Visual Narratives of Syrian and Ukrainian Refugees in European Media

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Abstract

This study examines how major European online news outlets visually represent Syrian and Ukrainian refugees, offering a comparative analysis of the visual narratives that accompany coverage of two recent mass-displacement events. While previous research has documented textual double standards in media framing, far less attention has been paid to the role of images in shaping public perception. Photographs, often assumed to be denotative and objective, in fact carry powerful connotative meanings that can reinforce or contest prevailing discourses. The dataset consists of 200 lead images (100 per case) published between August and December 2015 for Syrian refugees and between February and July 2022 for Ukrainian refugees, drawn from leading online outlets in the UK, Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. Using MAXQDA, images were qualitatively coded under three themes: (1) the representation gap (actual vs. illustrative images, scene composition, and identifying information); (2) framing and composition (photographic perspective, subject composition, and the presence and role of non-refugees); and (3) embodied displacement (expressions, bodily positions, spatial

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environments, and surrounding objects). Qualitative frequency tables and code-clouds support comparative interpretation. The findings reveal sharply divergent visual narratives. Syrian refugees are predominantly portrayed through distant, chaotic, and depersonalized imagery-anonymous masses, men-only groups, scenes of struggle, barbed wire, and survival objects-resulting in a dehumanizing and threatening visual frame. Ukrainian refugees, by contrast, are more often depicted as identifiable individuals or families, in orderly environments, with supportive officials, personal belongings, toys, and pets-producing a narrative of familiarity, proximity, and legitimacy.These visual asymmetries demonstrate that photographs do not merely illustrate news but actively construct hierarchies of deservingness. The study underlines the need for closer scholarly attention to visual media, particularly in an era where images are central to shaping public understanding of forced migration.

Keywords: Visual narratives, Syrian refugees, Ukrainian refugees, European media, visual sociology

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Avrupa Medyasında Suriyeli ve Ukraynalı Mültecilerin Görsel Anlatıları

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Öz

Bu araştırma, Avrupa'daki büyük çevrim içi haber kuruluşlarının Suriyeli ve Ukraynalı mültecileri görsel olarak nasıl temsil ettiğini inceleyerek iki kitlesel yerinden edilme olayının medyadaki görsel anlatılarının karşılaştırmalı analizini sunmaktadır. Önceki araştırmalar medya anlatılarında metne dayalı çifte standartları ortaya koymuş olsa da toplumun algısını şekillendirmede görsellerin rolüne daha az dikkat edilmiştir. Çoğunlukla düz anlamsal ve nesnel olduğu varsayılan fotoğraflar, aslında yerleşik söylemleri güçlendirebilen veya sorgulayabilen güçlü yan anlamlar taşır. Veri seti, İngiltere, Almanya, Fransa, İtalya ve İspanya'daki önde gelen çevrim içi yayınlardan seçilen, Suriyeli mülteciler için Ağustos-Aralık 2015 ve Ukraynalı mülteciler için Şubat-Temmuz 2022 tarihleri arasında yayınlanan 200 ana görselden (her vaka için 100) oluşmaktadır. MAXQDA kullanılarak görseller, üç tema altında niteliksel olarak kodlanmıştır: i. temsil boşluğu (gerçek veya örnekleyici görseller, kompozisyon ve tanımlayıcı bilgiler); ii. çerçeveleme ve kompozisyon (fotografik perspektif, özne kompozisyonu ve mülteci olmayanların varlığı ve rolü) ve iii. bedenlenmiş yerinden edilme (ifadeler, bedensel pozisyonlar, mekân ve çevreleyen nesneler). Karşılaştırmalı yorumlama niteliksel frekans tabloları ve kod bulutlarıyla desteklenmiştir. Bulgular, keskin bir şekilde farklılaşan görsel anlatıları ortaya koymaktadır. Suriyeli mülteciler

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ağırlıklı olarak uzak, kaotik ve kişiliksizleştirilmiş imgelerle; anonim kalabalıklar, yalnızca erkeklerden oluşan gruplar, mücadele görüntüleri, dikenli teller ve ölüm kalım nesneleri ile temsil edilerek insanlıktan uzaklaştırıcı ve tehditkâr bir görsel çerçeve oluşturulur. Buna karşılık Ukraynalı mülteciler daha sıklıkla tanımlanabilir bireyler veya aileler olarak düzenli ortamlarda, destekleyici yetkililerle, kişisel eşyalar, oyuncaklar ve evcil hayvanlarla betimlenerek yakınlık, aşinalık ve meşruiyet anlatısı üretilir. Bu görsel asimetriler, fotoğrafların yalnızca haberi görselleştirmediğini, aynı zamanda yardımı hak etme hiyerarşilerini inşa ettiğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, görsellerin zorunlu göçe dair kamusal anlayışı şekillendirmede merkezi role sahip olduğu bir çağda, özellikle görsel medyaya daha yoğun akademik ilginin gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Görsel anlatılar, Suriyeli mülteciler, Ukraynalı mülteciler, Avrupa medyası, görsel sosyoloji

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In June 2023, two tragic incidents occurred in sequence. A vessel named *Adriana* carrying approximately 750 people capsized and sank in the Mediterranean Sea on June 14th. The overloaded vessel was carrying refugees mostly from Pakistan, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Afghanistan who were hoping to reach Italy. 104 people survived and more than 500 people were presumed dead. In less than a week, on June 18th, a tourist submarine was announced to go missing in the Atlantic Ocean. Titan was an expedition submersible carrying 5 people and 3 of them were customers who were willing to view the wreckage of Titanic. The search and rescue operation continued until the discovery of the debris on June 22nd and they announced that an implosion caused the death of all passengers.

The Titan incident garnered significant public attention, with discussions revolving around safety regulations, the high cost of the experience, and theories regarding the events that transpired, keeping the media occupied for several days. The stark contrast in media coverage and public attention between the refugee boat incident involving Adriana and the search and rescue operation for Titan submarine ignited intense debates and discussions on social media. People questioned the prioritization of an incident involving a tourist submersible over a humanitarian disaster, arguing that the attention seemed disproportionate. Most social media posts were accompanied by two photos illustrating each tragedy, highlighting the disparity in numbers, wealth, and urgency of the victims. The low-resolution photo of the vessel

carrying refugees depicted a bird's-eye view, appearing overcrowded and distant, with people resembling mere dots, contributing to a chaotic atmosphere. The vessel appeared aged, and the photo seemed to belong to a bygone era. In contrast, the photo of the Titan was sourced from the company's advertisement, offering a close-up perspective and futuristic impression. In some instances, the photo of the submersible included portraits of the five victims. The asymmetry between the two events, their media coverage, and visual representation incited rage for a few days, before fading into the ever-flowing streams of social media "sensitivity".

The Adriana-Titan instance serves as a pertinent illustration of contemporary discourse surrounding refugee issues, whereby public reactions are profoundly influenced by globally circulating images. Such discussions and debates frequently invoke concepts such as "disproportion," "asymmetry," "imbalance," "double-standards," and "disparity." When G. Debord defined the "society of the spectacle" in the 1960s, neither the incredible volume of image production nor the rapid circulation of these images existed. His focus was on the social relationships between people as mediated by images and the reality constructed through these "appearances". "As reality is increasingly represented as images to be experienced by sight alone, eventually a completely separate pseudo-world of images emerges-where the "actual" reality is only represented, but never actually experienced; merely performed and eventually simulated" (Debord 2021, 16, emphasis in original).

On the other hand, the role of social media complicates these dynamics even further. Traditional media outlets increasingly rely on digital platforms—especially social media—to extend their reach and distribute news. However, as Jürgen Habermas argues (2023) the public sphere is undergoing a new structural transformation driven by the commodification of communication. In this digital landscape, the gatekeeper role of traditional media is eroding as they struggle to compete with the immediacy, virality, and sensationalism of online content. This shift makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between credible journalism and fake news, as all forms of content—whether verified or fabricated—flow together in the same digital streams.

Building on this perspective, this paper analyses the visual narratives propagated by European media in representations of recent "refugee crises" within EU borders, specifically focusing on the displacement of Syrian and Ukrainian people. Both groups fled war, sought asylum primarily

within Europe, and largely comprised civilian populations. Despite these similarities, the responses to their displacement—both at the policy level and in media coverage—exhibited stark disparities. Refugee rights advocates, scholars, international organizations, and policymakers have criticized the discriminatory attitudes toward Syrian refugees, citing discrepancies in news frequency, biased discourse, framing strategies, and the subtle criminalization or victimization of different refugee communities. Moreover, visual imagery in news coverage plays a crucial role in shaping public perception, as certain photographs leave lasting impressions that extend beyond factual reporting or descriptive language. To explore these dynamics, this study examines the visual content accompanying news reports on these refugee crises across major European online news outlets.

The research question will be further developed in subsequent chapters, where key concepts will be explored in greater detail. First, factual information and conceptual frameworks related to each humanitarian crisis will be examined through the lens of migration sociology to ensure a balanced perspective. Second, an overview of existing academic research and reports on the media coverage of the Syrian and Ukrainian crises will be provided, with a focus on highlighting significant disparities. The methodology employed in this research, data collection and analysis primarily utilizing the tools and approaches of visual sociology, will then be explained. Finally, the study's findings will be analysed alongside relevant academic literature, demonstrating the role of visual representations of refugees in shaping collective memory and public discourse.

