



Mariana Kitsa

Media Coverage and Opinion-Making: A Case Study of the Representation of Ukraine and Ukrainians in Rzeczpospolita and Gazeta Wyborcza During the Russian- Ukrainian War

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of research on media coverage of current affairs related to Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Polish newspapers *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*. These are two of the most influential media outlets in Poland, so their coverage is of significant importance for Polish-Ukrainian relations. To investigate how the press can influence public opinion in Poland by spreading different narratives, a case study was conducted. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were used to examine the image of Ukraine and Ukrainians in Polish media. The research timeframe covered almost three years, from the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, to the end of 2024 (December 31, 2024). A content analysis was performed on the total number of publications in the selected media to identify those dedicated to Ukraine or Ukrainians. In total, 807 publications from *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza* were analyzed. These publications were selected for qualitative research based on the following criteria: date of publication, headline, genre, topic, the presence or absence of illustrations, and the connotation of the publication in relation to its attitude toward Ukraine.

KEY WORDS

Gazeta Wyborcza. Media. Poland. *Rzeczpospolita*. Ukraine. War.

1 Introduction

The media plays a significant role in creating the attitude of its audience to current international, political, economic, and social events, to other social groups and nationalities. Palczewski (2018) emphasizes that modern media influence the audience and electorate as well by using such approaches as gatekeeping and framing. In particular, they form agenda setting and choose what events to make more noticeable than others. That is why the research on media coverage of current affairs in Ukraine and the news about Ukrainians in Polish media is of crucial importance.

In the modern world, the decisions of authorities are deeply dependent on the electorate; and the attitude of voters is formed by the media coverage of different topics in a vast majority of cases. So, between the media and political decisions, an invisible chain is formed: media coverage – an attitude of the electorate – the behaviour of authorities – and official decisions. Moreover, the media coverage in this context includes framing, gatekeeping, and agenda setting. So, what the media publish depends on steps which will be made by authorities in the resolution of the issue. While those topics and news that stay out of the media attention can remain on the stand-by status. Poland, as the closest Ukrainian neighbour and an ally in the Russian war, cannot only provide its support, but also lobby the interests of Ukraine in the European Union and NATO. However, these steps depend on its internal policy, which in turn is determined by the opinion of taxpayers. The chosen media *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* are two of the most relevant opinion-making media in Poland, so these newspapers' coverage of certain topics is of significant importance for the Polish-Ukrainian relationships. On the other hand, the research will not only help to understand the tone of voice in these media regarding Ukraine and Ukrainians, but it also aims to find out if the political, economic, or social affairs influence the connotation of the materials in Poland's most reputable media and what consequences it may lead to. Moreover, in the time of war, it is obvious that interested political groups can try to provide their influence on the affairs abroad by conducting psychological and informational operations. This is one more issue that is relevant to this research.

2 Methodology

To find out how the press influences public opinion in Poland by spreading different narratives about Ukraine and Ukrainians, a case study was conducted on two popular and well-known Polish newspapers, *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Other popular newspapers in Poland include *Super Express* and *Fakt. The Daily*, but these are tabloids. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.), a tabloid is a type of newspaper that has small pages, many pictures, and short, simple reports, often focusing on sensational stories about celebrities, crime, or scandals. This research aimed to examine quality press, which publishes journalistic materials in different genres, particularly analytical ones, without a tendency toward sensationalism. Therefore, *Super Express* and *Fakt. The Daily* were not included in this study. *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza* are known as opinion newspapers, or so-called reputable newspapers with an independent stance toward political parties (Rulka, 2007). According to a study by the National Media Institute, 65.7% of Poles declare that they read the press at least once a quarter (which amounts to around 24 million readers). The older the age group, the more popular the press becomes. Among the oldest Poles, the percentage of press readers is over 75% (Krajowy Instytut Mediów, 2024). In the IMM ranking of the most frequently quoted press titles in Poland in 2023, *Rzeczpospolita* took first place (with over 33 thousand cross-media references), followed by *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Puzio, 2024). Therefore, these media are among the most relevant opinion-shaping dailies in Poland. This is why they were chosen for this research.

To examine the image of Ukraine and Ukrainians in Polish media, qualitative and quantitative analyses were used. The research timeframe covered almost three years, from the beginning of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, to the end of 2024 (December 31, 2024). Each printed issue of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* was examined manually. From the total number of publications, a content analysis was conducted to single out those materials dedicated to Ukraine or Ukrainians as the protagonists of the publications. At this stage, deductive coding was applied. The following initial codes were established: Ukraine, Ukrainian, war, victim, refugee, mother, threat, entrepreneur, border, battlefield, aid, and solidarity. After that, manual coding was done to tag excerpts of text under the relevant codes. Based on the initial coding, a total of 807 publications in the printed newspapers *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* were singled out for in-depth analysis.

