifestyle in a series of comparisons. Olivier Truchot for example declares that "l'Ukrainien, il me *ressemble*. Il a la *même* voiture que moi", a point noted too by Philippe Corbé who describes them as "[des] Européens qui partent dans leurs voitures qui *ressemblent* à nos voitures". British columnist Daniel Hannan in *The Daily Telegraph* further confirms: "They seem so *like us*", adding that "Ukraine is a European country. Its people watch Netflix and have Instagram accounts."

Further predications focus on a perceived shared identity with Western Europeans. In terms of ethnicity, Kelly Cobiella unequivocally declares, "They're *white*" (*NBC News*), while David Sakvarelidze expresses his distress at watching these "*European* people *with blue eyes and blonde hair* being killed" (*BBC*). Another common element involves religious affiliation as Kelly Cobiella also specifies that "These are *Christians*" (*NBC News*). Ultimately, Christophe Barbier overlooks geopolitical boundaries as he asserts the primacy of culture : "ce sont des européens de culture… même si on n'est pas dans l'Union Européenne" (*BFM TV*).

The final predication strategy serves to construct Ukrainians fleeing the conflict as legitimate "*refugees*" (Kelly Cobiella, *NBC News*), "*vraiment* des *réfugiés*" (Christophe Barbier, *BFM TV*), "des gens qui fuient la guerre… et qui essayent juste de sauver leur vie" (Philippe Corbé, *BFM TV*). This construction is achieved by undermining the claims of other victims of conflicts as these speakers, along others in the corpus, are quick to qualify their statements. Indeed, Kelly Cobiella immediately specifies, these are "not *refugees from Syria*" (*NBC News*). *Al-Jazeera*'s Peter Dobbie, further outlines the alleged eligibility of Ukrainian refugees in contrast to other "*refugees trying to get away from areas in the Middle East that are still in a big state of war*", as though the Ukrainian crisis is a worthier cause than military conflicts elsewhere in the world which also result in the death or displacement of large numbers of civilians. Perhaps the most striking predication, however,

is present in Julia Ioffe's dehumanising qualification of Middle-Eastern victims of war: "you know, it's one thing for sarin gas to be used on *people in faraway Syria who are Muslim and who are of a different culture*" (*CNN*).

On the other hand, the discursive qualification of Ukraine and Kyiv is also predicated through the use of comparisons. According to *CBS* foreign correspondent Charlie D'Agata, "this is*n't a place … like Iraq or Afghanistan*, that has seen conflict raging for decades", rather "this is a relatively *civilised*, a relatively *European… city where you wouldn't expect that or hope that it's going to happen*". The implication here is twofold: first, the Ukrainian capital is portrayed as a 'civilised' city, unlike Baghdad and Kabul; second, this very status should preclude its current predicament, which concurrently seems like a natural and even expectable condition for the 'less civilised' regions of the world.

A similar analogy is drawn by Lucy Watson who is barely able to suppress her outrage as she exclaims: "And this is not *a developing, third world nation*; this is *Europe*!" (*ITV).* In the same spirit, *BFM TV*'s Ulysse Gosset further offers a commentary on the situation, expressing his disbelief at such a conflict taking place in a modern European city, 'as though we were in Iraq or Afghanistan' ("On est au 21ème siècle, on est dans une ville européenne et on a des tirs de missiles de croisière comme si on était en Irak ou en Afghanistan, vous imaginez!").

Such disparaging predications only serve to reinforce the marginal status that other war-ravaged regions and populations are relegated to, while conflicts in European territories seem to be given legitimacy and priority. More seriously, by implying that Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. are less "civilised" countries, all the analogies drawn by the speakers work to depict the citizens of these nations as less worthy, and indeed irrelevant altogether.

3- Argumentation

In this section, we will investigate the argumentative strategies used to justify positive and negative attributions.

The most pervasive strategy evident throughout the entire dataset revolves around the topos of *identity* as most speakers and writers resort to analogies in support of their claims. As discussed above, this is largely achieved by drawing on physical, geographical, religious and cultural similarities (and differences). An overview of the findings of the previous section can help recontextualise the use of these strategies within the rhetorical frame of an identification strategy that works towards establishing similarity and group identification.