European Refugee Crises or Syrian and Ukrainian Displacements

The 20th century has been characterized as "The Age of Migrations" by Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, as numerous migration flows have profoundly reshaped individual lives, societies, states, and transnational spaces. In the first decades of the 21st century, the movement of people has evolved in increasingly complex forms, with large-scale displacements being labelled as "refugee crises." However, the discourse of "crisis" is constructed by receiving countries, whereas the phenomenon carries different connotations, particularly from a humanitarian perspective and within the framework of the sociology of migration.

The 2015 European refugee crisis became evident when EU countries received nearly 1.2 million asylum applications within a single year, doubling

the figures from the previous year (UNHCR 2016, 35). This surge was a cumulative result of conflicts in the Middle East and Africa over preceding years.[1] The Syrian Civil War emerged in the context of the Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy uprisings that spread across the Middle East and North Africa in 2010–2011. Inspired by revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, Syrian protesters took to the streets in early 2011, demanding political reforms and an end to Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian rule. The government responded with brutal crackdowns, escalating tensions and fuelling armed resistance. As protests turned into an armed insurgency, regional and international actors became involved, transforming the conflict into a prolonged and devastating civil war which forced thousands to leave their country by the end of 2011. During 2012 and 2013, the crisis escalated, with the number of Syrian refugees surpassing 2 million in neighbouring countries, including Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. The rise of ISIS further intensified violence, pushing the number of registered Syrian refugees to over 3 million in 2014, with 1.5 million in Turkey. By the end of 2015, when the European refugee crisis peaked, 11.7 million Syrians had been displaced: 4.9 million as refugees, 6.6 million as internally displaced persons, and approximately 250,000 as asylum-seekers. Neighbouring countries continued to bear the burden of hosting refugees, with Turkey accommodating 2.5 million Syrians by the end of 2015 (UNHCR 2016, 16).

During the peak years of the Syrian crisis (2013–2014), European Union member states accepted only a small number of asylum applications, which exacerbated the crisis and made it more visible[2] The number of refugees submitted for resettlement in Europe in 2015 was only 17.000. With insufficient global institutional protection and closed borders; risky strategies for asylum, human smuggling and trafficking became widespread. That year, 1,015,028 people attempted to cross the Mediterranean, with 3,771 reported dead or missing at sea. Syrians accounted for half of these arrivals and losses (IOM

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1 The dramatic increase in the number of asylum-seeking people is the result of multiple crises. "These included new or reignited conflicts in Burundi, Iraq, Libya, Niger and Nigeria, together with older or unresolved crises in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and Yemen" (UNHCR 2016, 6). Majority of the asylum-seekers were Syrian people and this paper focuses on visual narratives about Syrian refugees. Therefore, the Syrian displacements, facts and figures will be given in more detail.

2 Asylum applications lodged in the European Union (28) from Syrian Arab Republic in 2013 and 2014 are 48.877 and 120.595 (UNHCR 2015b, 25).

2016). The situation was subsequently labelled a "refugee crisis" by the EU and the humanitarian emergency was recognized. In response, policy measures prioritized border control, led by FRONTEX (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency) operations in collaboration with Italy and other frontline countries. FRONTEX's budget was increased to combat smuggling and reduce sea fatalities, but the number of arrivals by sea remained largely unchanged. The EU Council introduced a two-year emergency relocation plan for 160,000 refugees, but implementation fell short of expectations. In 2016, the EU signed a cooperation agreement with Turkey: for every Syrian refugee returned to Turkey, another would be resettled in the EU, along with six billion euros in aid for Turkey. However, this agreement faced criticism for implementation shortcomings and raised concerns about violations of the Geneva Convention, the European Human Rights Convention, and EU laws (Guiraudon 2018, 157-158).

In summary, the "crisis" had already been unfolding for years for Syrians and neighbouring countries of first asylum. The lack of acknowledgment of an evident humanitarian emergency, coupled with externalization policies, resulted in severe and often fatal consequences. An alternative policy response to the refugee crisis could have been the implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), an EU policy instrument for protection established in 2001, which was proposed during that period (Ineli-Ciger 2016).

The second "refugee crisis" occurred in 2022. Military tensions between Ukraine and Russia originated in 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of armed conflict in the eastern regions of Ukraine. These events triggered widespread displacement both within Ukraine and beyond its borders. The situation escalated into full-scale war in February 2022, when Russia launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine. In response, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky declared martial law and mobilized the military-age population to defend the nation. Under martial law, men aged 18 to 60 were prohibited from leaving the country to ensure sufficient power for the war effort. The attacks targeted not only military assets but also cities, residential areas, and critical communication and transportation infrastructure, causing significant damage and disruption. As a result, millions of people were forced to leave their country seeking asylum primarily in neighbouring countries and beyond.

The EU member states imposed extensive sanctions on Russia and provided Ukraine with diplomatic and economic support. The humanitarian

response was also swift, and approximately one week after the onset of the crisis, the Council of the European Union unanimously activated the TPD on 4 March 2022. It is described as "… the most ambitious and generous legislative and policy package on asylum and temporary protection deployed in the history of the EU" (Ibañez Sales 2023, 7).

The Ukrainian government played a central role in the evacuation of civilians by organizing train routes and bus convoys and ensuring the establishment of safe corridors. International non-governmental organisations also contributed by providing transportation, shelter, and logistical support. Poland, as a neighbouring and accessible country, received the largest number of displaced persons, while other neighbouring states -Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia- also became major destinations. The TPD for Ukrainian refugees ensures beneficiaries to receive a residence permit valid for the duration of the temporary protection, which can last from one to three years. The main rights granted to Ukrainian refugees include access to asylum procedures, employment, suitable accommodation or housing, social welfare, medical care, education for persons under 18 years of age, banking services, family reunification, and free movement within EU countries (European Commission 2025). As of January 2025, number of refugees from Ukraine recorded in Europe stands at 6.303.200 (UNHCR Operational Data Portal 2025).

From a humanitarian perspective, both incidents are equally devastating. "The movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters" (IOM 2019, 55-56) is referred as "displacement" or "forced displacement". At times, reporters, journalists or politicians may fail to question the "deservedness" of individuals fleeing from war. However, under international migration law an asylum-seeker is defined as "[a]n individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it" (IOM 2019, 14). Additionally, according to the 1951 Convention a refugee is "[a] person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country …" (IOM 2019, 171–172). Thus, anyone fleeing

a region affected by armed conflict, bombings and war casualties qualifies as an asylum-seeker and a potential candidate for refugee status. Since obtaining the refugee status and resettlement in a third country involves a lengthy process, temporary protection status emerges as the most humanitarian and expedient policy response in cases of mass displacement.

Public opinion on migration and refugee groups is not solely shaped by facts and figures. Migration policy is a complex, multi-layered field, and official data is often scarce and ambiguous. Additionally, the political discourse of various interest groups further complicates the issue, making it difficult for an ordinary citizen without expertise in this field to form an informed perspective (Freeman 1995, 883–885). As a result, media -in all forms- plays a crucial role in shaping the public perception about migration politics and specific groups or incidents.

Double-standards on the Media Coverage of Syrian and Ukrainian "Refugee Crises"

As is widely recognized, media coverage is not a random selection of events and reporting them transparently. The Cultural Studies school of the 1970s provided significant insights into how media narratives are constructed. According to Stuart Hall et. al. (2013, 56–80), the selection of events deemed newsworthy is guided by a set of criteria known as "news values." To make these events comprehensible to the assumed audience, they are contextualized within familiar social and cultural frameworks by the news professionals. In an effort to create meaning that resonates with societal consensus, events are framed in ways that align with dominant ideologies, thereby reinforcing and maintaining that consensus. Although the media operates independently of direct control by authoritative sources, it often reproduces the definitions and perspectives of the powerful. This creates a reciprocal relationship: media coverage relies on authoritative accounts to frame events, while those same authorities use media narratives to justify their actions and policies. This mutual reinforcement forms a feedback loop that strengthens dominant ideologies and control mechanisms. In summary, the social construction of news is shaped by organizational structures, professional ideologies, and the interplay with social institutions, all of which tend to align with the interests of the powerful.

Following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, European media prominently featured the theme of "solidarity" with Ukraine and

its people. Both media outlets and policymakers exhibited a resolute commitment to effectively responding to this new humanitarian crisis. This concerted effort, coupled with positive outcomes in the asylum process for Ukrainian war refugees, prompted comparisons with the asylum process for Syrian war refugees. However, the discussion did not merely focus on the parallels between the two humanitarian crises; rather, the call for solidarity with the Ukrainian people was grounded upon a comparative context with Syrian and other Middle Eastern refugees. Many journalists conveyed surprise at the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the subsequent displacement of its people, noting their perceived similarity and proximity to European populations. Moreover, this narrative was often imbued with elements of what can be termed as "casual racism," wherein Ukrainians were described as "Christian," "white," "civilized," and "European," in contrast to the characterization of other refugees from "developing third world nations," "conflict-ridden countries," and "impoverished and remote populations" (Ellison and Andrews 2022).

The IOM (International Organization for Migration) report on media narratives (McCann, Sienkiewicz, and Zard 2023) provides a comparative analysis of two displacements and their corresponding media coverage. The research is based on English-language news in Europe over five-month periods in 2015 and 2022 representing Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crises. Employing qualitative analysis, the study identifies recurring themes through the coding of word groups. The research on the samples of 2015 and 2022 differs evidently. In 2015, the code "migrants as threats" (to national security, cultural identity, economy and health) appears more frequently compared to 2022. The Ukrainian refugees were readily acknowledged as a "vulnerable" group deserving of protection, while the legitimacy of asylum claims made by Syrian refugees remained ambiguous in the corresponding news sample. Word frequency analysis reveals that Syrian asylum seekers were often characterized as "economic" or "illegal" migrants, or suspected as affiliates of terrorist organizations. Due to differences in reception, the concept of integration was less emphasized in 2015, with Syrian refugees perceived as disinterested in integration. However, news coverage of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 extensively discussed integration strategies and the quality of integration support.