These publications were chosen for qualitative research based on such features as the date of publication, heading, genre, thematic subject, the presence or absence of illustrations, and the connotation (tone of voice) of the publication regarding Ukraine. At this stage, axial coding (connections between themes) and selective coding (refining and structuring main findings) were applied. This approach allowed for identifying connections between political, economic, and social affairs in Poland and the tone of voice in publications regarding Ukraine and Ukrainians. The connotation was classified as follows: positive – if the tone was friendly toward Ukrainians and depicted them or the country of Ukraine in a positive light. Such publications are likely to evoke positive emotions among readers. The next gradation was neutral. This is typically intrinsic to official publications about new government decisions, etc. Neutral publications also include those showing different points of view and balancing opinions with various tones of voice. Meanwhile, materials with negative connotations are expected to evoke negative emotions among readers. Such materials include, for example, publications depicting criminal or unethical behavior by Ukrainians, corruption in Ukraine, or fraudulent activities by Ukrainians. The results of the content analysis were entered into a table. After that, quantitative coding was performed. The frequency of topics in the printed materials was counted, and the proportion of positive versus negative portrayals of Ukraine and Ukrainians in each newspaper was compared. Based on the findings, a comparative analysis was provided, describing the changes in the depiction of Ukraine and Ukrainians in Polish media over nearly three years of war. These changes included topics, genres, and tone of voice. Based on this computation, key events that could influence the image of Ukraine and Ukrainians in Polish media were outlined, and the reasons and consequences of these changes were examined. In the discussion and conclusion sections, it was analyzed how coding categories relate to broader ideological or political biases. The research hypothesis was that the image of Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Polish media could have changed due to political, economic, and social reasons. The hypothesis was also that the Polish public and Poland have grown tired of the war in Ukraine. The research questions were the following:

RQ1: Was the full-scale war in Ukraine consistently depicted in the Polish media from its beginning until the end of 2024?

RQ2: What topics, genres, and tone of voice were presented in the publications about Ukraine in Polish media during the chosen period?

RQ3: How has the image of Ukraine and Ukrainians changed over the past three years?

RQ4: What events could have influenced the media coverage of Ukraine in Poland?

3 Results

3.1 An Overview of the Polish Media Market through the European Framework

In Poland, substantial injections of foreign capital and ownership prerogatives have transformed the mass media since 1989, with involvement from France, Italy, Switzerland, Norway, Germany, and other countries. This has affected the range as well as the style of both the printed and broadcast media (Goban-Klas, 1996). Nevertheless, Dobek-Ostrowska declares that interpretation and political commentary dominate reporting, and in this sense, patterns of Polish journalism are closer to the French and Italian commentary-oriented political reporting than to the news and information-based Anglo-American model, although Polish journalists are not as strongly opinionated and politically engaged as, for example, Greek journalists. Throughout Poland's twenty years of democracy, political leaders, presidents, and governments have aimed to secure media control. Polish parties do not own media enterprises, although some do have relationships with public broadcast media controlled by politically affiliated broadcasting bodies and with the quality newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*. While *Gazeta Wyborcza* may back a favored party, this support is conditional (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011). At the same time, Konarska states that, undoubtedly, the state's role in the functioning of media systems is increasing, and political parallelism is not only evident, but is even becoming obvious. The ruling elites make no secret of their plans to intervene in the state's media policy, justifying these actions on the grounds of a narrowly defined national interest, which is interpreted by party leaders' statements (Konarska, 2022). According to a report from the monitoring of media pluralism, reporting on the filtering and removal of online content has improved in Poland. However, other issues pertaining to freedom of expression remain problematic. One of the most concerning trends has been the disproportionate balance between the protection of freedom of expression and dignity, which has skewed toward the latter, especially regarding the political elite (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2023). Moreover, Poland also scored high risk in the independence and effectiveness of media authority indicators, and the implementation of the rules on media ownership concentration has been strongly debated. Furthermore, there are accusations that such concentration processes are politically influenced. Gálik et al. (2024) declare that in Poland and Hungary, media freedom has been recently challenged by illiberal turns in media regulation or the governmental capture of media ownership and control. The Polish case also illustrates highly ideological-political media landscapes with MAIs, such as codes of ethics and journalistic professionalization, as subjects (and the core) of a deeper societal and cultural polarization.

Nevertheless, when speaking about the media policy of Polish media during the Russian-Ukrainian war, Poland is largely immune to narratives about the Ukraine war and the Ukrainian state imposed by official and unofficial actors connected to the Russian authorities and their supporters (Wenzel et al., 2023). To better understand the reasons for this phenomenon, the nature and peculiarities of the media market in Poland, as well as the attitudes of the audience, should be considered. The immigration crisis is not a new issue in Poland or Polish media. For example, Zalas-Kamińska (2020) declares that the immigration crisis in Europe proved that issues concerning foreigners, migrants, and refugees became a prominent topic in Polish political communication, especially because the crisis occurred during the Polish parliamentary elections (spring 2015), and it was incorporated into the political campaigns.

According to her analysis, refugees and immigrants are depicted in Polish media as thieves, kidnappers, terrorists, etc. In her opinion, such media images of immigrants led to the polarization of Polish society and the electorate. In this case, the immigration crisis became an element of the Polish-Polish war, with hate speech directed at refugees. The situation with Ukraine and Ukrainians differs in several respects. One difference is that Ukrainians are Europeans and Slavs, like the Polish people are, so they share similar appearance, cultural traits, and behavioral

habits. Another difference is that Ukrainians often traveled to Poland as wage earners, so their presence in Poland is not new to its inhabitants. Additionally, Russia is geographically close to Ukraine, and if Ukraine loses, Poland could be next or could have a belligerent country on its border. Therefore, the attitude of Poles toward Ukrainian refugees has from the very beginning differed from that in 2015.

Goban-Klas (2024) explains that the conflict in Ukraine, in the context of the military activities on the eastern border, is not only a military conflict but also an information battle. In Ukraine, the disposition toward the Ukrainian authorities is not contingent upon the perception of digital media content. The willingness to continue the fight correlates with the awareness of the war and domestic politics through digital media. The idea of future peace in public opinion is closely related to the concept of justice and victory broadcast in online media (Marykhovskiy et al., 2024). Thus, information asymmetry and the role of information technologies have become significant elements in military strategy and international policy.

