

Representation of Ukrainian Refugees in the UK Media (BBC News)

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Abstract. This article examines the media representation of Ukrainian refugees in the United Kingdom, focusing specifically on BBC News coverage during two distinct periods: the initial 2022 Russian invasion and 2025. The study aims to identify dominant narratives and analyse how these portrayals have evolved. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study employs thematic analysis of fourteen news articles to explore underlying meanings in depth.

The findings reveal that representation across both periods is overwhelmingly positive, legitimising support for granting refuge and opportunities for settlement. However, a notable shift in focus is evident: 2022 coverage centred on the "British response," highlighting national humanitarian efforts and appreciation for refugees, while 2025 reports foreground themes of Ukrainians' integration, professional success, and "giving back" through volunteering.

Despite this favourable portrayal of Ukrainian refugees, the media appears to focus primarily on Britain's role in providing support, contributing to a sense of national pride. The study argues that these narratives often employ a "discourse of deservingness" that emphasises refugees' gratitude and socioeconomic contributions. Ultimately, the article concludes that while such positive portrayals may foster social cohesion, they may also oversimplify refugees' experiences by obscuring ongoing structural challenges and prioritising a more self-referential dimension of national compassion.

Keywords: Ukrainian refugee; media representation; BBC News; public opinion.

INTRODUCTION

Background and context. The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022 forced millions of Ukrainians to flee their homes in search of safety. A considerable number sought refuge in the United Kingdom, supported in part through government schemes such as Homes for Ukraine and family sponsorship programmes. Although the UK has a long history of receiving migrants and refugees, the arrival of a large group in a relatively short period inevitably poses challenges. In this context, the media's role as an intermediary becomes particularly significant. Balanced, accurate, and nuanced portrayals of newcomers can foster understanding, empathy, and social cohesion, whereas sensationalised or one-sided reporting may contribute to public anxiety, stereotyping, or polarisation.

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion by influencing how individuals perceive, interpret, and prioritise social issues. Through selective reporting, framing techniques, and agenda-setting practices, media outlets determine which topics gain prominence and which perspectives are foregrounded or marginalised. Headlines, imagery, and narrative framing can subtly guide audiences to view refugees either as vulnerable individuals in need of protection or as potential strains on public services. Since most members of the public rely on mediated information rather than direct experience to understand complex global events, media narratives have a significant impact on societal attitudes, policy preferences, and political behaviour.

The study aims to explore the media representation of Ukrainian refugees coming to the UK in a dynamic context by comparing reports from

2022 (the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion) with more recent coverage. The research assumes that media portrayals of Ukrainian refugees can significantly influence public opinion, as the language used in news articles shapes how people perceive their experiences, reasons for seeking asylum, and need for support.

The research questions can be formulated as follows:

1) How are Ukrainian refugees represented in the British mainstream news media (BBC News), and what dominant narratives emerge from this coverage?

2) How has the portrayal of Ukrainian refugees in the UK media (BBC News) evolved, from the initial 2022 invasion to the present?

In addressing these questions, this study may provide valuable insights into how media discourse affects public views on forced migration and contributes to academic understanding of the issue.

Literature Review

How media shape public opinion. The media's influence on society is undeniable [1]. In contemporary liberal democratic societies, public opinion is largely mediated by the mass media [2], which act as the primary conduit between the public and policymakers [3]. The media inform the public about political decisions while simultaneously conveying signals of public sentiment to political elites. As a result, the mass media significantly affect both public attitudes and policymakers' positions, particularly on sensitive issues such as migration and asylum [4].

One of the key mechanisms through which the media shape opinion is agenda setting [5]. By selecting which events are newsworthy and determining the frequency and prominence of their coverage, media outlets influence what audiences perceive as important. However, the media do not merely report events; they also frame them. Drawing on frame theory, news is presented through particular perspectives that guide readers in interpreting, evaluating, and responding to events [5]. Frames act as cognitive signposts, directing attention toward certain views and interpretations while obscuring others [6].

The language and imagery used in reporting can therefore have significant consequences.

Through editorial choices about what to publish and how extensively to cover it, the press contributes to constructing social realities, including the collective image of groups such as refugees [5]. In doing so, it may reinforce stereotypes and create distinctions between an in-group ("us") and an out-group ("them") [4].

