

# The Representation of the Arrival of Ukrainian Refugees in the Hungarian Media in 2022

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*This paper examines how the positive image of Ukrainian refugees was constructed in 2022 in the Hungarian media by analysing refugee-related news coverage across various media types, adopting quantitative content analysis. Utilising the concepts of illiberal informational autocracy and authoritarian populism, the study seeks to shed light on how the media represent refugee issues within an illiberal, authoritarian and populist context. The analysis hypothesised that, while pro-government propaganda media avoided portraying Ukrainian refugees negatively, their representations would still reflect the regime's populist and authoritarian characteristics. Our findings largely confirmed these assumptions. Pro-government media emphasised the government's competence significantly more than other media types, adopted an emotionally intense tone primarily toward Hungarian helpers and employed depersonalised representations of refugees.*

*Keywords: authoritarian populism, Hungary, informational autocracy, media representation, propaganda media, Ukrainian refugees*

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## Introduction

The war in Ukraine and the consequent influx of refugees has created a situation in the countries neighbouring Ukraine and the whole of Europe which is unprecedented since WWII. Compared to the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’, the situation in 2022 was different in several respects – the fact that the war broke out in Europe, the number of people in need and the social composition of the refugees (primarily women and children of the same cultural, racial and religious traditions). The refugees in 2015 came primarily from regions outside Europe, often only partially from war zones. Being predominantly Muslim, they were typically culturally, ethnically and religiously different from the populations in the destination countries.

In 2015, the Hungarian government and its media constructed and pursued an unparalleled anti-immigrant, anti-refugee propaganda campaign, in which refugees arriving primarily from the MENA region and Afghanistan were presented as posing an urgent threat to the economic stability, cultural traditions and national security of Hungary and Europe (Ádám and Golovics 2022; Benczes and Ságvári 2022; Bernáth and Messing 2016; Bocskor 2018; Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017; Gerő and Sik 2020; Messing and Bernáth 2015). In contrast, the refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine have been welcomed and portrayed using a humanitarian frame. While the Hungarian state reacted with some delay to the arrival of the Ukrainians, people were quick to mobilise, with various forms of support being organised by grassroots and civil organisations within a few days (de Coninck 2023; Feischmidt and Zakariás 2019; Pettrachin and Hadj Abdou 2022; Tóth and Bernát 2022; Zawadzka-Paluckta 2023).

The context of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Hungary is further complicated by the Hungarian government’s double-edged approach to the war in Ukraine. As a member of the 2 most significant Western alliances – NATO and the European Union – Hungary should theoretically support Ukraine in the war and regard Russia as the initiator and aggressor. However, the government frequently uses pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives in its communication. These narratives are either taken directly from official Russian communications or sourced from Kremlin-friendly media. This is not a novelty: clear signs of pro-Putin rhetoric have been detectable in Hungarian government communication for several years, since well before the outbreak of the war (Political Capital 2022; Patrik and Csaba 2022; Szicherle and Molnár 2022). Beginning in 2022, the Hungarian government has adopted a notably ambiguous stance on the war, consciously deploying contradictory messages. Through its propaganda media system (Ádám and Golovics 2022), it spreads explicit or implicit Russian disinformation. According to its central theme, the ‘peace narrative’, Hungary is the only country in the EU that supports a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The underlying narrative is that Ukraine is an oppressor of minorities, which explains and legitimises the Russian military invasion (Political Capital 2022).

This leads to the core focus of our research: How was the humanitarian representation of the refugees constructed in 2022 in the different types of media? To pursue our research motivation, we analyse the coverage of refugee-related news comparatively: in pro-government propaganda media, government-owned non-propaganda media and independent, government-critical media. We aim to contribute to understanding how the media instrumentalises the non-threatening refugee in illiberal, authoritarian and populist settings. The paper begins by introducing the theoretical framework, focusing on the concepts of illiberal informational autocracy and authoritarian populism, which explain how the media and populist media messages are used in illiberal and authoritarian contexts. It highlights some of the peculiarities of the Hungarian media landscape to gain insight into how press freedom has been restricted and into the implications for the government’s production of populist media content. We then point out the major differences between the populist representations of migrants and refugees in non-authoritarian and authoritarian regimes. The following

methodological section explains how descriptive quantitative content analysis was conducted. Finally, the results and their interpretation within the conceptual framework are presented.

## Theoretical framework

### *The media, media messages and propaganda in authoritarian and populist regimes*

In populist and authoritarian regimes, the media, media messages and political communication play a central role in maintaining the power of the ruler and thus the political system through the domination of the media infrastructure and the creation of propagandistic content (Ádám and Golovics 2022; Polyák 2019). *Illiberal informational autocracy* refers to these features of regimes that are neither democratic nor open dictatorships (Gurieva and Treisman 2020). The concept holds that some of today's autocratic political leaders have adapted to the new, globalised world and do not use 'traditional' violent means – or, when they use them, they try to conceal them. Instead, they manipulate information to establish and maintain their power. These systems have several typical features, such as the *mimicry of democracy* (democratic institutions such as elections or parliament, which are seemingly in place but which are more of a facade), the *emphasis on the competent leader, governance and effective performance*, the *reliance on less-privileged groups* for obtaining their votes and *restrictions on freedom of the press* that enable the *manipulation of information* (Ádám and Golovics 2022; Gurieva and Treisman 2020; Susánszky, Kopper and Zsigó 2022).