While commentators of various European nationalities highlight the significance of Ukrainians' biological features ('blond hair', 'blue eyes' – *BBC, La Sexta),* French journalist Olivier Truchot on *BFM TV* focuses on other common elements ("l'Ukrainien, il me *ressemble*. Il a la *même* voiture que moi") which he claims lead to a sense of *"identification"*. Similarly, Daniel Hannan in *The*

Daily Telegraph emphasises what he perceives as a shared lifestyle noting that Ukrainians "watch Netflix and have Instagram accounts", while *Al-Jazeera's* Peter Dobbie notes that "They look *like any European family that you would live next door to*". As for *NBC News* correspondent Kelly Cobiella, the argument involves not just Ukrainians' ethnicity ("They're *white*"), but also their religion ("These are *Christians*").

Other speakers highlight cultural similarities arguing that Ukrainians are "des européens de *culture*, même si on n'est pas dans l'Union Européenne" (Christophe Barbier, *BFM TV),* unlike for instance "people in faraway Syria who are Muslim and who are of a *different culture*" (Julia Ioffe, *CNN).*

It is important to note in this context the strategy of 'group definition' as Ukrainians are often identified in opposition to *'other'* victims of military conflict elsewhere in the world. This is achieved through binary constructions where Ukrainians are not only described through typically positive predications as discussed above, but are further defined as being unlike refugees from the Middle East, etc. through recurrent 'not' constructions. The pervasiveness of this strategy can be better visualised in the list below:

- "These are **not** obviously refugees trying to get away from areas in the Middle East that are still in a big state of war, these are **not** people trying to get away from areas in North Africa." (Peter Dobbie, *Al-Jazeera*)

- "These are **not** refugees from Syria. These are refugees from neighboring Ukraine." (Kelly Cobiella, *NBC News*)

- "These are**n't** like the other children that we've become accustomed to see suffer on TV, these children are blond with blue eyes" (Spanish reporter, *La Sexta*)

- "We're **not** talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Vladimir Putin, we're talking about Europeans" ("On ne parle pas là de Syriens qui fuient les bombardements du régime syrien soutenu par Vladimir Poutine, on parle d'Européens", Philippe Corbé, *BFM TV)*

- "this is**n't** a place ... like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades, you know, this is a relatively civilised… a relatively European… city" (Charlie D'Agata, *CBS*)

- "this is **not** a developing, third world nation; this is Europe!" (Lucy Watson, *ITV*)

Another argumentative strategy evident in the selections draws on the topos of *humanitarianism* as various speakers and writers attempt to justify international support for the displaced Ukrainian population.

On *BFM TV* for instance, Christophe Barbier speaks of an "evident *humanitarian* gesture" ("un geste humanitaire immédiat évident"), while Philippe Corbé draws on the emotional appeal as he contends that Ukrainians leaving their homes are not going on holiday but fleeing war: "we are talking about Europeans … who are *just trying to save their lives*" ("C'est pas des départs en

vacances. Ce sont des gens qui fuient la guerre. … on parle d'Européens qui essayent juste de sauver leur vie, quoi.")

Furthermore, commenting on the interest expressed by some US veterans in joining the military effort in Ukraine a few weeks after the start of the conflict, Dave Philipps in *The New York Times* provides a kind of moral evaluation by describing their motivation as "a *righteous fight* to defend *freedom*." Ultimately, Daniel Hannan in *The Daily Telegraph* frames Russia's invasion of Ukraine quite dramatically as "an *attack on civilisation* itself", thus emphasising the urgency of the appeal.

Interestingly, all four journalists attempt to legitimise the Ukrainian cause while simultaneously undermining the condition of victims of other conflicts.

Christophe Barbier blatantly justifies unconditional support for Ukraine as a self-evident option due to the '*incontestable* nature of the refugees', thus questioning the rights of other displaced individuals ('are they *really* refugees?') whom he implies should not be entitled to that status ("il y a un geste humanitaire immédiat évident. Pourquoi? Parce que la nature des réfugiés n'est pas contestable, on voit bien ce qu'ils fuient et il n'est pas question de dire: 'est-ce que vous êtes vraiment des réfugiés'.")

Daniel Hannan on the other hand alludes to other war-torn regions in a derogatory manner as he declares that "War is no longer something visited upon *impoverished and remote populations*".