Media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and policy responses, thereby directly influencing the asylum processes and subsequent

experiences of vulnerable groups. The Euromesco policy brief (Ibañez Sales 2023) comparatively overviews media framing and the proliferation of positive-negative narratives during the Syrian and Ukrainian crises, with a particular focus on highlighting "double-standards." This differentiated treatment is attributed to a Western-centric approach and xenophobia prevalent in newsrooms, which tend to portray Ukrainian people as "civilized" while depicting Syrian refugees as "terrorists" or "problematic." Accordingly, the dominant frame used for the Syrian crisis revolves around "national security," whereas a "humanitarian" frame is employed for the Ukrainian crisis. It is contended that media coverage can significantly impact policy-making processes, as exemplified by the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) immediately following the onset of the Ukrainian crisis, prompted by the positive narratives constructed for Ukrainian refugees.

The patterns observed in country-specific media coverage yield comparable results. Research examining German media (Oliveira 2023, 40–41) indicates that the Ukraine invasion garnered more attention than the Syrian conflict. Both groups are depicted as victims of war, yet the contextual nuances of the respective news coverage differ. Discussions concerning Syrian refugees predominantly revolved around the granting of asylum, whereas news concerning Ukrainian refugees often highlighted ongoing needs beyond initial assistance. The salience of national security concerns in relation to Syrian refugees, as well as the cultural and geographical proximity of Ukrainian people, resonates within German media, mirroring broader trends observed across European media landscapes.

In the Swedish media framing of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees (Telbrant and Haraldsson 2022), attitudes were parallel to those observed in other countries. The Syrian refugees perceived as a "threat" is a recurring theme also in the Swedish media but causality is more specifically related with gender. The Ukrainian refugees consist mainly of women while the majority of Syrian asylum-seekers are young men. The gender gap between refugee groups has led to subtle or overt implications that Syrian refugees might actually be "economic immigrants."

However, the gender gap can be better understood through migration policies and patterns rather than by associating one group with economic aspirations or questioning their deservedness. By the end of 2015, the demographic breakdown of recorded Syrian refugees in Turkey was as follows: 1.174.190 females (46,90%) and 1.329.359 male (53,10%) (Göç Politikaları ve

Projeleri Dairesi Başkanlığı 2016, 86). Additionally, children accounted for half of the Syrian refugee population (UNHCR 2015a, 2). The numbers are balanced when the route of asylum is considerably safe. However, in cases where clandestine and dangerous migration strategies are required—such as crossing the Mediterranean—men are more likely to take the lead. In 2015, among those who arrived in Europe by sea, 58% were men, 17% were women, and 25% were children (UNHCR 2016, 33). By contrast, Ukrainian men were prohibited from leaving their country due to martial law. Consequently, those eligible for departure—primarily women, children, and the elderly—were able to use safer and more organized transportation to reach predetermined asylum destinations. Given the differences in asylum policies and migration conditions, direct comparisons between these refugee populations may be misleading.

One of the major differences in Swedish media framing is about the meaning shift in the words "crisis" and "solidarity". Regarding Syrian refugees, the focus is on the influx as a crisis endangering the economic and social fabric of recipient nations, prompting calls for solidarity and collective responsibility within the European Union. Conversely, when discussing Ukrainian refugees, the emphasis shifts to the war as the crisis, with solidarity directed towards the fleeing individuals (Telbrant and Haraldsson 2022).

The existing literature suggests that double-standards in media framing of these two refugee groups fleeing from war stem largely from their geographical and cultural proximity to Europe. The perceived "otherness" of Syrians often frames them as a "threat," primarily within a security discourse, whereas the perceived "similarity" of Ukrainians leads to calls for "solidarity." The media has substantial power in shaping public discourse but it must be considered in relation to existing societal patterns and politics as a triangle of interrelatedness.

Methodology

The photographic image derives its power from the sensory tendency encapsulated in the phrase "seeing is believing." Roland Barthes (1977, 15-31) described the "photographic message" as paradoxical because, while a photograph appears to be a direct, denotative representation of reality, it is inevitably connoted. Its assumed objectivity stems from its "message without a code" quality, yet it is simultaneously shaped by cultural, technical, and ideological processes. As a result, photographs are not passive reflections of reality, but dynamic constructs shaped by cultural practices. Analysing

photographic codes reveals how societies mediate reality through images, balancing photography's mechanical "truth" with its cultural appropriation.

The phrases "Syrian refugees" and "Ukrainian refugees" immediately evoke distinct visual images in the minds of most adults today, regardless of their level of political engagement or news consumption. One does not need to actively follow current events to possess these mental images, as they are deeply ingrained in contemporary visual culture. As Anita Howarth notes:

> Images have, since time immemorial, served not only to illustrate a story but also to tell it: not only to capture notable happenings but also to provide visual cues of the momentous, whether it be in the form of cave paintings, stained glass windows for medieval congregations or privately commissioned artwork of wealthy patrons (Howarth 2020, 122).

In today's media landscape, it is nearly impossible to remain untouched by the "visual narratives" that shape perceptions of refugee groups. With the increasing speed and accessibility of media technologies, a visual culture has emerged—one that relies heavily on images to communicate and construct reality.

> Owing to the increased speed and accessibility of media technology, a "visual culture" is emerging that relies more and more upon information provided by pictures. The images we see on our television screen play a crucial role in determining how we construct our reality (Wright 2002, 53).

Moreover, the visual material produced by traditional media, such as photographs and videos, can be easily copied, re-captioned, and reframed by countless users on social media. An image shared and responsibly captioned by a reputable news agency may be appropriated and reinterpreted by individual users, often stripped of its original context and imbued with new, sometimes contradictory, meanings. This process of reframing and re-connotation highlights the fluidity of visual communication in the digital age, where the authority of traditional media is challenged by the participatory and decentralized nature of social media platforms. In this way, the transformation of traditional media is not only about adapting to new technologies but also about navigating the loss of control over the narratives and meanings attached to their content.

This reliance on visual representation becomes even more pronounced when it concerns "strangers" with whom people have no direct interaction, or

events occurring in distant and often inaccessible spaces—border crossings, open seas, and detention centres. In such cases, public perception of reality is largely shaped by the images that reach us. As James Banks (2012, 307) emphasizes, "Photographic images and visual representations play an important role in imposing meaning on asylum seekers and the process of asylum seeking." Moreover, as Habermas underlines (2023), social media algorithms prioritize engagement over accuracy, exposing users primarily to content that aligns with and reinforces their preexisting beliefs. This creates echo chambers, where individuals are insulated from diverse perspectives and rational-critical debate is stifled.

Photographs accompanying news articles do more than illustrate stories; they construct visual narratives that influence public understanding of displacement. This study investigates how European news media depict Syrian and Ukrainian refugees through these images. While much of the existing scholarship on media coverage of refugees summarized in the previous chapter focuses on textual framing, such as word choice, preferred phrases, and thematic emphases, the role of visual imagery remains relatively underexplored. To address this gap, this study employs a qualitative analysis to examine the visual narratives presented in news photographs. Total of 200 images (100 per refugee group) were selected and systematically coded to reveal frequencies and differences in cases using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software. The following sections outline the research design and methodological approach in detail.

Selection of News Sources: To compare the media portrayals of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Europe, this study focuses on widely circulated online news sources, particularly those with a strong presence on social media platforms, where visual content reaches broad audiences. The selection of news sources was guided by data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Reports (Newman et al. 2016; 2023) which identify the most accessed online news websites in 2015 (a peak year for the Syrian refugee crisis) and 2022 (following the mass displacement of Ukrainians). In addition to their wide circulation, news agencies known for quality journalism and a structured editorial process were prioritized.

Based on these reports, the following news outlets were chosen to ensure a comprehensive representation of visual narratives across major European countries:

United Kingdom: *BBC News, The Guardian, Daily Mail*
Germany: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Der Spiegel*
France: *Le Monde, Le Figaro*
Italy: *La Repubblica, Corriere della Sera*
Spain: *El País*

These sources were selected for their high readership, influence, and image circulation related to refugee coverage. The inclusion of three British newspapers was particularly preferred due to their global reach and publication in English.

Time Span:[3] As discussed in the first chapter, there was a temporal gap between the initial displacement of Syrian refugees and the formal recognition of the situation as a refugee crisis in European discourse. A significant turning point occurred in August 2015, when the number of refugees arriving at European shores and borders surged dramatically, prompting widespread media coverage. The crisis gained further global attention on September 3, 2015, with the publication of the widely circulated photograph of Aylan Kurdi, a drowned Syrian child whose image became emblematic of the humanitarian emergency. Given these developments, the selected time frame for analysing the visual representation of Syrian refugees spans five months, from August 1 to December 31, 2015.

The Ukrainian refugee crisis unfolded under markedly different circumstances. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, a mass displacement of civilians began almost immediately, with large numbers seeking asylum in neighbouring European countries. Unlike the Syrian case, media coverage was swift and extensive, with news reports heavily featuring both the war and the refugee exodus. To ensure a comparable analytical period, the time frame for examining the visual portrayal of Ukrainian refugees was set as February 24 to July 24, 2022, covering the first five months of the crisis.