Non-democratic, authoritarian systems are also often populist (Susánszky *et al.* 2022). *Authoritarian populist* regimes have a charismatic populist leader who maintains power by constantly creating external public enemies while emphasising the internal unity of 'the people'. This antagonistic divide between 'us' and 'them' is used in appeals to the people (Szebeni and Salojärvi 2022). Elections are a source of legitimation by citizens although the country is governed in a vertical-hierarchical manner through its clientèles (Ádám 2019; Szebeni and Salojärvi 2022), leaving limited or no space for opposition. The communicational creation and maintenance of 'the enemy', as well as unity, are largely achieved by using emotional language (Bartha, Boda and Szikra 2020; Forgas and Lantos 2020; Hann 2019).

### *The illiberal, authoritarian media landscape in Hungary*

The Hungarian illiberal government consciously sought to obtain as much control over the media market as possible. As a result, freedom of the press has been deteriorating since 2010 but has not entirely been eliminated. While much of the media has gradually come under government control, a few independent or government-critical media outlets still operate (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020; Polyák 2019, 2022; Susánszky *et al.* 2022). The main strategies of the illiberal media policy include the takeover of media commissions and public service media by appointing people loyal to the government, thereby undermining their independence. They also include manipulating markets, helping with media buyouts by businesses with ties to the government and making paid government advertisements available only to loyal media outlets. Another strategy is obstructing independent journalists' access to information and public data and increasing pressure on them, which often leads to self-censorship. Finally, government propaganda controls the agenda of political issues, as it did during the migration crisis of 2015 when the government deployed securitised and politicised messages. The government exploited events related to the 2015 refugee and migrant crisis by framing it exclusively as a security threat (securitisation), thereby creating a fearful environment where the country's political leadership could not be questioned and which was suitable for mobilising their supporters (politicisation). The leadership's

control over the agenda and framings is achieved not only through loyal media but also through having power over and access to a range of communication tools, such as billboard campaigns and push polls or ‘national consultations’ (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020; Hargitai 2021; Kállai 2019; Polyák 2019, 2022).

In 2020, according to the calculations of investigative journalists based on ownership and control, the government dominated political (popular) dailies (75 per cent), regional dailies (100 per cent), radio (66 per cent) and television news channels (75 per cent). With other types of media, such as weekly newspapers and online news portals, independent media dominated (40 per cent).<sup>1</sup> In terms of audience size, it was found that television news channels are similarly distributed between government and independent media (Bátorfy and Szabó 2022). However, merely examining the number of government-controlled and independent media outlets does not provide a sufficient understanding of the functioning of the entire mechanism of control over public communication. There are other means of doing this than just controlling media outlets, which can be captured in various indicators, 2 of which are the reach of the media outlets and the amount of state support provided through paid advertisements; in both, the government has a larger share.<sup>2</sup> A further indicator is the level of trust which people have in each media outlet.

Research data show explicit polarisation in this respect: while people may even read, listen to or watch opposition media, they only trust the one closest to their political preference (Hann, Megyeri, Urbán, Horváth, Szávai and Polyák 2023). An illiberal government has specific and effective ways of getting its messages across. The Orbán regime has managed to build a strong propaganda machine while leaving a smaller part of the media independent. Part of this strategy is to keep some democratic institutions functioning to preserve the ‘democratic façade’.

#### *The populist media representation of migrants and refugees in non-authoritarian and authoritarian regimes*

The study of the media representation of immigrants and refugees in receiving countries has been on the research agenda for decades (Benczes and Ságvári 2022; Boydston, Card, Gross, Resnik and Smith 2014; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017; Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017; Heidenreich, Lind, Eberl and Boomgaarden 2019; Hoewe 2018; Kovář 2023; Moen-Larsen 2020; Parker 2015; Pruitt 2019; Sulaiman-Hill, Thompson, Afsar and Hodliffe 2011; Urbániková and Tkaczyk 2020; Wallace 2018; Zawadzka-Palucktau 2023). Most studies point out that some degree of negative labelling and framing is a common characteristic of migrant and refugee representations in most countries. Securitised framing and a hostile approach are primarily part of far-right or populist right-wing strategies (Grande, Schwarzbözl and Fatke 2019). A series of media analyses have demonstrated how these discourses, which emanate from populist, radical, far-right actors, infiltrate mainstream public opinion (Feischmidt and Hervik 2015; Mondon and Winter 2020). It is typically tabloid, popular and commercial media that adapt and enhance these discourses. In contrast, public service and quality media deploy a more critical voice and use different interpretative frames; they adopt a more serious reporting approach, focusing on clarifying complex issues and situating events within a wider context (De Coninck, Mertens and d’Haenens 2021; Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017). For example, Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) found in their research on the 2015 refugee crisis that tabloid newspapers focus more on the criminality aspect of refugee and asylum issues, while quality newspapers more frequently use a variety of other frames. In illiberal settings, as we discuss below, this categorisation of media types cannot be applied.