Understanding media coverage is crucial, particularly when audiences lack direct experience with the issues being reported. In such cases, media narratives fill knowledge gaps, influence how responsibility is assigned, and shape the sides people choose to support [6].

BBC. As mentioned above, media narratives are not neutral reflections of reality; they are constructed to align with editorial priorities and resonate with specific audiences [7]. Within this landscape, the BBC stands out as the United Kingdom's public service broadcaster, recognised for its long history, strong reputation for reliability, and extensive global reach. As one of Britain's top news brands, the BBC attracts an audience of around 37.9 million people in the UK, making it one of the most visited and influential news outlets in the country [6].

Internationally, the BBC is a globally recognised media organisation. Through its 24-hour World News channel, it reaches over 200 million households worldwide, reinforcing its position as a dominant voice in global media discourse [8]. As a leading international broadcaster, the BBC reflects the dominant flow of global media and generally adheres to Western journalistic standards of objectivity, neutrality [7], and balance. By focusing on broader issues such as economic conditions and government policies, the BBC presents its coverage in line with its role as an impartial global broadcaster [7].

Because of its wide readership and influence, the BBC plays a significant agenda-setting role, shaping public understanding and perceptions of complex issues, including refugee and migration debates, through a reporting style widely regarded as formal and balanced [6].

Media coverage of Ukrainian refugees. Studies show that the Spanish press provided largely favourable news coverage of Ukrainian refugees [4], portraying them primarily as victims in need of humanitarian assistance [1]. A recurring theme was that Ukrainians "seem so like us", highlighting their European identity and constructing a sense of shared belonging [5].

Similarly, Polish media depicted Ukrainian refugees in neutral to positive terms. The authors consistently described them as war refugees and recipients of accommodation and material support [9]. Importantly, Polish newspapers did not frame their arrival as a "crisis" [9], and negative portrayals were largely absent [10].

In the Netherlands, television coverage crafted narratives of care and solidarity by celebrating sameness between "us" and "them". Ukrainian refugees were portrayed as culturally proximate Europeans who share core Western values [11]. Comparable tendencies appeared in German media, where Ukrainians were frequently represented as fellow Europeans. German media achieved the "sameing" of Ukrainians by attributing a middle-class identity to them and invoking shared experiences of historical victimhood [12].

However, according to Panagiotidis, German discourse also revealed underlying tensions, as older narratives of Eastern European "poverty migration" persisted, making the discursive equality of Ukrainians fragile [12].

In Türkiye, social media discussions showed compassion for Ukrainians. Tweets often expressed empathy for Ukrainian refugees' hardships and blamed Russia for their displacement. The predominance of women, children, and elderly refugees was frequently cited to legitimise tolerance [8]. Finally, American newspapers framed Ukrainian refugees more sympathetically than Syrian refugees, whom they more often depicted as potential threats than Ukrainians [14].

In the UK mainstream media (*The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Guardian*), Ukrainian refugees were represented using humanist and sympathetic imagery, often described as "just like us", "fellas", or "people desperate for help" [15]. UK media coverage emphasised their vulnerability, portraying their actions as reasonable responses to the circumstances. These descriptions construct Ukrainian refugees as "contingent" refugees — "those who are seeking refuge only in this instance and those who would otherwise not leave Ukraine" (highlighting an imputed desire to return) — and legitimate the support they received from host communities [16]. News outlets treat Ukrainian refugees as similar to members of the arrival countries. This approach positioned them more inclusively, minimising their "otherness" [16].

Overall, humanitarian perceptions were prevalent among Ukrainian refugees [17]; UK media discourse (*BBC*, *The Sun*) consistently conveyed evident sympathy toward them [6].

As mentioned above, most studies have focused on media coverage during the initial period of the Russian invasion (either the first couple of months or the first year of the war). The representation of Ukrainian refugees is often compared with that of other refugee groups, particularly Afghan, Syrian, and MENA (Middle East and North Africa) refugees, with scholars arguing that the portrayal of Ukrainians has been more positive [9]. The studies generally identify mostly welcoming attitudes toward refugees from Ukraine [17] and note that the outpouring of sympathy and support in both media and public discourse has been less visible in reactions to other wars and refugee crises [6]. This difference is explained by a perceived resonance between the values, cultures, and political climates of European host countries and the backgrounds of Ukrainian refugees [17].