3.2 Gazeta Wyborcza and Rzeczpospolita: Key Highlights

To outline the specific features of the provided case study it is worth mentioning the main peculiarities of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* newspapers. *Gazeta Wyborcza* is a nationwide daily Polish newspaper with a current print circulation of approximately 80 thousand copies and almost 300 thousand digital subscribers. The first issue of *Gazeta Wyborcza* was printed on the 8 May 1989. It had 8 columns. In the editor's column, it was declared that the main purpose of this newspaper is the spreading of information. Also, the deep cooperation with the political party Solidarity was underlined. This fact is confirmed also by a photo of Lech Walesa on the first page of the newspaper. It was accomplished by a slogan –“There is no freedom without solidarity” (Mielczarek, 2012). This dictum is printed on the first page of the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* until nowadays. At the end of April 2020, the daily's publisher announced that *Gazeta Wyborcza* had over 240,000 regular readers who subscribe to the electronic edition of the newspaper and at the end of December 2021, this number exceeded 280,000. In June 2022, there were 290,000 electronic subscribers. Daily sales of the paper edition in the first quarter of 2023 amounted to approx. 42,000 copies. The daily's larger circulation includes, among others, gas stations or Poczta Polska branches. Moreover, it is declared that in 2020, *Gazeta Wyborcza* was the 10th most frequently read daily in Europe (Kurdupski, 2020). In 2001, a website with the content of *Gazeta Wyborcza* was launched with up-to-date information. As of today, on the resource one can find materials that are published in the printed version and additional content that is only available online. In addition, readers of the publication have the opportunity to purchase a paid subscription and get access to all publications and the archive. Also, this media has its mobile application for smartphones.

Rzeczpospolita is also a nationwide daily Polish newspaper with a printed circulation of about 65,000 copies and more than 200,000 digital subscribers. It has a liberal-conservative orientation. This newspaper started in 1982. *Rzeczpospolita* was the first Polish newspaper which published official resolutions, decrees, and decisions of the government (Troszyński, 2021). In 2016, the newspaper had 274,000 readers daily, 75% of whom had higher education and almost 87% had permanent jobs (9% were pensioners, and almost 2% were students). More than three-quarters of the readers were people who held key positions at enterprises, specialists in certain fields, and represented the majority of the readership – directors, high-level government officials, managers, as well as technical workers and employees of administrations. More than half of the readers of *Rzeczpospolita* at that time were managers of various levels (Stępińska et al., 2016).

The content of the newspaper is divided into sections: the main general information (about important current events), the economic “Economy and the Market”, the legal “Everyday Law”, and the regional “Life of the Regions”. At the same time, on the pages of the publication, one can find news about culture, sports, science, etc. The newspaper is published 6 times a week. Every Saturday, the weekend magazine “Plus Minus” is published. It contains materials dedicated to literature and moral character. Mostly, such issues are filled with essays, reports, columns, and reviews. In addition, *Rzeczpospolita* has many supplements that are available to those who subscribe to the newspaper. Moreover, the publication has weekly supplements dedicated to the latest technologies, finance, construction, the commercial real estate market, and historical analyses. Today, the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* remains one of the most famous and quoted newspapers in Poland. In addition, their website is also quite popular. The media also offers its application for smartphones.

Gazeta Wyborcza and *Rzeczpospolita* are known as newspapers of opinion, or so-called reputable newspapers with an independent profile toward political parties (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). So, it is obvious that these media outlets immediately reacted to the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

3.3 Ukraine at War: The Coverage of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* in 2022

The beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022 became a central topic in most world media, and Polish media was no exception. The first publication in *Gazeta Wyborcza* about the war in Ukraine appeared on 25 February 2022 with the headline ‘This is the war’ and a photo of injured Ukrainian women. On the top of the publication, there was the phrase “We are with you” with the slogan of this newspaper “There is No Freedom without Solidarity”.

At the top of the front page, a ribbon in blue and yellow was printed, and on the next page, a statement read: “We all are Ukrainians”. The next few editions of the newspaper also featured a blue and yellow ribbon on the front page, along with a note that more information on the full-scale war in Ukraine was available in the online version of *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

The most frequently covered subtopics related to the war in Ukraine were the situation on the battlefield, military support, and social and humanitarian aid. The genres of the publications varied depending on the subtopic. For example, news about military support and the battlefield situation was mostly written in an informational style, in the form of news articles. However, reports from the battlefield were also included. Meanwhile, subtopics about the lives of Ukrainian refugees were often presented as feature stories or interviews.

For instance, on 28 February 2022, an interview was published with a Ukrainian refugee woman under the headline “A Place Where Everything Starts from the Very Beginning”. It was a conversation with Tetiana, a Ukrainian woman who fled with three children. She stayed at a reception center for refugees and spoke about her psychological and physical condition. The interview was accompanied by a photo of Tetiana with her daughter. The tone of such publications was positive, which can be identified through qualitative analysis. The Ukrainian refugee was portrayed as both a victim and a refugee mother.