In Hungary, this research field has emerged since the 2015 refugee crisis as the populist and authoritarian regime started to thematise the refugee crisis. In previous periods, due to the small number of immigrants and refugees and the lack of political interest in the topic,<sup>3</sup> little research was conducted on media coverage and discourses on immigrants and refugees (Brubaker 2017; Győri 2016; Sereghy 2016; Vicsek, Keszi and Márkus 2008; Zádori 2015). The reigning illiberal, authoritarian populist political power picked up the immigrant issue

to advance its political agenda (Ádám and Golovics 2022; Bernáth and Messing 2016). As is typical of such regimes, the politicisation of immigration and the refugee question emerged from the governing political elite rather than the far right. Research on the media representation of immigrants/refugees also demonstrates that the Hungarian media – primarily outlets under government influence – has adopted the interpretation of the refugee crisis as a political problem and a threat, as well as a security issue (Barta and Tóth 2016; Bernáth and Messing 2016; Futák-Campbell 2022; Gigitashvili and Sidło 2019; Szalai and Göbl 2015; Vidra 2019).

Based on the literature, our premise is that the populist regime always uses the same or similar techniques in its communication to win the support of the people (Ádám and Golovics 2022; Susánszky *et al.* 2022). To capture what media content is produced and how the Ukrainian refugee situation is exploited by the different media types, we empirically operationalise the concept of *illiberal informational autocracy* (Gurieva and Treisman 2020, 2022; Krekó 2022; Susánszky *et al.* 2022) and *authoritarian populism* (Szebeni and Salojärvi 2022). The concepts of informational autocracy and authoritarian populism highlight some of the specificities of the regime in terms of how power is maintained through (1) the creation of an image of a strong and competent leader and government, (2) the control and manipulation of information, (3) the generation of the in-group and out-groups, the fear of the ‘other’ and the emphasis of internal unity and (4) the use of emotional language.

Building upon these premises, our first research question examines how the positive image of refugees was constructed in 2022 and whether politically diverse media outlets represented refugees differently. Our second research question explores how the concept of the non-threatening refugee was constructed and utilised by the illiberal regime when refugees were not framed as a security or symbolic threat. By employing the concepts of ‘illiberal informational autocracy’ and ‘authoritarian populism’, we aim to contribute to the understanding of how media in illiberal populist settings instrumentalise the refugee issue.

As we have seen, the mimicry of democracy results in a situation whereby some media outlets are independent and have freedom of expression. Therefore, while the paper focuses on the illiberal and populist power’s adaptation and techniques, it will also enlighten the reader on the differences between pro-government media representations and those of the independent media. In fact, using this typology is justified as most media outlets and online portals can be categorised as either belonging to one or the other based on their ownership structure and/or their attitude toward the government, as manifested in their content. This categorisation by ownership and content largely covers the highly polarised media landscape. However, in addition to the clear categories of ‘pro-government propaganda’ and ‘independent’ media, an ‘intermediate’ category is also included in the analysis. It is an online portal with the largest readership, whose ownership structure puts it in the pro-government category but which had some independence in terms of content production (the ‘government-owned non-propaganda’ media).

## Methodology

### *Sampling and analysis*

The media analysis explores the representation of Ukrainian refugees in different media types using descriptive quantitative content analysis combined with qualitative steps in the iterative coding process. The timeframe of the analysis starts at the outbreak of the war (24 February 2022) and lasts until the inauguration of the new president of Hungary (14 May 2022). This period incorporates the national elections on 3 April 2022, in which discourses about the war in Ukraine and refugees were high on the agenda of politicians running for office. The study aims to give a quick snapshot of the representations right after the outbreak of the war.

The selection of the media sources took into account the combination of the *size of the audience/readership*, the *ownership of the media source* and its *significance for creating narratives*. In identifying the relevant sources, we also considered the results of research that indicate that the majority of the population gets information from (one of the) television channels rather than from print or online media.<sup>4</sup> Considering these aspects, we selected the most popular online media platforms and included 3 TV channels.<sup>5</sup>

As the public-service media and some specific commercial, printed and online media outlets operate under strong government control, our primary typology reflected the ownership structure and content thus produced. We used the category of ‘pro-government propaganda outlets’ – government-controlled ownership and content (propaganda) – and ‘independent media’ – no government control of ownership and content (independent). The media landscape is somewhat polarised, with clear pro-government and independent media outlets. However, the most popular and widely read online portal at the time of the analysis, index.hu, had to be categorised as an ‘intermediate’ category (government-controlled ownership but not content), as index.hu was independent but was bought up by an owner close to the government in 2020. The editorial staff resigned as a result of the transaction. The newly recruited editorial staff were trying to resist political pressure. According to investigative journalists, the government still let index.hu produce its own content albeit with some restrictions on covering specific topics.<sup>6</sup> The grouping of the media types is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of the selection and categorisation of media sources included in the content analysis**

<b>Pro-government propaganda media</b>	<b>Independent, government critical</b>	<b>Government-owned non-propaganda media</b>
magyarhaz.net.hu (N=75)	telex.hu (N=58)	index.hu (N=112)
origo.hu (N=33)	24.hu (N=48)	
TV2 news (texts) (N=40)	RTL news (texts) (N=40)	
M1 news (texts) (N=72)		
<b>Total: (N=220)</b>	<b>Total: (N=106)</b>	<b>Total: (N=112)</b>

As for the audience of the selected media, we identified the media sources that have the largest influence, either because they have the largest audiences in their market or because they are a main (re)producer of governmental narratives.<sup>7</sup>

When constructing the dataset, we used the search term ‘refugee’ (*‘menekült’*) in all the media sources, as our focus was explicitly on Ukrainian refugees. This resulted in a total of 2,243 articles. Since we used manual coding, we needed to reduce this dataset. We applied the *constructed week sampling* method (Riffe, Lacy, Fico and Watson 2019),<sup>8</sup> which resulted in a total of N=438 news items.