When interpreting the findings of this study, it is important to consider that both national policies and media narratives have fluctuated throughout different phases of these crises. The first five months were chosen for analysis, as they capture the immediate response to the "crisis," reflecting its political impact and the initial construction of narratives.

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3 The selection of the time frame is informed by prior comparative research on media narratives (McCann, Sienkiewicz, and Zard 2023).

Selection of News and Photographs: An online search was conducted using the keywords "Syrian Refugees", "Syrian Refugee Crisis" + [newspaper name], and "Ukrainian Refugees", "Ukrainian Refugee Crisis" + [newspaper name]. The keywords were adjusted for newspapers which are published in languages other than English. News articles that did not meet the selection criteria[4] were excluded from the dataset.

For the selection of images, the lead images—defined as the first photograph placed directly below the headline—were used. These images play a critical role in shaping public perception, as they are prominently displayed when news stories are shared on social media platforms, appearing alongside headlines in news feeds. This means that even when users do not click on the full article, they are still exposed to both the headline and the lead image, influencing their initial impression of the event.

The selection of news articles and images was conducted randomly, ensuring a balanced representation of each case and an equitable distribution across countries. Given the widespread circulation of news in English, 40 images per case were randomly chosen from three major online news sources in the UK. Additionally, 20 images per case were sourced from Germany and 20 from France, reflecting their significant population size and influence. Furthermore, 10 images per case were included from both Italy and Spain, ensuring broader geographical representation. In total, 200 images (100 per case) were compiled for analysis.

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4 To ensure a focused analysis of visual narratives surrounding refugee groups, only photographs that depict or are intended to represent refugees were included in the sample. Other types of visual materials, such as portraits of politicians, public figures engaged in philanthropic activities, drawings, as well as maps and infographics illustrating migration routes and statistics, were excluded from the dataset.
In the Ukrainian case, images of protests in European countries advocating for refugee acceptance were not collected, as they primarily depict protesters rather than refugees themselves. Additionally, some news articles featured "before the war" photographs of Ukrainian refugee families. While these images will be briefly touched upon in the findings section, they were not included in the final sample, as they do not represent displacement itself. Videos that appeared as primary visual elements were also excluded.
In the Syrian case, images and illustrations based on the widely circulated photograph of Aylan Kurdi were excluded. Since this image has already been extensively studied (Memou 2019), removing these derivatives helps avoid repetition and allows for a fresh perspective in this research.

Coding System and Themes:[5] The coding system was developed through an iterative review of the collected images, with some codes pre-defined based on initial observations. One of the first key findings concerned the representational type of refugee photographs. The lead images accompanying headlines were often illustrative rather than directly documenting the reported event. To account for this distinction, each photo was coded as either "actual" (capturing a real event) or "illustrative" (symbolic representation). Headlines and captions were also included in the screenshots to provide contextual cues.

A second pattern that emerged was the scene composition of refugee depictions. Many images conveyed chaotic scenes, reflecting the disruptive nature of mass displacement and the emergency conditions surrounding refugee movements. However, upon closer examination of the sample set, some images were noticeably more structured and orderly. Therefore, a second coding category was established: "chaotic" versus "orderly" compositions.

Given the prevalence of illustrative and chaotic images, the presence of identifying information within the photos was also coded. Some images depicted anonymous people or crowds, while others identified individuals by name. Additionally, the presence or absence of a specific location was recorded as part of this category.

Together, these three code groups—representational type, scene composition, and identification—form the foundation of what this study refers to as the representation gap. They capture the extent to which the images align with or diverge from the events they accompany, the narrative tone conveyed through visual order or chaos, and the level of specificity or anonymity in depicting individuals.

Beyond the initial representational categories, the next thematic group addresses how refugees are visually framed, who is included in the frame, and in what relational context. First, framing preferences were categorized by photographic perspective, including bird's-eye views, distant frames, close-up shots, and portraits. These choices influence the viewer's sense of proximity and emotional engagement with the subjects.

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5 For a comprehensive list of the codes employed in this study, categorized thematically, refer to Appendix I.

Building on this, the composition of subjects within the frame was coded to capture who is being represented. Images were categorized based on whether they depicted individual(s), crowds, masses, only men, children, children only, or no visible human faces at all. These distinctions reveal how human presence is emphasized or obscured in the visual narratives.

In addition, attention was given to the presence of people other than refugees within the images. While some photos showed only refugees, others included figures such as border security forces, coastal guards, police officers, soldiers, government officials, volunteers, or local civilians. These accompanying figures were further coded according to their apparent rol-whether they were intervening, restricting or neutral and assisting. This dimension provides insight into the broader relational framing and societal reception of refugee groups as constructed through the media imagery.

The third and final thematic group centres on what may be called embodied displacement—the visual articulation of refugees' emotional states, physical presence, spatial positioning, and material conditions.

When facial expressions or body language were clearly visible, the emotional state and perceived mood of the individuals depicted were coded. A spectrum of affective responses—ranging from negative to positive—was recorded, including angry/excited, exhausted/crying, anxious/distressed, tired/quiet, calm, and contented/grateful.

Closely related, a separate coding group focused on physical position and bodily action. At one end of the spectrum, individuals were portrayed in high-risk or life-threatening conditions—struggling physically or caught in distressing moments. At the other, they appeared relatively comfortable or at ease. Given the recurrence of waiting as a posture, images were categorized under several subcodes including standing in line, waiting on board a vehicle or boat, and waiting in more comfortable or orderly conditions. A smaller group of images depicted individuals sitting or sleeping on the floor. Additionally, active bodily gestures-such as walking or expressive movement-were coded to reflect moments of transition or agency.

The significance of these bodily positions is further contextualized by the spatial environment in which the refugees were depicted. A primary distinction was made between indoor and outdoor settings, with further subcategories including border zones, coastlines, transportation stations, tents or refugee

camps, welcome centres, schools, houses, and peaceful outdoor spaces such as gardens or residential streets.

A final coding group was developed to identify recurring objects and elements that appear in the immediate surroundings of refugees. This category captures what visually accompanies the refugee subjects in each frame. Items such as barbed wire, boats, gates and fences, emergency blankets, lifejackets, luggage, toys, food, flags, and pet animals were coded to reflect the physical context and environment depicted in the photographs.

Analysis and Limitations: This study employs a qualitative approach to examine the visual narratives of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in European news media, using compositional and semiotic analysis. While a comprehensive content analysis -with its systematic, quantitative coding of visual elements- would ideally yield more measurable results, the methodological assumptions required for such an analysis (e.g., multiple coders, larger sample sizes, and rigorous inter-coder reliability) were not fully achievable by a single researcher. Consequently, the analysis primarily relies on compositional techniques and incorporates elements of semiotic analysis, as outlined by Gillian Rose (2016) and Theo van Leeuwen (2004).

Drawing on Roland Barthes's seminal work (1977), this study examines both the denotative and connotative dimensions of refugee imagery, highlighting how signifiers and mythologies contribute to the construction of meaning. To mitigate these limitations, established codes and themes from previous research on the visual representation of refugees in European media were utilized, as detailed in the findings section. Additionally, the comparative perspective adopted here offers distinct advantages, providing a more nuanced understanding of how different visual narratives may influence public perceptions. Although the interpretive nature of this approach limits the generalizability of the findings, it yields valuable insights into the implicit biases and thematic patterns that underpin media portrayals of displacement and asylum.

This study does not undertake an ideological comparison of the newspapers or examine potential differences in their editorial approaches. Conducting such an analysis would require a more extensive dataset encompassing a broader range of news outlets. Future research is encouraged to explore this gap and provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics.

Although a study centred on the visual representation of refugees would ideally include selected newspaper photographs, obtaining the necessary copyright permissions to reproduce such images posed significant challenges. Moreover, given the scope of the research-based on a dataset of 200 images-incorporating a representative visual selection was neither practical nor methodologically appropriate. The aim of this study is not to interpret individual photographs in isolation, but to identify and compare recurring visual patterns across cases. Altering or collaging the original photographs would have conflicted with the methodological integrity of the research, which focuses on analysing images as they are publicly presented in their original media context.

To address the need for traceability and exemplification, hyperlinks to publicly accessible news articles have been included as footnotes throughout the findings section. These links correspond to images from the dataset that are illustrative of particular codes or thematic patterns. While not intended as definitive representations, they allow readers to contextualize and better understand the categories used in the analysis.

The results of the coding are presented through qualitative code frequency tables integrated into the findings section, offering a comparative and descriptive overview of visual themes. In addition, code clouds generated by MAXQDA are included in Appendix II, providing a visual summary of the most frequently applied codes to support interpretation and transparency.

Findings: The Visual Narratives of Syrian and Ukrainian Refugees

The coding of refugee groups using the previously outlined codes and categories provides valuable descriptive insights into the visual narratives constructed through news images. Given the qualitative nature of this study and its methodological limitations, the findings are not meant to be definitive but rather to offer a nuanced, descriptive-interpretive analysis. Instead of relying on precise numerical data or percentages, the study uses variations in code frequencies to highlight key differences between the two groups and their associated narratives.

Most findings emerge from a comparative perspective, emphasizing the ways in which Syrian and Ukrainian refugees are visually framed in European news coverage. This paper fully acknowledges that the individuals and groups

depicted in the photographs have distinct experiences and realities. The aim is not to compare them but rather to examine the photographic techniques, framing choices, and editorial decisions made by photojournalists and news outlets. As John Berger famously stated,

> Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights (Berger 1972, 10).

Based on this analysis, three distinct thematic patterns can be identified, each reflecting notable variations in coding categories and their interconnections.