In general, between late February and March 2022, the majority of *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s publications about Ukraine focused on humanitarian, psychological, and social support for Ukrainian refugees. Ukrainians were referred to as guests in Poland, a theme that was highlighted throughout the coverage. For example, articles were published with headlines such as “How to Prepare for Ukrainian Guests” (Czyżewski, 2022), “How Can We Care for Our Guests” (*Gazeta Wyborcza* 2022a), and “Congratulations at Home” (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022b). The connotation of these media materials was generally positive.

In total, 162 materials about Ukraine and Ukrainians were published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in 2022 (Figure 1). This count includes publications where Ukraine or Ukrainians were the central focus of the material – for example, reports on battlefield events, humanitarian or military aid provided to Ukraine, and stories about Ukrainian refugees. Publications about international affairs that did not primarily focus on Ukraine and only mentioned it in passing were not included in this count.

The majority of the publications (81) covered the situation on the battlefield. Most were written in informative or analytical genres, while some were reprints from other international media in the reportage genre. The tone of these publications remained positive throughout 2022, featuring information about the weapons used, Ukraine's successes on the battlefield, and the heroism of Ukrainian fighters.

The next section of publications focused on social issues and humanitarian aid (47 articles). These were written in the form of problem essays or portrait sketches. For example, in the *Gazeta Wyborcza* issue from 4 – 5 June 2022, the weekly supplement *Free Saturday* published a problem essay titled “Let's Give Ukrainians Polish Citizenship” (Bachmann, 2022). The main narrative of the publication proposed granting Ukrainians Polish citizenship for several reasons: first, it would allow them to decide whether to return to Ukraine or stay in Poland; second, it would enable them to make decisions regarding their children's education, employment, and other aspects of life.

Among publications on social topics, special attention was given to Ukrainian pupils. The connotation of such materials was consistently positive, emphasizing that Ukrainian children require psychological rehabilitation, are welcomed in Polish schools, and that all necessary conditions for their integration into Polish society would be provided.

However, when it came to Ukrainian refugees in general, the tone of publications was not always positive. From the beginning of the war until the end of 2022, a shift in attitudes toward Ukrainians was observed, moving from positive to neutral and, in some cases, negative (2 publications). This change in connotation became noticeable between late June and early July 2022. Such publications did not reflect the opinions of journalists or experts but instead reported on anti-Ukrainian sentiments emerging in Poland.

For example, in the *Rzeszów Weekly* (a regional supplement of *Gazeta Wyborcza*) on 15 July 2022, a report titled “Nationalistic Circus” described a rally in Rzeszów where Polish nationalists gathered, calling Ukrainians the enemy due to the presence of Ukrainian flags in Poland and the large amount of financial aid being allocated to Ukrainians (Kruk, 2022).

Later, on 28 December 2022, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published a problem article about the worsening attitudes of Poles toward Ukrainians. The main focus was on the increasing resentment among Poles, who opposed the extension of social benefits for Ukrainians, such as medical care and financial assistance (Karwowska, 2022). As a continuation of this topic, on 30 December 2022, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published a correspondence discussing how Ukrainians in Poland felt unwelcome, leading many refugees to consider returning home (Bolanowski, 2022).

The next section of publications focused on economic issues (17 articles). From the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war and throughout March 2022, economic publications primarily addressed the threat of hunger and global instability caused by the war in Ukraine. Another key topic was the need to lift the ban on Sunday trade due to the large number of refugees arriving in major cities on weekends.

Starting in April 2022, the focus of economic publications shifted to Ukrainian grain exports. For example, on 20 April 2022, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published a report titled “Kołobrzeg is the Window to the World for Ukrainian Goods” (Kraśnicki, 2022), which discussed the arrival of 5,000 tons of Ukrainian corn at the port of Kołobrzeg via rail. The tone of this publication was positive, highlighting the opportunities and benefits for the Polish city due to this trade.

However, by June 2022, the discourse on Ukrainian grain took on a different tone. In the 13 – 16 June 2022 issue, a report stated that over 20 million tons of grain were stored in Ukrainian silos. On 13 July 2022, an article titled “Ukrainian grain deliveries have finally started via the Danube. But will this help us avoid a catastrophe?” was published, reporting that Ukraine had signed an agreement with Turkey to resume grain exports. The connotation of this publication was neutral (Kokot, 2022).

On 5 September 2022, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published a long-form problem article titled “The Harvest and the Curse of the Ukrainian Harvest” (Naszkowska, 2022). The article discussed Poland’s lack of infrastructure to handle large volumes of Ukrainian grain, stating that it was nearly impossible to “even cram Ukrainian grain into the wagons”, and suggesting that Russia might profit more from the situation than Ukraine. While the article maintained a neutral tone, the text implied that Poland was unable to store Ukrainian grain and possibly did not see it as a justified effort.

Another thematic focus of publications about Ukraine in *Gazeta Wyborcza* was international and Polish-Ukrainian relations (14 articles). For example, one information report discussed how more and more Poles want NATO troops in Ukraine (Szeptycki, 2022), while another explored what Europeans and Poles are most afraid of in the context of the war in Ukraine (the use of nuclear weapons). Additionally, it was reported that most people believe Ukraine will have to cede territories to Russia, among other topics. On 17 November 2022, a new issue within this theme emerged – a rocket exploded in the Polish city of Przewodów, killing two people. The “Opinion” column included the headline, “It Was Not an Attack on Poland”, followed by the phrase “Rocket of Ukraine, Russia’s Fault”. The author argued that, had it not been for Russia, the tragedy would not have occurred, emphasizing that Russia uses such incidents for its propaganda. The connotation of these publications was positive and neutral (merely informing about the event).