The content of the news items was coded manually with the participation of 3 coders. Manual coding was chosen over automated coding in order to make our coding process flexible and adaptable. Since the theme of the exclusively positive refugee was entirely new in the media, we employed an iterative approach to developing new codes as we progressed through the analysis. This approach allowed us to capture nuanced, context-specific details. Additionally, the size of our dataset did not warrant the need for automated coding, making manual coding the more appropriate choice. The codebook was prepared in a multi-step, iterative process with the active participation of the members of the research team. We included several codes from earlier codebooks (Bernáth and Messing 2016) and introduced new ones adapted to the current situation.

All articles were coded;<sup>9</sup> one article could have multiple codes within the same category. The data were analysed using SPSS. Frequency distributions of codes were calculated for all media types. Concerning the

coding process, we first identified the dimensions of the media content that were relevant to the 2022 refugee situation. The second step in the process was to apply the coding to our conceptual framework.

### Coding

In our analysis, we operationalise the concepts of informational autocracy and authoritarian populism by juxtaposing codes that refer to different features of the regime. The components of the analytical concepts and the corresponding variables are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Selected components of the analytical concepts and the corresponding variables**

Components of concepts	Variables in the media content analysis
Competence of the leader, the government and government politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topics (those which refer to the importance of the role of the government and the state, a prevalence of these topics)</li> <li>• Views on the refugee policies of the state (positive, negative, neutral)</li> <li>• Actors and speakers (prevalence of mentions of government, government actors and state institutions)</li> <li>• Presence/lack of images of government politicians</li> </ul>
Manipulation of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Terminology used to refer to refugees (refugees vs illegal migrants)</li> <li>• Framing</li> <li>• Personalisation vs non-personalisation of refugees in narrative and visual representations</li> <li>• Voice given or not given to refugees</li> <li>• Presence and lack of the topic and images of the war</li> </ul>
Internal unity, ‘us’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topics (any referring to unity): Sub-Carpathia, helpers</li> <li>• Views about refugee helpers</li> <li>• Actors and voice given to refugee helpers</li> </ul>
Emotional political communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional intensity of representations</li> <li>• Subject of emotional representation</li> </ul>

The first dimension the study explored was the *competence of the leader and the government* (which characterises illiberal informational autocracy), which was captured through *topics* such as the prevalence of the *refugee policies of the state*<sup>10</sup> and *opinions about these policies*<sup>11</sup> as well as through the *prevalence of government actors and state institutions* as actors and speakers.<sup>12</sup>

The second dimension was *manipulation*, which was captured through *dehumanised representations*; employing dehumanisation influences how people perceive refugees and formulate their views about them (Bruneau, Kteily and Laustsen 2018; Esses, Medianu and Sutter 2021). Therefore we identified variables which could be regarded either as dehumanising or as the opposite – humanising. First, the *labelling or the terminology* describing refugees (‘refugee’ vs ‘illegal migrant’) and the *framings* that were used (humanitarian, security, economic and cultural) were regarded as explicit indications of dehumanisation versus humanisation.<sup>13</sup>

There were, however, more implicit indicators. The representation could be interpreted as more humanised if refugees were personalised in some way (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017; Doufesh and Briel 2021). This could appear in *personal stories (topics)* or when *voice is given to refugees* to let them speak on their own behalf.

Apart from these factors, manipulation occurs the most effectively through visual images. The visual representation of refugees is crucial in shaping emotions and shifting public attitudes in either a positive or negative direction (Sohlberg, Esaiasson and Martinsson 2019). Visuals may be either stigmatising or destigmatising due to the strong impacts which images can have (Bullinger, Schneider and Gond 2023). Also, images are very effective at conveying and magnifying the humanised or dehumanised messages used in immigrant and refugee narratives. There are some common techniques that help to achieve the desired impact: humanised representations use close-ups and tracking shots, while a biased selection of images contributes to the visual framing whereby complex realities are reduced to simple messages (Hellmueller and Zhang 2019; Martikainen and Sakki 2021). The scholarly literature identifies that showing groups or crowds of people without the opportunity to identify their faces enhances the threat of the refugee and security framing, as occurred with the visual representation of the refugees in 2015 by the Hungarian propaganda media (Bernáth and Messing 2016; Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017). *Dehumanised vs humanised* portrayals were traced depending on how refugees were portrayed (alone or in crowds) and whether the war from which they were fleeing was referenced in the context of the refugee situation.

Emphasising *internal unity*/'us' was captured in variables referring to the *people mobilised to help*<sup>14</sup> as well as the topic of *Sub-Carpathia*. Helping refugees did unite various segments of society, therefore it seemed justified to use variables related to *helpers* (topics of refugee helpers, opinions about refugee helpers, church vs civil helpers) to reveal how important the aspect of internal unity was in the different media types. Sub-Carpathia, a region of Ukraine home to ethnic Hungarians, is relevant in the national(ist) consciousness as representing the ethnic bonds of all Hungarians.<sup>15</sup>

For populists, the use of emotional language is crucial, so we explored which *emotional representations* of refugees prevailed. We assessed the *emotional intensity of the representations* and the *subject of emotions* (emotional language referring to refugees or helpers) in the different media types. This assessment had two parts. First, articles were coded as either positive, negative or neutral to refugees and the refugee situation regarding their emotional representation (direct emotional language or tone was coded as either positive or negative and, in the lack of such, coded as neutral). Second, the 'subject of emotions' was also analysed, revealing what the emotional representation referred to: either the situation of the refugees or praise for the efforts of the helpers, emphasising the devotion of the Hungarian people to the cause.