However, concerns remain about how durable the belief in Ukrainians' equality as Europeans actually is [12] and whether their neutral/positive portrayal represents only a temporary trend [9]. If so, the initial humanitarian response may evolve into compassion fatigue or even demonisation, as occurred with Syrian refugees [13], when empathetic media coverage in the summer and autumn of 2015 gradually shifted toward suspicion and, in some cases, hostility [18]. Therefore, a research gap remains regarding potential changes in the portrayal of Ukrainian refugees over time (three years later), which this study seeks to address.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher collected data directly from British mainstream news media, specifically from BBC News, focusing on its reporting on Ukrainian refugees in the United Kingdom. Seven news articles from 2022 (marking the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the most intense period of Ukrainian displacement) and a similar number from 2025 were selected, resulting in a total of fourteen articles for detailed analysis and comparison.

This small sample size is intentional — and beneficial — given the qualitative nature of the research, which prioritises in-depth analysis over

breadth. Such an approach enables a richer, more insightful examination and enhances awareness of the nuances of each article studied [6]. The researcher selected all articles by typing "Ukrainian refugees" into the search box on the BBC News website.

Data Analysis. Thematic analysis, defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (be that several interviews or focus groups as well as a range of texts) [19], was used to examine the collected data, with entire press articles serving as research units [20].

Unlike many qualitative methodologies (e.g., Critical Discourse Analysis), thematic analysis is not tied to a specific epistemological or theoretical perspective [21]. Conducting a CDA is often described as a kind of "detective work", looking at the details of language to uncover what is actually being communicated [22]. However, thematic analysis also moves beyond merely describing what is said, focusing on interpreting and explaining it [21]. Thus, it can serve as a method that both reflects reality and unpacks the surface of "reality", overlapping with certain forms of discourse analysis [19].

The researcher analysed several stages. First, the author thoroughly read all selected articles to gain an overall understanding of their content. Next, the author highlighted significant text segments, identified preliminary themes, and organised them into broader categories reflecting patterns of representation. Finally, the researcher interpreted these themes in relation to the study's research questions.

Reflexivity. As I am a Ukrainian refugee who came to the UK following the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, I cannot be considered a "neutral observer" or, as Wodak argues, "the (critical) subject is not external to the discourses on which s/he reflects" [23, p. 8]. I sympathise with the plight of refugees and am particularly interested in how the news media portray their presence in the country.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Building on the methods outlined above, the researcher identified and named two main themes for both 2022 and 2025: "the British response" and "the Ukrainian refugees' experiences." The analysis also revealed a shift in focus between

2022 and 2025, with one theme becoming more prominent in each period.

Within these themes, several sub-themes were developed, as "they can be useful for giving structure to a particularly large and complex theme" [19].

The theme of the British response can be further divided into two sub-themes: the official response and the community response, both closely linked to messages of support and help.

The BBC News reports on government and local authorities' actions to support Ukrainian refugees across several articles. For example, UK ministers changed the rules to allow unaccompanied Ukrainian children to come to the UK. At the same time, the Welsh government "appealed for more people to open their homes to Ukrainian refugees" [24]. Authorities also provided information on immediate access to benefits and employment, as well as additional funding for councils to cover extra costs. However, there were calls for the government to plan and increase payments to host families, as 25 % of sponsors intended to withdraw after the initial six-month period had ended [25].

Earlier, in March 2022, BBC News published statistical data on how many people had signed up for the Homes for Ukraine programme, along with a registration link for those interested in hosting a refugee [26].

However, local councils admit that, unsurprisingly, most sponsorship arrangements are not long-term and are developing homelessness prevention plans in case these are needed [27]. Furthermore, according to the government, "very few" sponsorships are breaking down, and when they do, local authorities have provided support or found more suitable sponsors [28].

Another sub-theme relates to support from ordinary people, including host families and volunteers. In comments to BBC News reporters, those who have hosted Ukrainian families described the experience as enjoyable, wonderful, or enriching, noting that they treat Ukrainians as "part of the family" [25]. Their motivation is largely empathetic — recognising the struggles people face in Ukraine, they act as they would hope others would act toward their own loved ones [26]. Similarly, volunteers who run weekly English classes to help integrate Ukrainians into the community explain: "We want them to know they're welcome, we understand everything

they're going through, and we support them" [29].

The general narrative about Ukrainian refugees' experiences is that they were welcomed, are grateful for the support and assistance they received, and now feel safe.