The Representation Gap: Anonymous Figures vs. Named Individuals

Refugee photographs in news articles are presented in either *actual* or *illustrative* forms. Lead images are expected to visually narrate the news they accompany, shaping the reader's perception of the story. However, in the context of refugee coverage, illustrative images appear more frequently than actual ones. Rather than directly documenting a specific event, many refugee-related articles-including those discussing border crossings, policy responses, voting results, budget allocations, and opinion pieces-are paired with generic or archival images representing refugee groups as a broad category. In many cases, the temporal relevance of the image is unclear, as photographs may have been days or months prior to the event being reported.

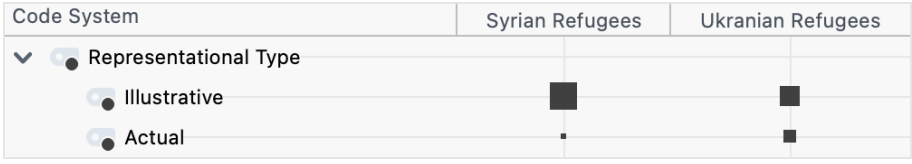

Table 1: Representational Type Code Frequency Table

While both Syrian and Ukrainian refugee coverage relies on illustrative images, a notable difference emerges between the two groups. Syrian refugee news overwhelmingly features illustrative photographs,[6] whereas Ukrainian refugee images are more evenly split between illustrative and

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6 *BBC News*, 19.11.2015, "Migrant crisis: Wales' refugee response too narrow, says charity", https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-politics-34857597 (Access Date: 06.01.2025).

actual[7] depictions. This suggests a narrative gap between the textual framing of Syrian refugees and their visual representation, where images often fail to correspond directly to the reported events. This gap is less pronounced in the Ukrainian refugee coverage, where a relatively higher proportion of images depict identifiable individuals and specific moments linked to the news text.

Further supporting this finding is the information tagging included with the photographs. Each image in the dataset was coded based on whether the individuals were *named* or remained *anonymous*, as well as whether a specific *location* was provided. In Syrian refugee coverage, the vast majority of images depict anonymous[8] figures, often labelled simply as "Syrian refugees" without further identification. While anonymity is also common in Ukrainian refugee photographs, images including named individuals[9] are more frequent in this case. Regarding location information,[10] both groups follow a similar pattern, with geographic details provided in more than half of the images.

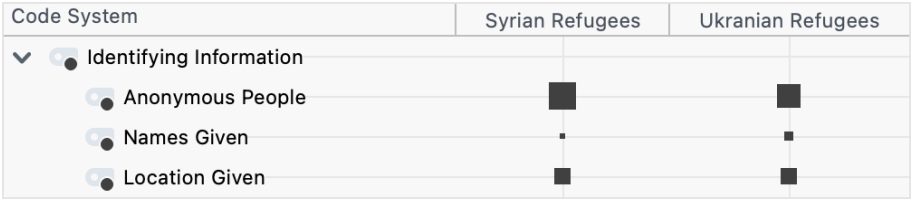

Table 2: Identifying Information Code Frequency Table

This distinction in the actual vs. illustrative balance and the level of individual identification highlights key differences in how the two refugee groups are visually represented. The Syrian refugee narrative tends to depersonalize and generalize, whereas Ukrainian refugees are somewhat more individually recognized in the media coverage. While the presence

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7 *Der Spiegel*, 05.03.2022, "Ein Bett in Berlin", https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/fluechtlinge-aus-der-ukraine-in-berlin-wie-unternehmer-und-privatpersonen-helfen-a-c882d15d-f1fb-4104-a6fb-0a9d2c219ce0 (Access Date: 10.01.2025).

8 *BBC News*, 30.10.2015, "Syria refugees: MPs worried by UK 'capacity to manage'", https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-34666386 (Access Date: 06.01.2025).

9 *The Guardian*, 25.03.2022, "Ukrainian refugees: frustration grows over long wait times for UK visas", https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/25/ukrainian-refugees-frustration-grows-over-long-wait-times-for-uk-visas (Access Date: 09.01.2025).

10 *Le Figaro*, 15.04.2022, "À Nancy, des interprètes au service des réfugiés ukrainiens", https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/a-nancy-des-interpretes-au-service-des-refugies-ukrainiens-20220413 (Access Date: 12.01.2025).

of individuals reinforces humanization and evokes empathy, the absence of individual representations is regarded as a dehumanizing visual pattern (Bleiker et al. 2013). This difference plays a crucial role in shaping public perception, influencing how each group is perceived in terms of visibility, agency, and relatability.

To further analyse the visual narratives constructed through news images, a general coding category was used to classify photos as either *chaotic* or *orderly*. The refugee experience is, by definition, marked by disruption and uncertainty. The sudden mass displacement of people is rarely expected to manifest in visually structured or "normal" scenarios. However, it is important to clarify that this categorization is not intended to either normalize or victimize any group's experiences. Instead, the goal is to examine how visual representations are created.

When coding images as chaotic or orderly, the following question was considered: If I did not know this was a photo of refugees, could this scene be mistaken for a moment from everyday life? In many cases, it was possible to categorize images as orderly simply by temporarily disregarding the knowledge that the individuals depicted were displaced. Still, more photos were coded as chaotic rather than orderly. In comparison of the cases, the findings reveal a contrast: images of Syrian refugees predominantly convey a sense of chaos, while Ukrainian refugee images tend to appear more structured and orderly.

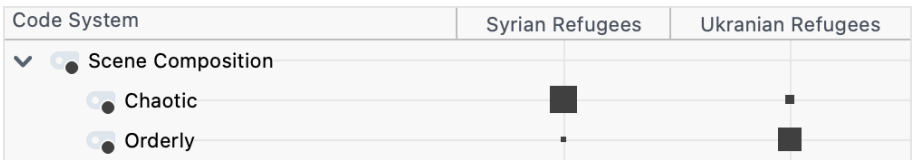

Table 3: Scene Composition Code Frequency Table

This overt difference between the two cases is partly rooted in variations in reception and migration routes, as discussed earlier. However, since this study also examines how refugees are perceived in host societies, it is significant that Syrian refugees are more frequently portrayed as chaotic[11]

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11 *Corriere della Sera*, 21.08.2015, "Macedonia, lacrimogeni contro i migranti al confine: otto feriti", https://www.corriere.it/esteri/15_agosto_21/macedonia-lacrimogeni-per-disperdere-migranti-confine-grecia-76af9e08-47dc-11e5-9031-22dbf5f9fa34.shtml (Access Date: 08.01.2025)

groups, whereas Ukrainian refugees are visually framed in a more orderly[12] and structured manner.

Framing and Composition

The framing techniques employed in these images further reinforce these divergent perceptions. In photos of Syrian refugees, *bird's-eye view*[13] and *distant framing* are frequently used, making individuals appear as part of a large, indistinct crowd rather than as identifiable persons. *Close-up shots*[14] and *portraits*-which humanize subjects and create a sense of connection-are notably scarce. Interestingly, even in situations where closer framing would have been possible, photographers and/or editors often opted for more distant perspectives, reinforcing the sense of detachment. The use of distant framing in refugee photography has previously been analysed through the lens of Georg Simmel's concept of "The Stranger," which captures the paradox of simultaneous spatial proximity and social distance. This visual strategy not only reinforces the perceived otherness of refugees but also amplifies local anxieties by framing them as unfamiliar and potentially threatening figures (Banks 2012, 301-302).

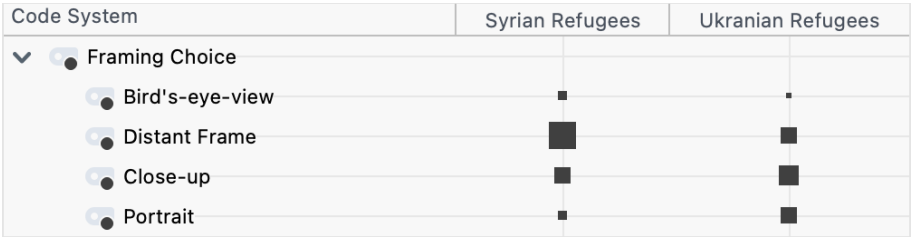

Table 4: Framing Choice Code Frequency Table

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12 *La Repubblica*, 29.03.2022, "Rifugiati ucraini arriva il contributo in contanti: 300 euro per gli adulti, 150 per i minori. Ma solo per tre mesi", https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/03/29/news/rifugiati_ucraini_arriva_il_contributo_in_contanti_300_euro_per_gli_adulti_150_per_i_minori_ma_solo_per_tre_mesi-343313549/ (Access Date: 13.01.2025).

13 *Le Monde*, 09.09.2015, "Sur l'île grecque de Lesbos, 86 000 habitants et 20 000 réfugiés" https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2015/09/10/sur-l-ile-grecque-de-lesbos-86-000-habitants-et-20-000-refugies_4749910_3214.html (Access Date: 09.01.2025).

14 *Der Spiegel*, 06.03.2022, "Uno meldet mehr als 1,5 Millionen Kriegsflüchtlinge aus der Ukraine", https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/fluechtlinge-aus-der-ukraine-uno-meldet-mehr-als-1-5-millionen-kriegsfluechtlinge-a-8aa7accf-dd34-4dbf-8b6e-1bf30e0974fd (Access Date: 13.01.2025).

By contrast, images of Ukrainian refugees frequently feature portraits and close-up shots that highlight identifiable faces and personal expressions. This framing encourages emotional engagement, allowing viewers to connect more intimately with the individuals depicted (Martikainen and Sakki 2024, 108). While a range of framing styles exists in both datasets, the disparity in frequency is significant. The prevalence of portraits in the Ukrainian case suggests greater proximity and emotional immediacy. By making their faces and expressions more visible, these images invite close attention and create a sense of familiarity.