The dimensions above were studied to reveal the techniques used by pro-government media and compare them with the representations of the refugee situation in independent and government-owned non-propaganda media. We examined the prevalence of these dimensions in the different media types. Our assumption was that the propaganda media would be significantly different from the two other types.

## Results

In the following section, the results of the content analysis are presented. Table 3 shows the prevalence of variables according to media type. These variables are grouped using the conceptualisation of informational autocracy and authoritarian populism. The components of the concepts are presented – the *competence of the government*, the *manipulation of information*, *internal unity* and *emotional and political communication* – while the differences between pro-government, independent and government-owned non-propaganda media are highlighted.



**Table 3. Prevalence of variables according to media type (per cent) (N=438)**

	Pro-government propaganda media	Independent, government- critical media	Government-owned non-propaganda media
<b>Topic (in % of news items)</b>			
Arrival + travel of people fleeing war in Ukraine	55	57	55
Hungarian government's refugee policy	39	14	17
Domestic and foreign politics	30	18	10
Personalisation of refugees (personal accounts)	6	19	8
Sub-Carpathia	14	2	8
Helping for arriving Ukrainian people	22	10	17
War	32	19	31
Ukrainian refugees in other countries	15	20	22
Integration of refugees	15	12	13
<b>Terminology used in relation to the Ukrainian refugee crisis (in % of news items)</b>			
Refugee	79	77	64
Illegal migrant	2	1	1
Mixed/Other	4	1	2
<b>Frames (in % of news items)</b>			
Humanitarian	90	88	70
Security threat	3	2	-
Economic threat	1	-	-
Cultural/identity threat	-	-	-
None/not identifiable	6	9	31
<b>Opinion about state refugee policies (% of news items)</b>			
Positive	57	7	21
Negative	0	6	3
Neutral	1	3	8
No opinion expressed	45	84	69
<b>Opinion about helpers (% of news items)</b>			
Positive	36	15	27
Negative	-	-	-
Neutral	-	-	1
No opinion expressed	64	85	73
<b>Actors (% of actors)</b>			
Government actors	32	12	16
Foreign politicians and international organisations	7	17	8
Political opposition to the regime	2	1	2
Locals	6	8	5
Refugees	2	15	9
Civil helpers	11	12	15
Church helpers	7	0	6
Experts and celebrities	5	3	7

<b>Speakers</b> (% of speakers)			
Government actors	35	16	14
Foreign politicians and international organisations	31	49	46
Political opposition to the regime	3	2	2
Locals	4	2	3
Refugees	2	9	7
Civil helpers	5	6	5
Church helpers	5	1	3
Experts and celebrities	10	13	9
<b>Emotional representation</b> (% of news items)			
Emotionally intense	44	20	36
<b>Subject of emotional representation</b> (% of news items presenting emotions)			
Refugees	58	92	74
Helpers (Hungarians)	19	0	11
<b>Visual images</b> (% of news items)			
Visual images attached to the text	71	50	61
<b>Content of visual representation</b> (% of news including visuals)			
Politicians	33	2	23
... of whom foreign politicians and international organisations	5	13	8
Refugees	49	74	46
War	7	25	31
<b>Humanised/dehumanised visual representation (number of people)</b> (% of items presenting visuals about refugees) N= 322			
Crowd	40	47	70
Small group	55	86	72
Individual	20	24	13

#### *The competence of the government and government politics*

This dimension was designed to reveal how frequently the competence of the government was emphasised in relation to the different types of media, the topics covered and the speakers, actors and visuals presented.

The topic the most frequently appearing in all media types was the *arrival and travel of people fleeing the war in Ukraine*. While the most frequently represented topic was the same in all media types, the prevalence of the other topics involved important and meaningful differences. The second most frequently recurring topic in the propaganda media was the *Hungarian government's refugee policy* (39 per cent, as opposed to 14 per cent and 17 per cent in the independent and government-owned non-propaganda media). The propaganda media not only talked more about the state's refugee policies but also had a dominantly positive view (57 per cent) of the state's efforts concerning how the refugees were supported. In comparison, the independent and the government-owned non-propaganda media either did not deal with it (84 and 69 per cent) or were much less positive (7 and 21 per cent). *Domestic and foreign politics* was the third most prevalent topic in the propaganda media (30 per cent), while this was less discussed in the other two forms of media (18 and 10 per cent).

Concerning speakers and actors, the propaganda media was dominated by government representatives (35 and 32 per cent). In contrast, the independent and government-owned non-propaganda media featured representatives of the government less frequently (16 and 14 per cent of speakers and 12 and 16 per cent of actors, respectively). The speakers the most frequently appearing in the independent and government-owned non-propaganda media were foreign politicians and international organisations (49 and 46 per cent), who also figured as the second-most-important speakers in the propaganda media (31 per cent). Political opposition to the Orbán regime was almost non-existent in the reporting about refugee matters in all three types of media (3, 2 and 2 per cent).