Similarly, Philippe Corbé undermines the plight of Syrian refugees, blatantly expressing his lack of concern for their predicament: "We're not talking here about Syrians fleeing the bombing of the Syrian regime backed by Vladimir Putin".

Finally, Dave Philipps seems to suggest that Middle-Eastern countries do not deserve Western aid as they do not care much about democracy: "After years of serving in smoldering occupations, trying to spread democracy in places that only had a tepid interest in it, many [US war veterans] are hungry for what they see as a righteous fight to defend freedom".

Thus, through the use of topoi of *identification* and *humanitarianism,* the Ukrainian refugees' cause is represented as a legitimate one requiring immediate assistance, in contrast to the condition of 'other' refugees who do not seem to be deserving of either sympathy or support.

4- Perspectivisation

This section will explore the point of view from which the labels, attributions and arguments discussed above are expressed. In many of the reports, the speakers' position is communicated through personal deictics expressing predominantly connection and identification, mainly in the form of first-person pronouns.

Daniel Hannan's op-ed in *The Daily Telegraph* opens with a striking analogy: "They seem so like *us.* That is what makes it so shocking." The trope of similarity and self-identification is in fact a recurrent feature as evident for instance in Olivier Truchot's comment on *BMF TV:* "l'Ukrainien, il

me ressemble. Il a la même voiture que *moi*, et finalement, c'est à trois heures de Paris, *je* pourrais être à sa place." A similar argument reflecting personal involvement is made by David Sakvarelidze on the BBC: "It's very emotional for *me* because *I* see European people with blue eyes and blonde hair being killed".

Al-Jazeera's anchor Peter Dobbie resorts to another strategy using the second-person deictic pronoun 'you' to engage his audience by creating a sense of immediacy to provoke empathy: "They look like any European family that *you* would live next door to."

Apart from personal pronoun deixis, the speakers' position is also expressed through spatial deictics expressing either involvement or distance. In terms of the representation of Ukrainian citizens, there is a predominant use of proximal deictics *this* and *these* evident in several reports, and which serves to communicate a sense of closeness.

Peter Dobbie's report on *Al-Jazeera* focuses on Ukrainian refugees' physical appearance: "*These* are prosperous, I'm loathe to use the expression, *these* are prosperous, middle-class people. *These* are not obviously refugees trying to get away from areas in the Middle East that are still in a big state of war, *these* are not people trying to get away from areas in North Africa."

In a similar vein, *NBC News* correspondent Kelly Cobiella reporting from Poland declares that "*These* are not refugees from Syria. *These* are refugees from neighboring Ukraine. I mean, that, quite frankly, is part of it. *These* are Christians."

Another reporter on Spanish TV news channel *La Sexta* takes the analogy further by stating unapologetically that "*These* aren't like the other children that we've become accustomed to see suffer on TV, *these* children are blond with blue eyes, [so] this is very important."

Finally, *ITV*'s Lucy Watson presents Ukraine from an evidently Eurocentric perspective asserting that "*this* is not a developing, third world nation; *this* is Europe!"

In fact, the notion of proximity is even communicated explicitly at the lexical level, with French political journalist Christophe Barbier on BFM TV justifying French people's empathy towards Ukrainians by describing them as close neighbours ("une population qui est très *proche*, très *voisine*"), while Olivier Truchot further outlines geographical closeness as a determining factor: "c'est à trois heures de Paris, je pourrais être à sa place. Il y a simplement une identification, une *proximité* que peut-être le Français a moins avec l'Afghan. C'est pas du racisme, c'est la loi de la *proximité*."

While proximal deictics suggest a sense of closeness not only in a physical but also an ideological sense, the use of distal deictics can create the opposite effect by setting up a metaphorical distance between the speaker and the entities described. A striking example is evident in Julia Ioffe's commentary on *CNN,* where she unequivocally expresses indifference towards foreign victims of military conflict in an explicit reference to wars in other parts of the world: "it's

one thing for sarin gas to be used on people in *faraway* Syria who are Muslim and who are of a different culture. What is Europe going to do when it's on European soil done to Europeans?". Such a depiction of people who are 'different' and live in a 'faraway' place establishes a distance that serves in a way to justify their inhuman treatment, as if their existence is almost insignificant.