In addition to framing preferences, the human composition of the images was coded. Photographs featuring small groups of up to ten individuals, provided that at least one portrait was visible, were categorized as *individual(s)*. Larger groups, particularly those confined within a relatively small space, were coded as *crowd*s, often characterized by distant perspectives where individual faces were not clearly discernible. Images depicting an uncountable number of people were classified as *mass*. A comparative analysis of the two cases reveals a notable difference: Ukrainian refugee images frequently feature individuals[15], whereas such portrayals are considerably rarer in the Syrian refugee case. A previous study on Finnish media (Martikainen and Sakki 2024, 114) concluded that Ukrainian refugees were represented through humanizing visual rhetorical strategies. Depicting them as individuals, families, or small groups served to construct an understanding of their personal struggles.

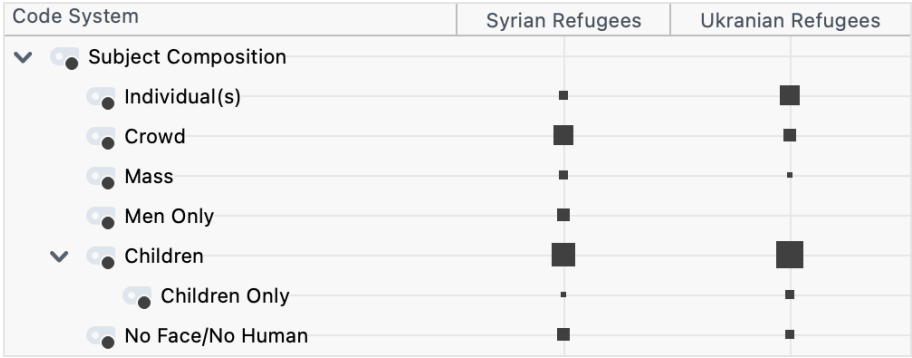

Table 5: Subject Composition Code Frequency Table

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15 *Corriere della Sera*, 02.04.2022, "Ucraini a Bergamo, accolti oltre mille bambini. 'La gente sta aprendo le case'", https://bergamo.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/22_aprile_02/ucraini-bergamo-accolti-oltre-mille-bambini-la-gente-sta-aprendo-case-103a3224-b23c-11ec-8273-0ad59adb9bd4.shtml (Access Date: 13.01.2025).

Instead, images of Syrian refugees predominantly depict crowds, with a recurring compositional pattern in which no distinct faces are visible. The use of crowd and mass imagery carries specific connotations in the visual representation of immigrants and refugees. A study on the Swiss People's Party's election posters for the 2014 initiative "Against Mass Immigration" highlights that "[t]alking about and showing mass immigration through visualization produce a feeling of a loss of overview as well as of being lost to the masses as individuals. This fear of the mass, visualized through the headless and bodiless shapes, is conveyed by anonymity" (Wintzer 2019, 7). By evoking fear in the audience, the depiction of anonymous masses can effectively reinforce anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments. Even in cases where the actual number of refugees in European countries is relatively low, visual narratives can amplify concerns about mass "invasion".

Beyond the scale of human presence, other compositional elements were coded. Some images featured *only men*, a framing choice that aligns with the "migrants as a threat" narrative frequently observed in media portrayals. Notably, *men-only*[16] photos appeared exclusively in the Syrian refugee case. A previous study on European media representations of refugees, including those from Syria, found that women are visually underrepresented in refugee-related imagery. The research also revealed a gendered framing pattern: while female refugees were primarily depicted within victimization narratives, male refugees were more frequently portrayed as either a burden or a threat (Amores, Arcila-Calderón, and González-de-Garay 2020, 307–8). In several cases, images were categorized as both *crowd/mass* and *men-only*, reinforcing narratives that shape perceptions of a refugee group's "deservedness" while also heightening fears of migration as a security threat. In the European context, the representation of "Arab men" carries specific connotations. A study examining visual content on social media found that posts about "Arab men" frequently employ rhetoric rooted in culture-based differentialist racism, framing them as symbols of cultural invasion in a broader symbolic process (Průchová Hrůzová and Zápotocký 2022, 359).

Another key compositional element was the visibility of *children*, as they are often associated with vulnerability and can elicit strong empathetic responses from viewers. The presence of children was among the most frequently occurring

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16 *El País*, 10.09.2015, "10 preguntas y respuestas sobre la crisis de los refugiados y las cuotas", https://elpais.com/internacional/2015/09/10/actualidad/1441896081_073855.html (Access Date: 10.01.2025).

codes in the dataset; however, the Ukrainian case contained a higher proportion of *children* and *children-only*[17] compositions. In contrast, in Syrian refugee photos, children were often subsumed within larger crowds or masses, making their presence less individually distinguishable. Children are also an important element of humanizing visual strategies "which emphasizes an understanding of children as fragile, vulnerable, and innocent" (Martikainen and Sakki 2024, 117). Given that Ukrainian refugee images more commonly featured portraits and individual compositions, children in these images were also depicted in a closer, more personal framing.

The presence of non-refugee individuals and their roles within the images were also coded. In the Syrian refugee dataset, most photographs depict refugees alone.[18] When other individuals are present, they are predominantly officials, often shown in confrontational roles, attempting to stop or control refugee movements. Some images[19] even depict violent encounters, occasionally with children visible in the frame. Instances of officials in neutral or assisting roles are less frequent. The presence of security bodies is considered to transmit a less positive representation and as a possible burden and/or threat (Amores and Arcila 2019, 7).

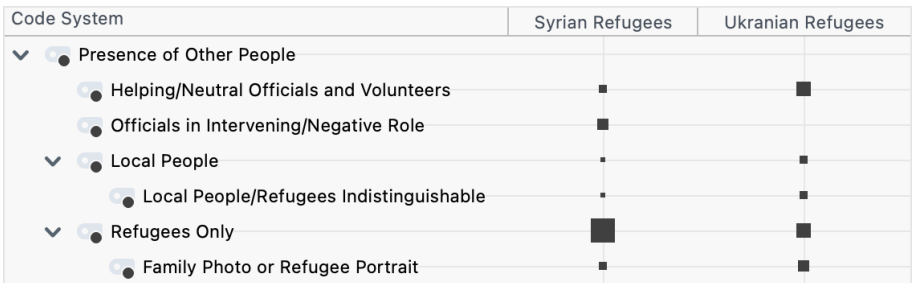

Table 6: Presence of Other People Code Frequency Table

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17 *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18.03.2022, "Wie deutsch darf die Schule für ukrainische Kinder sein?", https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/fluechtlinge-aus-der-ukraine-wie-deutsch-darf-die-schule-sein-17888993.html (Access Date: 13.01.2025).

18 *Le Monde*, 10.09.2015, "La porte de Saint-Ouen, escale de misère pour les réfugiés syriens", https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2015/09/11/la-porte-de-saint-ouen-escale-de-misere-pour-les-refugies-syriens_4753335_3214.html#:~:text=Environ%20vingt%2Dcinq%20familles%20syriennes,parisien%20dans%20une%20extrême%20précarité.&text=Lecture%204%20min.&text=Verte%2C%20bleue%2C%20jaune%2C%20grise,la%20porte%20de%20Saint%2DOuen (Access Date: 08.01.2025).

19 *Der Spiegel*, 22.08.2015, "Die Verzweiflung der Kinder", https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/fluechtlinge-verzweifelte-familien-wollen-nach-mazedonien-a-1049364.html (Access Date: 07.01.2025).

In contrast, Ukrainian refugee photographs more commonly feature officials and volunteers in supportive roles.[20] Some images even capture heartwarming moments, such as a policeman offering candy to a child or an official embracing a baby. While neutral or indistinct officials appear in some images, there are no instances within this dataset of confrontational or violent interactions. Although refugee-only photographs are also frequent among the Ukrainian refugee photos, some of them depict individuals or family portraits rather than large, indistinct groups. A notable distinction between the two cases is the presence of local civilians: Ukrainian refugees are sometimes pictured alongside local residents[21] in everyday settings, creating a sense of integration. In contrast, Syrian refugee photos rarely depict interactions with local populations unless the individuals hold an official role.

In summary, Syrian refugee photographs predominantly utilize distant framing portraying faceless crowds and masses in which children blend into the background. They are mostly depicted in refugees-only compositions or with officials in intervening roles. In contrast, Ukrainian refugee images focus more on individuals with closer framing, where children serve as a visibly emphasized compositional element. They are also portrayed with helping officials and in mixed compositions with local people.

Embodied Displacement: Expressions, Spaces, and Objects

As previously discussed, clear facial expressions are not always discernible in refugee photographs, particularly in images featuring distant perspectives or large groups. Consequently, the emotional states of individuals were also interpreted through body language, and broad categorizations were employed rather than specific emotional labels. Photos depicting refugees in distant mass compositions were excluded from expressional coding due to the lack of visible individual expressions.

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20 *Der Spiegel,* 02.03.2022, "Es wird mit zweierlei Maß gemessen", https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/interview-mit-migrationsforscherin-wird-putins-angriffskrieg-die-europaeische-asylpolitik-dauerhaft-veraendern-a-99b7cc0e-a427-4117-b42b-2d803145605a (Access Date: 13.01.2025).