The next publication on this topic appeared on 21 November 2022, in the form of a commentary. The article was titled, “That Missile is a Test for New Polish-Ukrainian Relations” (Beniuszys, 2022). The tone of the commentary was positive toward Ukraine.

Also, in 2022, there were several cultural articles related to Ukraine or Ukrainians. For example, it was reported that Oksana Zabuzhko would receive an award in Kraków, named after Stanisław Vincenza (Pitoń, 2022). There was also a mention of a ballet performance from Kyiv, funded by the Russian Culture Fund as part of a Polish-Ukrainian project. Additionally, there were informational articles about documentary films on the war in Ukraine, such as *Superheroes* and *Human to Human* – a 10-episode series (Drózdź, 2022). The connotation of these publications was always positive from the Ukrainian perspective.

Rzeczpospolita also actively covered topics about Ukraine and Ukrainians from the beginning of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022. Just like in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita* published its first article about the war on 25 February 2022. On the front page, a photo of an injured Ukrainian woman accompanied the headline, “Bloody Putin’s Conquest” (Bielecki, 2022). A blue-and-yellow ribbon appeared under the newspaper’s title with the slogan, “In Solidarity with Ukraine”. During the first week of the war, the main topics in the newspaper were refugee aid, humanitarian assistance, the situation on the Polish-Ukrainian border, and events on the battlefield.

Starting on 2 March 2022, *Rzeczpospolita* began publishing articles about Ukrainian refugees. One such article, titled “Escape from Ukraine, What’s Next?” (Gorynia & Sitek, 2022), was written from an economic perspective. The publication argued for the necessity of a long-term economic strategy for Ukrainian refugees in Poland. The tone of the article was positive, suggesting concrete and clear actions for dealing with the presence of Ukrainians in Poland.

Thematic diversity of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians in *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022; %

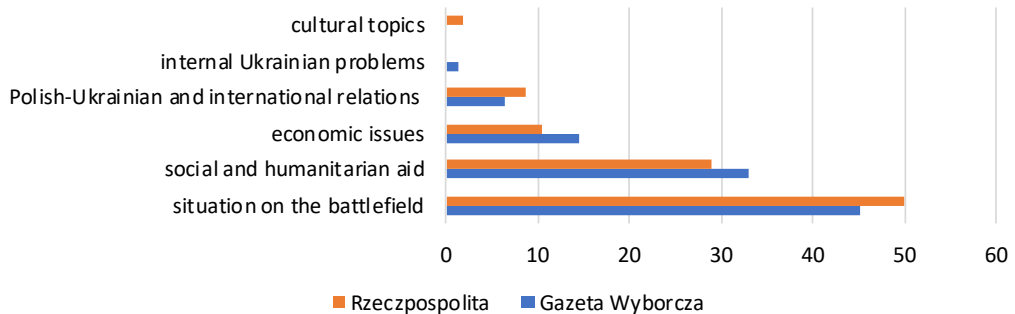


FIGURE 1: *Thematic diversity of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians in Rzeczpospolita and Gazeta Wyborcza, 2022*

Source: own processing, 2025

During 2022, the number and topics of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians varied. In total, there were 160 such media materials (Figure 1). The vast majority of these publications were dedicated to the situation on the battlefield (72). These materials were written in informative genres, with additional reportage from the frontline and interviews. Among all the materials on the military topic, positive connotations and support for Ukrainian fighters were evident from both journalists and experts. There was no doubt in the publications that Poland, the European Union, and the USA should help Ukraine win the war.

The next thematic group of publications focused on Ukrainian refugees and humanitarian aid (53). These materials can be grouped as social topics with subtopics such as support for refugees, humanitarian aid for those who had already escaped and for those still in Ukraine, legal issues concerning the stay of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, and the integration of children and pupils into Polish schools. These publications were often accompanied by photos of Ukrainian refugees with children at the border, at train stations, etc. New programs and opportunities were discussed.

After 3 – 4 months from the start of the war, more materials on legal topics were published. For example, articles discussed how to help refugees, how to shelter them, and what benefits Poles could receive for doing so, as well as the rights of Ukrainians already living in Poland. There were also discussions about the labor market – how to employ Ukrainians, on what basis, etc. These publications had positive connotations. Examples include: “The Education of Ukrainians Should Be Properly Confirmed” (Ćwiek, 2022), “Ukrainians Should Earn the Same Salary as Poles” (Kacprzak & Zawadka, 2022), and “Ukrainian Refugees Want to Work in Poland” (Rzemek, 2022).

The economic topic was also covered on the pages of the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* in 2022. There were 23 publications on topics such as investments, the labor market, grain, trade with Ukraine, the development of Ukrainian startups, and more. The first materials on such topics appeared in the third month after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, in April and May 2022. One of the issues covered was the labor market’s struggle due to the lack of Ukrainian men working in Poland. The publication was written as a problem analytical article. In conclusion, it was stated that Ukrainians could be replaced by men from Asia and South America. The connotation of this publication was neutral.

Another subtopic in the economic category was the development of Ukrainian startups in Poland. For example, in the publication under the heading “A safe haven on the Vistula for startups fleeing war” (Duszczuk, 2022), it was highlighted that Ukraine has many highly educated specialists in the IT field, who are ready to start their own businesses in Poland or replace

the existing ones from Ukraine. The tone of this publication was positive and highlighted the benefits for Poland and Poles from such integration.