Finally, it is also significant to note the use of evaluative adjectives that further reflect the speakers' perspective and help position the reader in relation to the events and participants described. This is evident for instance in the commentary of *La Sexta*'s reporter who foregrounds the priority of this conflict over others due to the nature of its victims, emphasising that this is "very *important*." In a similar vein, *Al-Jazeera*'s anchor Peter Dobbie highlights the emotional appeal of the Ukrainians' physical appearance: "What's *compelling* is just looking at them", which indicates that they come from a privileged background and are thus entitled to a preferential treatment. Ultimately, Matthew Wright on *ITV* takes the argument to a different level through a controversial statement further reinforcing the same double-standards evident throughout: "The US has used [a thermobaric bomb] before in Afghanistan. But the idea of it being used in Europe is *stomach-churning*."

All of the strategies discussed above thus contribute to the creation of a dichotomy establishing metaphorical proximity/distance and legitimising support/indifference, depending on the nature of the participants.

5- Intensification or mitigation:

In this section, we will examine the illocutionary force of utterances by exploring the strategies employed in the selections to either intensify or mitigate statements.

What seems to be striking at a primary level is the degree of emotional involvement exhibited by several speakers and writers through the use of intensifying adverbs. In an attempt at framing the significance of the crisis in Ukraine, Daniel Hannan in *The Daily Telegraph* contends that "They seem *so* like us. That is what makes it *so* shocking." On a similar note, a reporter on Spanish *La Sexta* news channel emphatically justifies the precedence Ukrainian children take over other young victims of armed conflicts due to their physical features: "These aren't like the other children that we've become accustomed to see suffer on TV, these children are blond with blue eyes, this is *very* important." Likewise, David Sakvarelidze on the *BBC* emphasises the plight of Ukrainian victims "with blond hair and blue eyes" revealing that "It's *very* emotional" for him.

Other speakers went further in their expression of shock and outrage, using hyperbolic statements and analogies. To *ITV*'s Lucy Watson, "the *unthinkable* has happened to them", as she makes no attempt to conceal her indignation: "And this is not a developing, third world nation; this is Europe!". Similarly, Ulysse Gosset on *BFM TV* expresses his disbelief through a rhetorical construction ("can you imagine!") contesting the events in Ukraine by drawing an unfavourable

comparison: "On est au 21ème siècle, on est dans une ville européenne et on a des tirs de missiles de croisière comme si on était en Irak ou en Afghanistan, *vous imaginez!*". Significantly, in both statements, the illocutionary force of the utterances is further amplified through the use of animating prosody.

On the other hand, several speakers resort to mitigation strategies such as hesitations, false starts and vague discourse markers when discussing sensitive matters. Weighing in on the NATO's position in relation to the conflict, Julia Ioffe (*CNN)* interrupts herself before introducing a controversial statement about the legitimacy of using chemical weapons on different civilian targets, hedging her statement with the discourse marker 'you know': "So, what is NATO going to do if -- *you know*, it's one thing for sarin gas to be used on people in faraway Syria who are Muslim and who are of a different culture." *CBS* foreign correspondent Charlie D'Agata also displays hesitation as he describes Kyiv as a 'civilised, European' city, in contrast to other regions that have experienced wars: "this isn't a place, … , *you know*, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades, *you know,…*". As for *NBC News* correspondent Kelly Cobiella, her report on the warm welcome that Ukrainian refugees received at the Polish border focuses on their ethnicity and religion, a statement she hedges with discourse marker 'I mean' and adverbial 'quite frankly': "These are not refugees from Syria. These are refugees from neighboring Ukraine. *I mean,* that, *quite frankly*, is part of it. These are Christians. They're white."

Mitigation can also be achieved through the use of disclaimers that serve to distance speakers from the claims they are making. Charlie D'Agata on *CBS News* for instance repeatedly resorts to disclaimers to modify the force of his claim: "*with all due respect*, …, this is a relatively civilised, a relatively European – *I have to choose those words carefully too* – city where you wouldn't expect that or hope that it's going to happen." This is reinforced by the repetition of the adverb "relatively" to attenuate the tone of his statement. *Al-Jazeera*'s anchor Peter Dobbie further frames his reluctance to commit to the claim of his proposition through a clear disclaimer: "What's compelling is just looking at them, the way they're dressed. These are prosperous, *I'm loathe to use the expression,* these are prosperous, middle-class people." As for *BFM TV*'s Olivier Truchot, he resorts to the use of negation to mitigate his claim, asserting that it is "not racist" to feel more sympathy towards Ukrainians than Afghans: "*C'est pas du racisme,* c'est la loi de la proximité."