Ukrainians (mostly women, as men are generally required to remain in Ukraine due to restrictions on leaving the country) depict their experiences of the war in Ukraine as "horrible". However, they report that, in the UK, due to "support from people and from the governmental programme", they feel much better [30]. BBC News articles also highlight several concerns expressed by Ukrainian refugees, including missing family members who remain in Ukraine, fears about moving to a new country, and feelings of loneliness; at the same time, respondents note that the welcome they have received has been very warm. As one respondent stated: "It gives hope, faith and confidence that we will be able to work, study and live" [29]. Ukrainians also describe people in Britain as "very lovely", "really lovely and kind", and "very tolerant and caring deeply about the problems and pain of refugees", and they "would like to say thank you to all the British people" [28].

In 2025, the themes remain largely the same; however, the British response theme has become less prominent in BBC News coverage, while the Ukrainian refugees' experiences theme has gained more attention. Some of the same sub-themes persist, such as being welcomed and feeling grateful, but new ones have also emerged, including rebuilding a life, stories of success, and a wish to help others.

BBC News articles provide data from councils across the UK on how many Ukrainian refugees have relocated under the government's Homes for Ukraine scheme, and how many people have come forward as sponsors, accompanied by renewed appeals for more host families. They also present the number of school-aged Ukrainian children enrolled in education in the area (Buckinghamshire Council). In addition, BBC News reports on the activities of organisations (e.g., Hilltops Ukrainian Support Community and the Ukrainian Welcome Centre in central London) that provide services to Ukrainians arriving in the UK and help them settle in and integrate into their new communities. One respondent explains: "Through a wide array of initiatives, we foster a strong sense of belonging and mutual

care, helping Ukrainians overcome challenges as they rebuild their lives" [31]. The news media consistently emphasise the warm welcome that Ukrainians receive in the UK.

The motivations for sponsorship remain similar to those identified previously — namely, humanitarian and empathetic concerns. As one respondent stated: "It just seemed absolutely the right thing to do in situations like this. I always think, supposing it was me and my children, I would be so grateful if people gave me this opportunity" [32].

In BBC News reports, Ukrainians describe their experiences in the UK as they attempt "to build [their] lives again". In the UK, they report feeling safe ("they could sleep soundly"), welcomed, and grateful for the support they have received. As one respondent noted, "It's so moving how people open doors to their own homes. They have been so welcoming to Ukrainian people" [31]. Another echoed this sentiment: "They helped us start building our lives from scratch... I've never seen such beautiful people and such a welcoming family in my life" [32].

BBC News articles report on Ukrainian refugees who are studying to obtain qualified jobs or undergoing training to have their medical qualifications recognised [33], working, running their own businesses, securing investments [34], and winning awards [35]. The protagonists of these success stories also remain connected to Ukraine. As one respondent stated: "Our mission is to help Ukrainian companies to increase sales and support the economy through taxes, and create new workplaces for Ukrainian refugees in the UK" [34].

Another sub-theme that emerges from BBC News reporting is the support that Ukrainian refugees provide to others. After some time, many become volunteers themselves to "give back to the place" that helped them survive [36]. Ukrainians volunteer, for example, by teaching English to help other refugees (not only Ukrainians) navigate a new country and integrate into the local community. One respondent noted: "When I came here to Wells, my life has changed considerably, and trying to help others has helped ease that pain of fleeing my home country" [37].

Thus, the final sub-theme within the theme of Ukrainian refugees' experiences is the challenges they face. As reported, Ukrainians face difficulties with the language, struggle to find employment

— especially when it comes to qualified work — have problems finding a GP they can trust (with significant differences in the healthcare system also mentioned), and report loneliness as an issue.

My findings indicate that in this sample, BBC News portrays displaced Ukrainians fleeing the horrors of war as legitimate refugees deserving protection. Providing shelter and assistance to Ukrainian refugees is described as a taken-for-granted response, while those fleeing are depicted as similar to their British hosts — "part of the family".

Coverage from 2022 largely centres on official government and local authority responses, as well as the actions of volunteers and host families, with comparatively less attention given to the refugees' own experiences. The dominant narrative suggests that British communities warmly welcomed Ukrainians, who expressed gratitude and now feel safe.