One more subtopic that began in 2022 and continued into 2024 was grain transportation, which later escalated into a crisis. *Rzeczpospolita* highlighted this issue in June 2022. For example, on June 20, an analytical comment was published under the heading “Grain from Ukraine should not be distributed in Poland”. The publication stated that Ukrainian grain should reach the African region, where it is in high demand, but not be sold in Poland (Kolanko & Skwirowski, 2022). The connotation of this material was neutral, though one can notice the beginning of concern by Polish authorities about the trade of Ukrainian grain. Later, on 12 July 2022 (printed version on 13 July), the tone of voice in *Rzeczpospolita* about grain changed to negative. For example, in the publication “Transit through Poland is not working, cheaper grain is worrying”, it was stated: “The pessimistic scenario is coming true: Poland and the European Union declared their support for grain exports from Ukraine, but in the meantime, it is spreading unchecked across the border provinces and driving down prices there...”¹ (Ptak-Iglewska, 2022, para. 1).

The theme of Ukrainian grain exports continued into the autumn. For example, in the publication under the heading “Ukrainian grain is exported via Poland via a drip”, it was written about the fact that there were problems with exports from both sides. Export by rail was very slow due to a lack of platforms. At the same time, Poles were finding undeclared goods among the grain. Along with this, in the first half of 2022, the number of Ukrainian exports to Poland increased by 57% (Woźniak, 2022a).

Later in 2022, the subtopic of Ukrainian grain was covered less frequently in *Rzeczpospolita*, while publications with more positive connotations began to appear. For example, trade between Poland and Ukraine rapidly increased from both sides (Woźniak, 2022b), and Polish companies were encouraged to invest in Ukraine and enter the Ukrainian market (Woźniak, 2022c).

International and Polish-Ukrainian relations were also covered in *Rzeczpospolita*. There were 10 publications on such topics. For example, on 17 November, a publication titled “Now is not the time to lament Ukraine” (Szuldrzyński, 2022) was published, discussing the missile that fell in Przewodów. This material, in the form of an analytical comment, had a neutral connotation, emphasizing that the weakness of the state’s military defense was evident, that Russia is not actually attacking NATO and has no plans to do so, but that Ukraine is defending itself and needs help in this. At the same time, in the next issue, there was an expert column stating that Ukrainian President V. Zelensky is deliberately claiming the missile was Russian, even though he has no relevant evidence, and that he aims to drag the West into the war.

Another conflict situation in Ukrainian-Polish relations was covered on 20 December 2022, regarding the explosion of a grenade launcher in the Polish commandant’s office of General Szymczyk. He had brought the grenade launcher as a gift from Ukraine. It was supposed to be decommissioned, but it exploded. The material was balanced, and there were no accusations from the Ukrainian side, although it was stated that the grenade launcher was not in use and was disposable. The problem article raised the question of how this grenade launcher was transported across the border.

Two more publications in *Rzeczpospolita* were dedicated to internal Ukrainian problems, such as corruption and mobilization. One of them was published at the end of 2022 (December 27, in the printed version on December 28) under the heading “Not All Ukrainians Defend Their Homeland”, which stated that not everyone is defending the homeland. This problem article addressed draft evaders who pay thousands of dollars to avoid mobilization. The material

¹ Author’s note: The text of the quotation in the original language: “Spełnia się pesymistyczny scenariusz: Polska i Unia Europejska deklarowały pomoc w eksporcie zboża z Ukrainy, tymczasem ono bez kontroli rozlewa się po nadgranicznych województwach i zaniża tam ceny. Rząd powołał zespół, Bruksela zorganizowała korytarze solidarnościowe, ale trudno mówić o spektakularnej poprawie sytuacji” (Ptak-Iglewska, 2022, para. 1).

included a comment from a Ukrainian expert from the Razumkov Center, stating that such people are not patriots, but deserters who face criminal liability (Szozzyn, 2022).

In general, 2022 was a year of good Polish-Ukrainian relations, as depicted in the publications of two of the most influential newspapers in Poland – *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*. The vast majority of publications were dedicated to events on the battlefield, economic issues, and international relations. The connotation of the publications remained mostly positive regarding Ukraine, but from the second half of 2022, the number of materials with a positive tone decreased, while more publications with neutral connotations appeared.

When comparing the depiction of Ukraine and Ukrainians in 2022 between *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*, some differences can be noticed. Firstly, in *Rzeczpospolita*, there was more diversity in topics about Ukraine and Ukrainians. In particular, publications about Ukrainian startups, investments by Polish companies in Ukraine, and the influence of the war in Ukraine on the labor market were covered. Conflict issues, such as the missile explosion and grain were covered differently. *Gazeta Wyborcza* depicted these topics mostly in a positive light, while *Rzeczpospolita* presented them in neutral or even negative terms (1 publication). However, by the end of 2022, the topic of grain was almost exhausted, and the focus shifted to the attitude of Poles toward Ukrainians, and their readiness and willingness to help refugees from Ukraine.

3.4 Military Aid, Grain Crisis, and Volyn Tragedy: The Coverage of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* in 2023

In 2023, Ukraine remained present in the news coverage of Polish media, but less frequently than in 2022. In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, there were 135 publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians (Figure 2). Among them, 36 materials were dedicated to the situation on the battlefield. These were primarily news about changes on the frontline and developments from both sides. The genre diversity did not change compared to the previous year. News notes, correspondences, and sketches predominated in this thematic category, while there were also some reportages and problem-oriented essays.