An overview of the findings presented here can serve to answer the research questions that have guided this research.

First, in relation to nomination, the process of naming groups of people does not simply involve applying labels to existing entities but rather entails the creation of group identities based on perceptions of what they have in common and what distinguishes them from others. Indeed, as noted by Taylor (2019), the use of labels reveals social attitudes and perspectives while also

simultaneously influencing social relationships. Thus, the importance of naming strategies is related to their function both in terms of reflecting but also shaping reality and how it is perceived. As far as referential strategies are concerned, Ukrainians are unanimously represented in the corpus as members of the Western community through a membership categorisation device using the anthroponym "European" which serves to construct a sense of shared identity.

Second, the social actors identified through nomination strategies can be further assigned qualities through predicational strategies which attribute them with either positive or negative characteristics. In the selected corpus, Ukrainians are consistently depicted as legitimate "refugees" and as victims deserving sympathy and support. Most predications also focus on a perceived shared identity with Western Europeans, whether in terms of ethnicity, religion, culture or lifestyle. Conversely, the analysis revealed a predominance of negative predications assigned to victims of other conflicts who are depicted as less "civilised", "impoverished" and inherently "different".

Third, argumentation strategies can also be used to justify positive and negative attributions and can serve as grounds for partiality or discrimination, and for the inclusion or exclusion of certain social actors. In the selected data, the speakers resort to the topos of *identity* which establishes similarities with the Ukrainians, thus contributing to the creation of a type of positive identification which leads to empathy, support, and ultimately promotes preferential treatment. Furthermore, the analysis reveals the presence of another argumentative strategy based on the topos of *humanitarianism,* arguing for the legitimacy of Ukrainian refugees' cause, in contrast to the condition of 'other' refugees who are excluded and unapologetically discriminated against. As noted by Khosravinik (2010), the processes of humanisation (achieved here through identification strategies) and victimisation (through which Ukrainian refugees are depicted) both emphasise the plight of the affected people, "create a sense of urgency and appeal for support and help" (p. 21).

Fourth, the strategy of perspectivisation frames the speakers' involvement and their point of view in the reporting and description of events. In the selected data, the speakers' position is communicated through the use of personal and spatial deictics expressing respectively a sense of connection and closeness in relation to Ukrainian citizens. What is interesting to note in this connection is how perspectivisation is typically used to highlight refugees' potential proximity as an imminent threat, thus creating a certain "moral panic" as demonstrated by Khosravinik (2014) whose study reveals that "the proximity of events/displaced populations to the UK seems to correlate with heightened levels of tension, projection of fear and a tendency towards negative representation of immigrants/refugees" (p. 517). In the present research, however, it is notable that this discursive strategy is used here rather to reduce distance from the subjects of discourse as indeed the notion of "proximity" serves as a justification for the preferential treatment of Ukrainian refugees.

Furthermore, another finding of the current study reveals the contrasting use of deictics which can work to establish metaphorical distance as well as closeness. This is mainly evident in the representations of foreign victims of conflicts in "faraway" lands whose remoteness is used to justify disinterest and indifference towards their predicament. Indeed, a striking binary reflecting the ambivalent attitude of many speakers and writers in the corpus is epitomised by the predications "close" ("une population qui est très *proche*", Christophe Barbier) vs. "remote" ("impoverished and *remote* populations", Daniel Hannan) describing Ukrainians and "the others", respectively.

Fifth, the use of intensifying and mitigating strategies is also evident in the data under study. The use of intensifying adverbs and hyperbolic statements, in addition to animating prosody, serves to reflect the degree of the speakers' emotional involvement and enhance the illocutionary force of their statements as they express shock and disbelief in relation to the situation in Ukraine. Conversely, several speakers also resort to the use of mitigation strategies such as hesitations, vague discourse markers, and disclaimers when presenting potentially controversial arguments which can betray their bias.