The visual representations corroborated what the textual analysis revealed. The governmental media included politicians in their images significantly more frequently (33 per cent of the articles had images) than the independent media (2 per cent). The government-owned non-propaganda media was more similar to the propaganda media in this respect (23 per cent).

### *The manipulation of information*

Manipulation was explored by looking at terminology and framing, the level of personalisation of the refugees in topics and visual representations.

The first aspect of the manipulation of information is the labelling or the *terminology used for Ukrainian refugees* in the media. As expected, the Ukrainians fleeing the war were exclusively presented as genuine refugees in all media types (79 per cent in propaganda, 77 per cent in independent and 64 per cent in government-owned non-propaganda media). In the 2022 media coverage of Ukrainian refugees, the term *illegal migrant* appeared only marginally and exclusively concerning immigrants arriving from other – Asian, MENA and African – regions.

Concerning *framing*, the 2022 refugee crisis was dominantly framed as a humanitarian issue (90 per cent in propaganda, 88 per cent in independent and 70 per cent<sup>16</sup> in government-owned non-propaganda media).

The personalised representations of refugees and their stories were covered more intensively in the independent than in the propaganda media (19 vs 6 per cent, respectively). The government-owned non-propaganda media was similar to the propaganda media in this respect (8 per cent). Refugees were *represented* and *given voice* more frequently in the independent (15 and 9 per cent) than in the propaganda media (2 and 2 per cent). Their portrayal in the government-owned non-propaganda media was between the latter 2 types (at 7 and 9 per cent).

We also looked at the visual representations of the refugee situation. The propaganda media used visuals significantly more frequently (71 per cent) in their reports than the independent media outlets (50 per cent). Visual images were also analysed to see whether refugees were shown as individuals/in small groups or large groups (crowds). Most of the reports with visuals attached featured small groups (families) in all 3 media types. When crowds were shown, they were the most frequently images of Ukrainians arriving in Hungary, descending from the train or queuing in train stations, at border crossings or at helpdesks.

A further aspect of the analysis of visual representations was how images of the war appeared. A significant difference in the portrayal of the armed conflict was discovered. The independent and government-owned non-propaganda media showed images of the war (arms, fighting, destroyed buildings, etc.) in 25 and 31 per cent of reports, while such visuals were almost completely lacking in propaganda media (7 per cent). When the war was used as a topic (in the narrative), it was not disregarded; it appeared in 32 per cent of the propaganda media news items (and 31 per cent in government-owned non-propaganda media) as opposed to 19 per cent of independent media stories.

### *Internal unity, 'us'*

Emphasising the unity of the people, creating a narrative of 'us' versus 'them', is a genuine component of authoritarian populist regimes. During the 2022 crisis, despite the ambiguous government communication about the war, the Ukrainian refugees were not presented as an enemy. There were two sets of variables through which the emphasis on the in-group was captured; one was the use of the topic of Sub-Carpathia and the other was the representation of 'the people', who were the refugee-helpers in this case.

The results confirm that the propaganda media paid much more attention to the *Sub-Carpathian region* and the people there or from there than the independent media (14 vs 2 per cent, respectively). The government-owned non-propaganda media also paid more attention to this topic than the independent media (8 per cent).

Our data showed that the topic of *helping Ukrainian people who were arriving* was not very prevalent in any of the media types; it was the fifth most prevalent political topic. Nonetheless, it was more frequently discussed by the propaganda and the government-owned non-propaganda media (22 and 17 vs 10 per cent independent). The results of the *opinions about refugee helpers* revealed that, while helpers were only seen positively, the propaganda media expressed positive views more frequently (57 as opposed to 7 per cent in the independent media). The government-owned non-propaganda media was also more positive than the independent but much less so than propaganda (21 per cent).

### *Emotional political communication*

The presence or absence and the intensity of emotional and political communication were revealed through the variables that directly dealt with emotions. One of the variables measured whether the refugee issue was represented in an *emotionally intense* or relatively neutral manner by using words, adjectives, verbs and phrases referring to strong emotions. It was found that the use of emotionally intense representations in propaganda and government-owned non-propaganda media was significantly greater than in the independent media (44 and 36 per cent vs 20 per cent).

Relying on our close reading and pre-tests, another variable was created to show what the *emotional representations referred to*: the situation of the refugees or praising the efforts of the aid providers and emphasising the devotion of Hungarians to the cause. As the results show, the situation of the refugees was primarily represented in an emotionally intense way in all types of media (in propaganda, 58 per cent; in independent, 92 per cent; and 74 per cent in government-owned non-propaganda). Explicit praise for the Hungarian people as helpers was much less emphasised but was more typical of the propaganda and government-owned non-propaganda media (19 and 11 per cent, respectively, vs 0 in independent media).

It was found that the propaganda media applied a significantly more emotional type of representation than the independent media (44 vs 20 per cent), partly confirming the assumption that the illiberal populist media and political communication are keen to evoke emotions, most probably to mobilise people for political purposes (Bartha *et al.* 2020; Forgas and Lantos 2020; Hann 2019). The government-owned non-propaganda media used emotional representation; however, it was still much less typical than in propaganda media (36 per cent). Two more important findings gave further insight into how emotional politics works. The 'greatness of Hungarians' was emphasised with an emotional tone in the propaganda media (19 per cent as opposed to 0 in independent media) when representing refugee helpers.