The next thematic group was military aid for Ukraine (23 publications). In 2022, we considered this topic within the context of the battlefield situation, but in 2023, it was singled out as a separate topic because these publications focused on plans and the usefulness of different types of weapons produced by various countries. For example, there were reports on German rockets like Taurus, American Atacms, and their impact on Ukrainian defense, as well as discussions on the need for F-16 planes. These materials had neutral connotations and were generally discreet.

In the last quarter of 2023, publications about the threat to support from the USA appeared in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. For example, on 4 October 2023, a full-page problem article titled “Dark Clouds over Support for Ukraine” was published. It covered disputes in Congress, Robert Fico’s electoral victory in Slovakia, a cooling of relations between Warsaw and Kyiv, and Hungary’s blockade of a tranche of aid to Ukraine. “All of this casts a shadow over the unity of the West on the issue of Ukraine. The White House assures that fears are unfounded”² (Czarnecki, 2023, p. 10)

The social topic was also presented on the pages of *Gazeta Wyborcza*. In 2023, there were 28 such publications. These materials mostly consisted of sketches about Ukrainian refugees, their desire to return home, limitations on the assistance they receive, and data on the number of Ukrainians who had already found jobs in Poland. Special attention was given to the education of Ukrainian children. In the problem articles on this subtopic, it was mentioned that there are pupils who do not attend either Polish or Ukrainian schools. As a result, the position of the

² Author’s note: The text of the quotation in the original language: “Wszystko to rzuca cień na jedność Zachodu w sprawie Ukrainy. Biały Dom zapewnia, że obawy są niesłuszne” (Czarnecki, 2023, p. 10).

Polish government and social organizations was to make school education compulsory for Ukrainian children staying in Poland. The tone of voice of these materials was mostly neutral.

Economic topics were presented in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in different ways. On the one hand, there were informative publications about the strikes and blockades on the Polish-Ukrainian border (17 April 2023). On the other hand, there were problem-oriented articles that refuted the claims that Ukrainian grain was of poor quality and highlighted the potential profit for Polish farmers from processing Ukrainian grain, raspberries, etc. It is clear that the editorial office of the newspaper had taken a specific stance on this economic issue. They accused the political party PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) and framed the situation as a pre-election strategy by politicians. For example, in the article “Electoral Grain”, it is stated that “the government does not want to solve the problems of farmers; instead, it wants to redirect their anger towards Ukraine” (Naszkowska, 2023, p. 3).

In this context, another thematic category was also highlighted – the Polish-Ukrainian relationship, which was treated separately from international relations (as it was in 2022). The journalists of *Gazeta Wyborcza* directly emphasized that it was the political party PiS that tended to undermine Polish-Ukrainian relations. Most of these publications appeared in the autumn of 2023, and a total of 12 such publications were observed. For example, in a piece from 22 September (Kubik, 2022) it is argued that there is a strategy of anti-Ukrainianism, claiming that PiS is fueling anti-Ukrainian sentiment. On 12 October (Wysocka-Schnepf, 2023), there was a publication about relations with Ukraine and the Polish “gene of destruction”, stating how PiS was “doing everything to destroy relations between Ukraine and Poland”, among other points.

The topic of international relations between Ukraine and other countries was covered in 11 publications. The primary focus of these publications was on Ukraine’s prospects for joining NATO and becoming a member of the European Union. The connotation of these publications was always positive toward Ukraine, with the assertion that a strong Ukraine in NATO and the EU would also benefit Poland. There was also a reprint of an analytical comment by a Ukrainian politician Yulia Tymoshenko under the heading “What Ukrainians Can Bring to NATO in the Future”. In the publication, it is stated that “Ukraine has one of the strongest armies in the world, and it will definitely strengthen NATO”³ (Tymoshenko, 2023, p. 25).

A new thematic issue that was not present in 2022 was historical topics. In 2023, there were two publications discussing historical issues that have been a stumbling block between Ukraine and Poland. The authors of these publications accused the political party PiS of raising historical issues with Ukrainians to appeal to a xenophobic electorate (Subbotko, 2023). Additionally, two more publications were dedicated to cultural topics and announced the screening of Ukrainian films, particularly Mariupol.

Another new topic that appeared in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in 2023 was the fight against disinformation. In particular, three publications were published about hate speech against Ukrainians on social media. The authors of these publications refuted fake claims that refugees from Ukraine contribute to queues at doctors’ offices or at hairdressers’, or that they don’t want to work and only live off Polish taxpayers. This is a positive trend because there are many trolls on social media who deliberately post controversial comments about Ukrainians. Another positive observation in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in 2023 was a series of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians that were supported by the European Union and the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). The articles funded by IVF were marked as such, and the ones supported by the European Union were highlighted with a blue and yellow banner, carrying the slogan “Ukrainians in the Union”. These publications dispelled stereotypes about Ukrainians and demonstrated the global impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war in various aspects.

³ Author’s note: The text of the quotation in the original language: “[...] ukraińskie wojsko jest zdecydowanie najlepszą siłą bojową, jaką będzie można znaleźć w Europie w dającej się przewidzieć przyszłości. A NATO może być pewne, że zawsze będzie w najwyższej gotowości” (Tymoshenko, 2023, p. 25).