The final question was concerned with the use of discriminatory or prejudicial discourse. Much evidence was found in this connection, mainly in terms of predications and argumentative tropes. What was further evident apart from the unfavourable comparisons made through recurrent binary 'x **not** y' constructions is the presence of negative presuppositions embedded in the discourse and that serve to dehumanise victims of other conflicts, namely:

1- it is normal for "the other children" to suffer (*La Sexta*'s reporter*)*

2- it is acceptable for toxic chemical weapons to be used on Muslim people in Syria (Julia Ioffe, *CNN)*

3- Iraq and Afghanistan are not "civilised", thus we can "expect" the worst to happen to them (Charlie D'Agata, *CBS*)

Conclusion

In sum, the outcome of this study reveals significant insights. While the portrayal of foreign refugees from developing countries is aligned with the findings of previous studies in terms of predominantly negative representations (Baker & McEnery, 2005; Khosravinik, 2010; Wodak, 1996; etc.), a striking difference needs to be noted in relation to the representation of Ukrainian refugees. As outlined earlier, the outcome of Walter and Fazekas's (2022) recent enquiry highlights the exclusion of European citizens from ingroup membership categorisation in British news media portrayals in spite of the many common features they share with UK citizens. Nevertheless, the present study reveals quite a contradictory picture as Ukrainians are systematically predicated as being close and similar, in both British and other Western media outlets. This finding stands even

more notably in contrast with the unfavourable depictions of Eastern European migrants specifically highlighted by Wodak and Matousheck (1993). Whether that shift is due to cultural factors, humanitarian concerns or political considerations, McLeod's (2022) commentary following the outbreak of the armed conflict provides an interesting insight: "For the first time, we are being invited to view the war from the side of the victim." While that is a commendable and indeed ideally expected stance, it should nevertheless apply to all victims of conflict, irrespective of their ethnicity or socio-economic status.

Although at the outset this study set out to investigate the uncharacteristically positive depiction of Ukrainian refugees in Western media reports, one of the incidental outcomes of the analysis simultaneously seems to confirm the implicitly pervasive racism that justifies preferential treatment of people who are "like us" while denigrating the different "other". The danger of such discursive practices based on discriminatory analogies lies in the harmful repercussions of normalising conflicts in certain world regions, as if it were logical, natural or even expected for them to occur. Indeed, this has led the Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association (AMEJA) to issue a statement denouncing the dehumanisation and normalisation of the tragedies experienced in other parts of the world such as the Middle East:

> AMEJA condemns and categorically rejects orientalist and racist implications that any population or country is "uncivilized" or bears economic factors that make it worthy of conflict. … Civilian casualties and displacement in other countries are equally as abhorrent as they are in Ukraine. … We deplore the difference in news coverage of people in one country versus another. Not only can such coverage decontextualize conflicts, but it contributes to the erasure of populations around the world who continue to experience violent occupation and aggression. (AMEJA, 2022)

In relation to the role of discourse in influencing the "creation of specific preferred mental models", it is important to recall that "Manipulating people involves manipulating their minds, that is, people's beliefs, such as the knowledge, opinions and ideologies which in turn control their **actions**" (van Dijk, 2006, p. 365). A direct connection can be provided in this context in terms of the impact of media representations of the Ukrainian conflict on European public opinion and attitudes. Through both private and institutional initiatives, most Western European countries offered unconditional shelter to Ukrainian refugees following the outbreak of the conflict. In the UK specifically, the government-supported sponsorship scheme "Homes for Ukraine" was launched, whereby British citizens voluntarily hosted Ukrainian families in their homes initially for a period of six months. As a stark example of double-standards, this scheme was put forward by the British government around the same time as the controversial Ruwanda immigration deal according

to which 'illegal' refugees and asylum seekers from developing countries were set to be deported to the east-central African country where they would face an uncertain fate.

Several other analogies could be drawn in relation to the derogation of individuals and groups through discursive representations, such as Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant's recent reference to Palestinian fighters as "human animals" which contributes to their dehumanisation, thus making it easier to overlook the plight of Palestinians under occupation. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a particularly worthy and relevant subject especially in light of the latest events, we will restrict ourselves to the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in this paper due to limitations of scope and space. Finally, this study has tackled the first few weeks of the conflict. It would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to explore whether attitudes have remained positive once large numbers of Ukrainian refugees have moved to and settled in Western European countries that initially offered them a warm welcome. Evidence from both previous research and personal observation may suggest otherwise.

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