This provokes the question of whether the focus rests more on Britons and British charity than on refugee perspectives. Within this portrayal, Ukrainian refugees are primarily cast as humble, grateful recipients of aid, reinforcing their perceived worthiness of care and hospitality. As Meuzelaar argues, such representations foreground "our" (here, British) charity and construct a discourse of deservingness by emphasising that care is reciprocated through gratitude [11].

In the BBC News narrative, the British nation is portrayed as hospitable and as a place of solidarity and care. Such reports highlight the virtue of the nation in welcoming refugees: "The support people have given is absolutely first class and makes me proud to be British" [25].

At the same time, this coverage produces a narcissistic dimension of compassion: by caring for "them", "we" affirm our own sense of goodness, while "they" remain positioned largely as objects of "our" empathy and benevolence [11].

In 2025, the focus shifts notably, with BBC News coverage placing less emphasis on British support and greater attention on the experiences of Ukrainian refugees. The media increasingly depict Ukrainians as integrated into British society: they study, work, run their own businesses, and become part of local communities. They are portrayed not only as recipients of assistance but

also as individuals who actively seek to give back, particularly through volunteering.

At the same time, these narratives — emphasising that Ukrainians are hardworking, economically beneficial, and willing to reciprocate hospitality — reproduce a "trope of deservingness" by highlighting the economic value of citizenship [11]. In this sense, Ukrainians are represented as valuable contributors to the British economy, participating in a legitimate exchange of capital, and as willing to return "our" hospitality through "their" investment in the nation [11].

In this context, the reduced attention to the challenges that Ukrainian refugees still face is understandable. However, this approach may oversimplify and narrow the representation of Ukrainian refugees' experiences, presenting an overly optimistic picture.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the present study provide answers to the research questions. The results show that the selected BBC News articles portray Ukrainian refugees overwhelmingly positively, corroborating the conclusions drawn in the literature review. The articles depict Ukrainian refugees as deserving of help and warmly welcomed, while largely taking the provision of shelter and assistance for granted. They present the efforts of the government and local authorities to support Ukrainians as evident in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, they describe the experiences of host families and their Ukrainian "guests" as predominantly positive and portray their actions as unproblematic and aligned with expectations. In the 2025 coverage, the articles portray Ukrainians as integrating into local communities through studying, working, and volunteering, while expressing gratitude for these opportunities and for a sense of safety.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that, despite concerns in some research about "compassion fatigue" and a possible shift from positive to negative representations of displaced Ukrainians, Ukrainian refugees in 2025 are still evaluated very favourably. While early portrayals depicted Ukrainians as confused, in turmoil, and feeling isolated, over time, they are shown as becoming more confident. They are described as more settled, often moving from host families into their own homes, and more integrated, with greater

emphasis placed on their achievements than on the challenges they continue to face. In more recent BBC News articles, Ukrainian refugees are represented not only as individuals in need of support, but also as people who can help others and contribute positively to society.

The findings of this study have several implications for understanding the media representation of refugees.

First, the consistently positive portrayal of Ukrainian refugees in BBC News suggests that media narratives are strongly shaped by broader geopolitical and humanitarian contexts, particularly in relation to the brutality of the Russian invasion of Ukraine; this indicates that refugee representation is not uniform but varies depending on perceived cultural proximity, political alignment, and public sentiment.

Second, by depicting refugees as notably grateful and appreciative of the help they receive, media can implicitly "flatter" its audiences by reinforcing a positive self-image of compassion and moral responsibility. While such representations may foster sympathy and public support, they can also narrow the portrayal of refugees' experiences by prioritising gratitude over complexity.

Moreover, the shift from initial vulnerability to later narratives of success and integration highlights how media discourse can normalise expectations of rapid adaptation and self-sufficiency.

Such portrayals may reduce stigma, but they can also obscure the ongoing challenges faced by displaced populations.

The study is limited by its small sample size and narrow scope, as it focuses exclusively on a single British mainstream news outlet, which may restrict the generalisability and representativeness of the findings and conclusions.

Replicating this study across different British media types and formats (online and offline, including comments or reports), as well as outlets with varying editorial leanings, would provide a more comprehensive picture. Further research could also benefit from applying alternative methodological approaches (e.g., Critical Discourse Analysis or Framing Theory) to uncover implicit or hidden meanings more effectively and to offer more nuanced explanations — ideological or otherwise — for the identified patterns in media texts.

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