21 *Corriere della Sera*, 22.03.2022, "Venezia, la lavanderia non trova stagionali: assunte dieci ucraine", https://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/venezia-mestre/cronaca/22_maggio_28/venezia-lavanderia-non-trova-stagionali-assunte-dieci-ucraine-dfe66982-deb7-11ec-9956-2753475a8c8a.shtml (Access Date: 14.01.2025).

Code System	Syrian Refugees	Ukranian Refugees
Expressions and Perceived Emotions		
Angry/Excited	■	
Exhausted/ Crying	■	▪
Anxious/Distressed	■	■
Tired/Quiet	■	■
Calm	■	■
Contented	▪	■

Table 7: Expressions and Perceived Emotions Code Frequency Table

The findings indicate that Syrian refugees were predominantly depicted with anxious, desperate, sad, or exhausted expressions, often accompanied by visible signs of distress such as crying. Some images also portrayed them as tired or quiet.[22] In contrast, Ukrainian refugees were more frequently shown in a calm or contended state, particularly in images[23] taken after migration, when they were in resettled environments. While tired or silent expressions were present in both cases, more overtly negative emotions-such as exhaustion or anxiety-were less frequently observed in the Ukrainian group. Additionally, a small number of images portrayed Syrian refugees with expressions of anger[24] or excitement, which could contribute to narratives framing them as potentially threatening rather than vulnerable.

The physical conditions depicted in refugee photographs provide further insight into the lived experiences of displaced individuals. It is relatively common to see images of refugees *standing*, *in queue*, and *waiting*. These portrayals were balanced across both refugee groups and were coded when no additional situational context was present. However, significant disparities emerged in more extreme scenarios. Photographs of Syrian refugees

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22 *Le Figaro*, 15.11.2015, "En Europe, la crise des réfugiés s'exacerbe", https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2015/11/15/01003-20151115ARTFIG00134-en-europe-la-crise-des-refugies-s-exacerbe.php (Access Date: 07.01.2025).

23 *BBC News*, 16.04.2022, "Homes for Ukraine: Robert Jenrick takes in Ukrainian refugee family", https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-61122240 (Access Date: 11.01.2025).

24 *Daily Mail*, 20.08.2015, "Riot breaks out at overcrowded refugee camp in Germany after resident tore pages out of the Koran and threw them in the toilet", https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3204828/Riot-breaks-overcrowded-refugee-camp-Germany-resident-tore-pages-Koran.html (Access Date: 06.01.2025).

frequently depicted individuals in distressing or precarious situations,[25] such as *struggling* in overcrowded boats, confronting hostile officials, or being confined by barbed wire. Notably, the "*struggle*" code was not applied to the Ukrainian refugee images, as such depictions were absent from the dataset. Instead, Ukrainian refugees were more often portrayed in relatively *normal* and *comfortable*[26] settings.

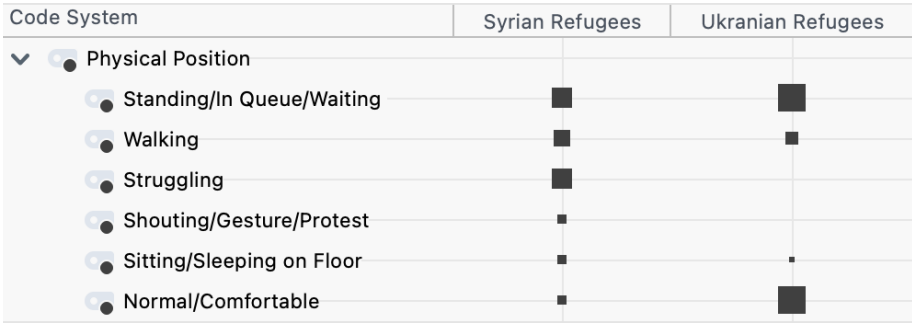

Table 8: Physical Position Code Frequency Table

The prevalence of struggle-oriented imagery in the Syrian refugee case may evoke feelings of compassion and pity. However, it also risks reinforcing a narrative of victimization, potentially desensitizing audiences to extreme conditions by normalizing their perpetual exposure to hardship. Susan Sontag argues (2003, 99-103) that passivity, rather than exposure to numerous images, dulls emotional response to "faraway suffering". While sympathy may seem like a moral reaction to images of distress, it can also serve as a means of detachment-affirming the viewer's innocence rather than fostering a deeper reflection on their position in relation to the suffering depicted or "pain of others". Conversely, the more stable and dignified representations of Ukrainian refugees do not negate their suffering but may serve a different communicative function. These images could serve to counter criticisms of inadequate humanitarian aid in recent crises while also justifying government expenditures on refugee assistance to taxpayers.

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25 *Der Spiegel*, 26.11.2015, "Die Kettenreaktion", https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/blockierte-fluechtlinge-auf-der-balkan-route-die-kettenreaktion-a-1064261.html (Access Date: 10.01.2025).

26 *The Guardian*, 19.04.2022, "'They treat us very well': Ukrainian refugees settle into Irish life", https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/19/ukrainian-refugees-ireland-life (Access Date: 12.01.2025).

Expressions and physical conditions are closely tied to the environments in which refugees are photographed. Images of Syrian refugees are predominantly set in outdoors, in border[27] and sea-coastline[28] regions. Recurring thematic element of sea and boats in the Syrian refugee imagery is a common element in refugee imagery. The persistent visual representation of boats contributes to the perception of refugees as anonymous masses, contrasting with images of individuals, which have been shown to elicit greater compassion and empathy from viewers (Bleiker et al. 2013, 413).

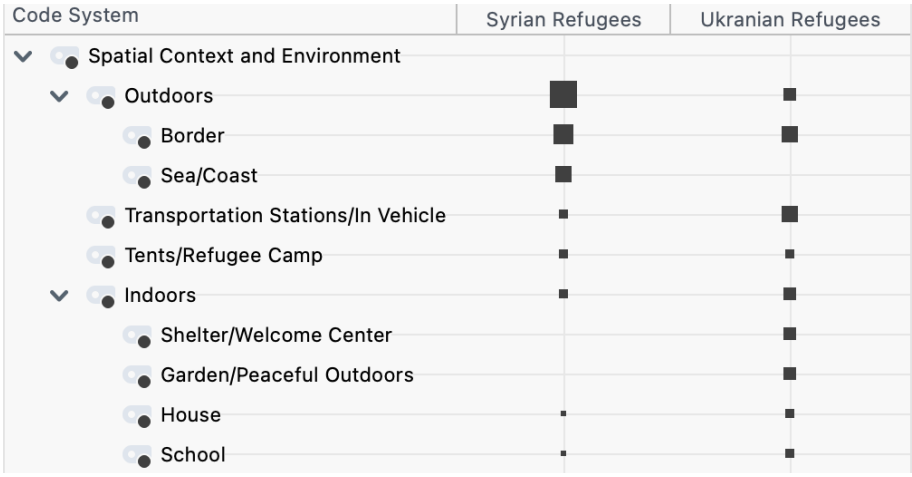

Table 9: Spatial Context and Environment Code Frequency Table

In contrast, Ukrainian refugees are more frequently photographed in indoor settings such as houses, hotels, schools, shelters, and welcome centres.[29] Particularly in post-migration contexts, they are also depicted in peaceful outdoor compositions,[30] such as gardens or city streets, reinforcing a sense of

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27 *Daily Mail*, 27.08.2015, "Thousands breach Europe's wall of wire: Young migrant gets her hair tangled while scrambling into Hungary - as police say 700 children crossed border in just one day", https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3212601/Agonising-moment-young-migrant-girl-gets-hair-tangled-barbed-wire-scrambling-Hungary-police-say-700-children-crossed-border-one-day-alone.html (Access Date: 06.01.2025).

28 *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25.09.2015, "In den Händen der Schlepper", https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/fluechtlingskrise/ein-fluechtling-erzaehlt-in-den-haenden-der-schlepper-13821768.html (Access Date: 09.01.2025).

29 *BBC News*, 07.03.2022, "Ukraine: With placards and tears, Poles are greeting refugees like family", https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60641217 (Access Date: 11.01.2025).

30 *The Guardian*, 20.03.2022, "From Kharkiv to Kent, life with the Ukrainian refugees who now

stability and integration. Another recurring theme is the presence of Ukrainian refugees in transportation hubs, undefined outdoor spaces, and border regions.

Some refugee photographs also include objects beyond people and environmental features, which contribute to shaping the visual narratives of displacement. In the Syrian refugee images, individuals are often depicted with minimal belongings, limited to life jackets[31] and emergency blankets—objects that symbolize immediate survival rather than continuity or stability. In contrast, Ukrainian refugee photos frequently feature luggage,[32] reflecting a more structured journey with defined routes, access to transportation, and a clearer sense of destination. Moreover, the portrayal of children in Ukrainian refugee imagery is further emphasized through the presence of personal items such as toys[33] and even pet animals, reinforcing themes of familial continuity and resilience. Although "before war" images of Ukrainian refugees were not included in the dataset, their availability underscores the perceived familiarity and ordinariness of Ukrainian lives prior to displacement.

A notable distinction is the absence of barbed wire imagery in the Ukrainian dataset, even in border-related photographs while the Syrian dataset include several examples.[34] This absence reflects differences in reception policies and migration routes. Meanwhile, images of Syrian refugees struggling with barbed wire may further contribute to narratives of criminalization and reinforce themes of "unwantedness" and "invasion." These settings frequently include additional visual elements such as tents, gates, and fences, which reinforce narratives of restriction, displacement, and vulnerability.

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feel like family", https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/from-kharkiv-to-kent-life-with-the-ukrainian-refugees-who-now-feel-like-family (Access Date: 12.01.2025).