## Discussion and conclusion: populist and non-populist representations of the Ukrainian refugees in the illiberal authoritarian political context

The aim of our paper was to examine the distinctive characteristics of media representations of the 2022 refugee crisis within the context of Hungary's illiberal, authoritarian and populist political system. The regime has a specific approach to the media and media messages. Because of its illiberalism, it controls a large part of the media landscape and the media content produced to effectively convey its populist messages. We have focused on exploring how the media operates in an illiberal populist environment in relation to non-demonised and non-securitised refugees.

Our first research question investigated how the positive portrayal of refugees was shaped in 2022 and whether media outlets with diverse political orientations presented refugees in distinct ways. The second question explored how the concept of the non-threatening refugee was framed and leveraged by the illiberal regime, especially when refugees were not depicted as a security or symbolic threat.

Using the concept of *illiberal informational autocracy* (Guriev and Treisman 2020, 2022; Krekó 2022; Susánszky *et al.* 2022) and *authoritarian populism* (Ádám 2019; Szelenyi and Salojärvi 2022), we aimed to explore how the competence of the government, its political representatives and government policies on the one hand and the framing and manipulation of information on the other, had been asserted in the media representation of refugees. We also examined other categories that indicate how the regime's political representatives constantly refer to the internal unity of the nation, as well as how much they adopt emotional political communication (Bartha *et al.* 2020; Forgas and Lantos 2020; Hann 2019). By utilising these concepts, our goal was to contribute to the understanding of whether and how the media, in illiberal populist contexts, instrumentalise the refugee issue.

In this paper, news coverage of refugees in three types of media, differing in ownership and freedom to produce content, was studied using quantitative content analysis. The three types were 'pro-government propaganda', 'government-owned non-propaganda' and 'independent, government-critical' media. We hypothesised that, although the pro-government propaganda media did not create a negative image of Ukrainian refugees, the representations still reflected the political characteristics of the populist and authoritarian regime as framed by the concept of *illiberal informational autocracy* and *authoritarian populism*. To explore these features, we operationalised the two concepts and used some of their characteristics in the coding scheme – (1) the competence of the leader, the government, and its policies; (2) manipulating information; (3) promoting internal unity through an 'us vs. them' narrative; (4) and employing emotional language.

While our assumption was that the 2022 refugee situation was very different from the 2015 situation, based on our findings we argue that some form of politicisation and dehumanisation still characterised the regime's communication but in a more implicit way. As the results have shown, (1) the overemphasis on government actors and their deeds and speeches created the context for the refugee situation. That is to say, the propaganda media framed the refugee question primarily as a political question, making it the focus of its political agenda. The independent and the non-propaganda media focused much less on political actors, their speeches and deeds and even less on government politicians.

(2) Manipulation was operationalised by what framing (humanitarian or others) was used, and by whether refugees were humanised or dehumanised on the one hand – or personalised or non-personalised on the other. We found that refugees were not dehumanised, demonised or negatively labelled because the government did not aim to evoke fear and frustration in the population; no negative labels or framings were used in the pro-government media, however, refugees were largely represented as non-personalised. Dehumanisation and non-personalisation are not the same but may serve similar purposes (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017; Doufesh and Briel 2021):

to prevent empathy towards the refugee. In contrast, the independent media frequently utilised personalised representation by documenting and reporting personal stories and images. The analysis also showed that the pro-government propaganda media largely excluded, whereas the independent and non-propaganda media included, images of the war. This omission visually separated the refugees' arrival from the realities of war.

This non-personalisation in the pro-government media went in parallel with (3) emphasising the unity of the nation. Our analysis revealed that the propaganda media was keener on emphasising the unity of the people and, through the representation of the Sub-Carpathian region, the ethnic bonds of the nation. The refugee helpers were also more frequently represented in the propaganda and government-owned non-propaganda media in a positive way than in the independent media.

(4) Emotional political communication, as found in the analysis, was indeed more important for the propaganda than for the independent media; the refugee situation was addressed in a more sentimental way. However, it was interesting to see that these emotions were expressed either towards 'us' (host-country citizens) who helped 'them' (refugees) or the refugee situation in general – in line with the humanitarian framing – rather than towards individual refugees (i.e., indicating the non-personalisation of refugees). The refugee situation was a cause to which people could feel attached although refugees were not personalised or individualised.

All in all, emotional political communication in the illiberal populist media meant evoking sentiments towards a cause or 'us' but much less towards refugees. Refugees were not a dehumanised or demonised outgroup in the 2022 situation in the populist approach; nonetheless, the fact that they were not individualised prevents or decreases the likelihood of any emotional attachment to them. It could be said that they are not an explicit outgroup but an implicit one. Independent media and, to some extent, non-propaganda media used different representations: the refugee issue was framed much less as a political matter and more as a humanitarian one. Government and government politicians were not portrayed as significant actors; instead, refugees were personalised and emotions were directed towards the refugees rather than the helpers.