31 *Daily Mail*, 23.09.2015, "First of 20,000 Syrian refugees arrive in the UK: Families fleeing war already welcomed in British towns", https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3245553/First-20-000-Syrian-refugees-arrive-UK-Families-fleeing-war-welcomed-British-towns.html (Access Date: 06.01.2025).

32 *Le Monde*, 19.04.2022, "Avec la guerre en Ukraine, la peur d'une hausse du trafic d'êtres humains le long des routes de l'exil", https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2022/04/19/le-spectre-des-trafics-d-etres-humains-sur-les-exiles-d-ukraine_6122696_3224.html (Access Date: 12.01.2025).

33 *El País*, 23.03.2022, "Niños de Ucrania, refugiados a salvo del lobo feroz", https://elpais.com/elpais/2022/03/22/album/1647970679_157181.html (Access Date: 14.01.2025).

34 *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 01.12.2015, "Assad: Unter syrischen Flüchtlingen sind auch Terroristen", https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/fluechtlingskrise/assad-sagt-unter-fluechtlingen-aus-syrien-sind-terroristen-13941823.html (Access Date: 09.01.2025).

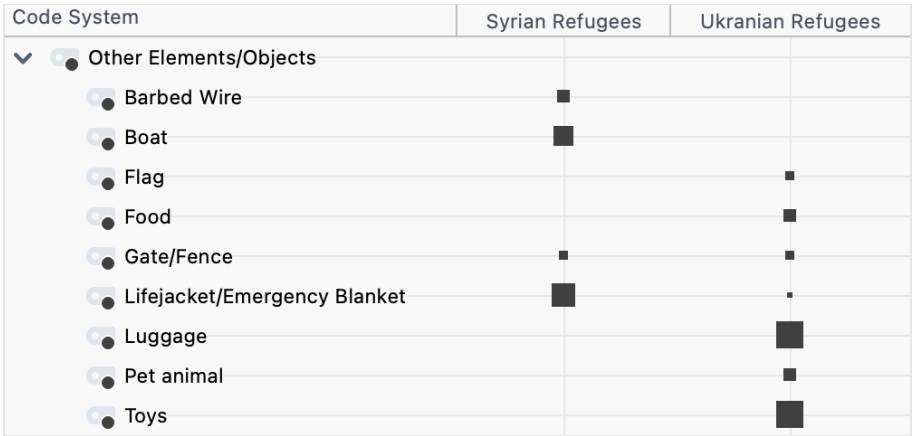

Table 10: Other Elements/Objects Code Frequency Table

Additional objects, such as food and national flags, appear in the Ukrainian dataset but are absent from the Syrian case. The presence of these items suggests a narrative of organized displacement, national identity, and humanitarian support, whereas the absence of such elements in Syrian refugee imagery underscores a more precarious and desperate migration experience.

Although this paper does not systematically include photographs, two selected examples are presented here to illustrate the contrasting visual narratives constructed around the two displaced groups.

In sum, the visual codes related to expressions, bodily positions, spatial environments, and surrounding objects contribute to a deeper understanding of how displacement is constructed in media portrayals. These elements, taken together, illustrate not only the physical and emotional conditions attributed to refugee subjects, but also the broader discursive frameworks through which their presence is mediated. The contrast between the chaotic, precarious depictions associated with Syrian refugees and the more structured, familiar, and individualized portrayals of Ukrainian refugees reflects the persistence of visual hierarchies in the representation of forced migration. This chapter has demonstrated how embodied indicators—such as visible exhaustion, spatial containment, and symbolic objects—serve as visual cues that reinforce or mitigate distance, vulnerability, and legitimacy.

Photograph 1: Syrian Refugees
"Thousands breach Europe's wall of wire: Young migrant gets her hair tangled while scrambling into Hungary - as police say 700 children crossed border in just one day" article by Simon Tomlinson, Photograph: AFP/Getty Images, 27.08.2015 - *Daily Mail*

Photograph 2: Ukrainian Refugees
"The hope and the horror: my week as an interpreter on Ukraine's border" article by Charlotte Hobson, Photograph: Wojtek Jargiło/EPA, 18.03.2022 – *The Guardian*.

Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of the visual representation of Syrian and Ukrainian displacements in major European online media, this study has uncovered both shared and distinct "visual narratives." Predominantly, refugee images tend to be illustrative in nature, often featuring anonymous figures. Such findings suggest the existence of a "representation gap" between the textual content of news and the lead images intended to represent it. This gap is not neutral; rather, it is susceptible to being filled with various affective responses—prejudice, mercy, fear, or sympathy— depending on the cultural proximity and existing beliefs of the audience. Consequently, decisions such as depicting crowds versus individuals, emphasizing or obscuring faces, and framing elements like barbed wire or toys, are instrumental in shaping how audiences interpret and emotionally engage with these narratives.

The double standards in the media representation of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees were outlined in Chapter Two through a review of previous comparative studies. This research similarly identifies differentiated approaches and framing practices between the two groups. However, by focusing on the visual dimension, it uncovers additional layers of meaning that remain largely unaddressed in text-based analyses.

The images accompanying news stories convey more sharply drawn distinctions, reinforcing and amplifying implicit hierarchies already present in verbal narratives. As discussed in the findings chapter, the concept of a "representation gap" highlights the disjuncture between headline content and visual framing, allowing space for further connotations to emerge through imagery. Those connotations both fill the gap and produce overflowing visual narratives that significantly shape public perception.

The visual narrative surrounding Syrian refugees predominantly reflects dehumanizing themes. They are frequently depicted as anonymous, sometimes faceless, masses seen from distant perspectives. Chaotic scenes, men-only crowds, and interactions with security forces or barbed wire reinforce narratives of burden, threat, and fear of invasion. While children appear within these crowds, compositions that emphasize their innocence and vulnerability are notably rare. Even in the limited instances of portraiture, their suffering remains geographically and symbolically distant-situated in border regions, on boats, or along coastlines. The absence of local civilians in these images further reinforces a sense of otherness and detachment.

Moreover, their possessions—limited to lifejackets and emergency blankets rather than familiar, everyday items—reinforce their otherness and create a sense of distance between them and the audience. Ultimately, this visual framing reduces them to anonymous masses, rendering their suffering as the "pain of others" rather than evoking proximity or personal connection.

In contrast, the visual narrative surrounding Ukrainian refugees primarily emphasizes familiarity and relatability. Rather than anonymous masses, they are often depicted as individuals or families in close-up shots, fostering a sense of connection and empathy. The availability of personal portraits further reinforces this humanizing effect. Their environments are frequently indoors—houses, shelters, schools, and transportation hubs—settings that evoke familiarity rather than foreignness. When portrayed outdoors, they are shown in structured, orderly spaces rather than chaotic or perilous ones. Unlike the stark, survival-focused belongings of Syrian refugees, Ukrainian refugees are often pictured with luggage, personal items, toys, and even pets—objects that signify continuity with their previous lives and reinforce their perceived normalcy. Children are more prominently featured, serving as an emotional bridge between the audience and the refugees. Additionally, the presence of local civilians, aid workers, and volunteers further legitimizes their status and integrates them into their new surroundings, diminishing any sense of otherness. Instead of reinforcing distance, these images frame Ukrainian refugees as proximate, relatable, and deserving of care and assistance.

Verbal forms of discrimination are often more readily identifiable, allowing for public scrutiny, corrective discourse, or editorial accountability. In contrast, the seemingly denotative and objective character of photographs can obscure their capacity to convey subtle yet powerful narrative effects. Precisely because of their assumed neutrality, images may reinforce underlying hierarchies and shape public perception in ways that are less visible but no less consequential. In an era defined by visual communication, such dynamics underscore the need for sustained academic attention to the role of imagery in constructing social meaning.

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Appendix I
List of Code System and Themes

Theme I - The Representation Gap: Anonymous Figures vs. Named Individuals

Representational Type
- Illustrative
- Actual

Scene Composition
- Chaotic
- Orderly

Identifying Information
- Anonymous People
- Names Given
- Location Given

Theme II - Framing and Composition

Framing Choice
- Bird's-eye-view
- Distant Frame
- Close-up
- Portrait

Subject Composition
- Individual(s)
- Crowd
- Mass
- Men Only
- Children
    - Children Only
- No Faces/No Human

Presence of Other People
- Helping/Neutral Officials and Volunteers
- Officials in Intervening/Negative Role
- Local People
    - Local People/Refugees Indistinguishable
- Refugees Only
    - Family Photo or Refugee Portrait

Theme III - Embodied Displacement: Expressions, Spaces, and Objects

Expressions and Perceived Emotions

- Angry / Excited
- Exhausted / Crying
- Anxious / Distressed
- Tired / Quiet
- Calm
- Contended / Grateful

Physical Position

- Standing / In Queue / Waiting
- Walking
- Struggling
- Shouting / Gesture / Protest
- Sitting / Sleeping on Floor
- Normal / Comfortable

Spatial Context and Environment

- Outdoors
  - Border
  - Sea / Coast
- Transportation Stations / In Vehicle
- Tents / Refugee Camp
- Indoors
  - Shelter / Welcome Center
  - Garden / Peaceful Outdoors
  - House
  - School

Other Elements/Objects

- Barbed Wire
- Boat
- Flag
- Food
- Gate / Fence
- Lifejacket / Emergency Blanket
- Luggage
- Pet Animal
- Toys

Appendix II

Code Frequency Cloud for Syrian Refugees Dataset

Code Frequency Cloud for Ukrainian Refugees Dataset