In conclusion, we can say that, as suggested by the literature on *informational autocracy* and *authoritarian populism*, the government was the central focus of the representations, with its competence being overemphasised in the propaganda media. This is, however, true in immigrant and refugee media representations in general and was especially true during the 2015 crisis in Hungary. In other words, this dimension alone does not give much insight into the specificities of the 2022 situation. However, the accentuation of the importance of the government created a political context in which the in-group and its activities – helpers and helping refugees – were presented with emotional intensity. This aspect was a new and different element compared to the 2015 crisis, when helpers were represented negatively or were invisibilised (Ádám and Golovics 2022; Benczes and Ságvári 2022; Bernáth and Messing 2016; Bocskor 2018; Georgiou and Zaborowski 2017; Gerő and Sik 2020). The manipulation of information was also present in 2022, albeit implicitly: refugees were not dehumanised – as they were in 2015 – but were, instead, depersonalised. As we have observed, although the political context has changed and Ukrainian refugees were not perceived as enemies or threats, the illiberal regime still presented a more ambiguous image of them compared to the independent or government-owned non-propaganda media.

In summary, in 2022 the government aimed not to incite moral panic – as it had in 2015 – but, rather, to accommodate refugees. To achieve this, positive imagery was employed. However, as our research revealed, government media continued to instrumentalise Ukrainian refugees by emphasising its own political agenda, such as showcasing the government's competence and promoting national unity in assisting the refugees. This approach contrasted with the more humanitarian focus evident in independent and non-propaganda media.

## Notes

1. <https://atlatszo.hu/kozpenz/2020/08/07/grafikonokon-es-diagramokon-mutatjuk-hogyan-alakult-at-a-magyar-media-az-elmult-tiz-evben/>.
2. <https://atlatszo.hu/kozpenz/2020/08/07/grafikonokon-es-diagramokon-mutatjuk-hogyan-alakult-at-a-magyar-media-az-elmult-tiz-evben/>.
3. Hungary was not an important destination for migrants until 2015. However, it has long been a destination for ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries such as Romania, Ukraine, Serbia and Slovakia. This migration was encouraged by government policies supporting Hungarian minorities abroad, including the provision of dual citizenship starting in 2010. Migrants from neighbouring countries, particularly Romania and Ukraine, moved to Hungary for work or education. Hungary also received asylum-seekers from conflict zones such as the Balkans (e.g., the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s). Ethnic Hungarian migration had political significance as it was seen in the conservative political narrative and politics as a tool for nation-building, electoral strategy and regional influence.
4. <https://media1.hu/2021/06/29/az-orszag-kozel-fele-egyaltalan-nem-olvas-hireket-a-neten-az-is-kiderult-kik-nezik-a-kozmediat-a-tv2-t-es-az-rtl-t/>.
5. We included the shortened text format of the news from the TV channels' news reels.
6. <https://www.direkt36.hu/az-index-ostromanak-szinfalak-mogotti-tortenete/>.
7. <https://e-public.gemius.com/hu/rankings/5991>.
8. This means that, from the 3 months included in the dataset, 1 day of the week from each month was selected randomly: e.g., from all the Mondays in 1 month, 1 Monday was randomly selected and all articles from that day were entered into the reduced dataset. The same selection method was applied to every day in every month.
9. To guarantee the validity of the coding, intercoder reliability was measured by the coding of every fifth article by multiple coders.
10. We used an inductive process to identify the topics that fit the 2022 refugee situation. The following topics were found: 'domestic and foreign politics', 'the war', 'Ukrainian refugees in other countries', 'integration of refugees', 'personalisation of refugees (personal stories and accounts)', 'facts about the arrival and travel of the refugees', 'helping people arriving from Ukraine', 'the refugee politics of the government' and 'the sub-Carpathian region' (ethnic Hungarians living in the sub-Carpathian region).
11. The opinions expressed in the articles on state refugee policies were coded as either positive or negative if the opinion was clear and direct; otherwise as neutral.
12. As studies show, while refugees are portrayed as either victims or threats, their voice is hardly heard. It is mainly politicians who are portrayed in the media. Civil actors are not given much voice. We wanted to explore whether the same patterns were at play regarding Ukrainian refugees.
13. Each frame included a description containing keywords and expressions. An article could contain multiple frames.
14. In 2015, helpers were depicted in the pro-government media as part of the 'Soros network', working against the interest of Hungary and the Hungarian people, which was one of the main tropes of the successive hate campaigns launched by the government (Gerő and Sik 2020; Sik and Simonovits 2019). In 2022, the narrative on refugee helpers and the extent of the actual mobilisation of the people were very different.
15. After World War I, Hungary lost a significant portion of its territory, along with the populations residing there, many of whom were ethnic Hungarians. These regions – including Sub-Carpathia – have since remained a central element of Hungarian national identity and nationalism: the unity of the nation

includes ethnic Hungarian in the neighbouring countries who are considered as an integral part of the nation. Since the regime change, it has always been right-wing, conservative parties that have referred to the Hungarian nation as encompassing all ethnic Hungarians, regardless of their country of residence or citizenship.

16. Some 30 per cent lacked any clear framing.

## Funding

Centre for Social Sciences internal research and internship fund. Ref: 01016239.

## Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge and thank Adél Oláh, Bernadett Miskolczi, and András Raptis for their internship at the HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences, during which they worked on this project and coded the media content. Their contribution was instrumental to the research that forms the basis of this paper.

## Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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**How to cite this article:** Vidra Z., Messing V. (2025). The Representation of the Arrival of Ukrainian Refugees in the Hungarian Media in 2022. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review*, 30 April, doi: 10.54667/ceemr.2025.08.