Rzeczpospolita in 2023 published more materials about Ukraine and Ukrainians than *Gazeta Wyborcza*, but the connotation of the articles was entirely different. Of the total of 143 publications on the topic of this research, the largest number – 34 materials – were dedicated to the situation on the battlefield (Figure 2). These were the most neutral publications about Ukraine. Informative genres predominated in this thematic group, although there were also reportages and interviews. Another related topic focused on military aid for Ukraine. These publications mostly concentrated on the refusal of Germany to provide the Taurus rockets, the USA’s refusal to send Atacms, and Great Britain’s refusal to supply the Storm Shadow rockets. It was also emphasized that Russia will not attack NATO members, which is why it is important for Poland and other neighboring countries not to become involved in the conflict. However, there were also other viewpoints. For example, in the article “Rocket Attack on Dnipro. Today We Are All Ukrainians”, the author Artur Bartkiewicz states, “Just as there would be no modern prosperity in Western Europe without the denazification of Germany, there can be no safe world without the deputinization of Russia”⁴ (Bartkiewicz, 2023, para. 4). The journalist emphasizes that Europe, and particularly Poland, cannot remain indifferent to the war in Ukraine and should unite efforts for “deputinization”. “Today we are all Ukrainians and residents of Dnipro, today the world is falling on all of our heads like the ceilings in an apartment building hit by a rocket”⁵ (Bartkiewicz, 2023, para. 3).

Thematic diversity of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians in *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2023; %

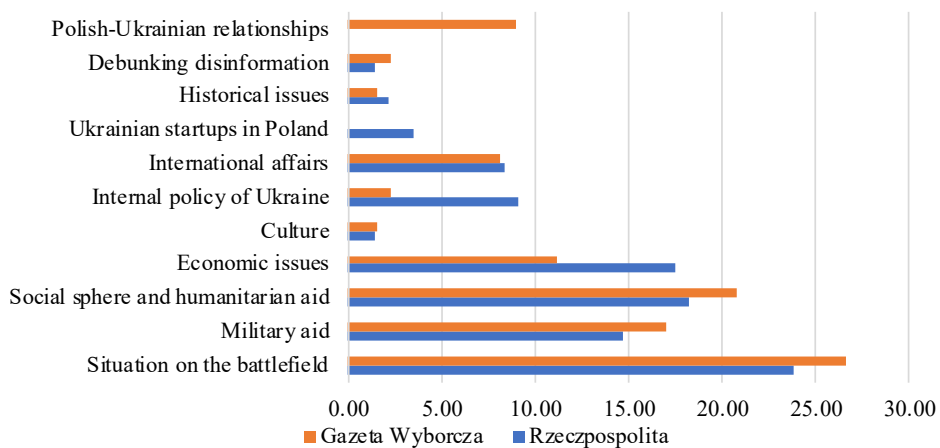


FIGURE 2: Thematic diversity of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians in *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2023

Source: own processing, 2025

The international relations concerning Ukraine and Polish-Ukrainian relations, in particular, were addressed in different thematic groups. There were six publications about Ukraine’s international policy and the same number about Polish-Ukrainian relations. The coverage of this topic was balanced, showing both sides’ points of view. For example, on 3 January 2023, there was an analytical comment by PSL leader Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz under the heading

⁴ Author’s note: The text of the quotation in the original language: “Tak jak nie byłoby współczesnego dobrobytu Europy Zachodniej bez denazyfikacji Niemiec, tak nie może być bezpiecznego świata bez deputinizacji Rosji” (Bartkiewicz, 2023, para. 4).

⁵ Author’s note: The text of the quotation in the original language: “Dziś wszyscy jesteśmy Ukraińcami i mieszkańcami Dniepra, dziś wszystkim nam świat wali się na głowę jak sufity w trafionym przez raketę bloku” (Bartkiewicz, 2023, para. 3).

“Let Ukraine Apologize” (Ukraina niech przeprosi), where it was stated, “There will be no good relations between Poland and Ukraine if the Ukrainian authorities continue to praise Bandera...”⁶ (Nizinkiewicz, 2023, p. 3). Such assertions do not facilitate understanding and good relations between Ukraine and Poland and could lead to new conflicts.

Nevertheless, on 13 January, an interview with a Ukrainian political observer Volodymyr Fesenko was published under the heading “Ukrainian Political Scientist: Poland, Our Main Friend”. In this publication, it was stated that historical issues should not be a stumbling block in Polish-Ukrainian relations and that Ukraine deeply appreciates all the help that Poland provides (Szozzyn, 2023a). These two publications, printed just ten days apart, balance the positions and allow the audience to form their own opinions and attitudes on the situation.

Historical issues continued to appear in *Rzeczpospolita* in some other publications. For example, on 24 May 2023, an article titled “Swallowing a Ukrainian Frog” (Warzecha, 2023) was published, discussing the need to commemorate the anniversary of the Volyn tragedy, but Ukraine had not yet agreed to the exhumation. Later, on 19 July 2023, the continuation of this topic appeared in the correspondence “What to Tell Ukrainian Refugees About Volyn” (Majewski, 2023). In a refugee center in Legnica, a historical lecture was held about Volyn, the Vistula, and the UPA. The material highlighted the fact that many refugees were unaware of these events, and after the meeting, many requested materials in Ukrainian. The tone of this publication was neutral.

Economic issues were covered with more negative connotations. There were 25 such publications, the vast majority of which were related to the grain crisis. On 4 April 2023, a problem article was published under the heading “Poland is Drowning in Grain from Ukraine” (Ptak-Iglewska, 2023), declaring that the government had allowed at least 3 million tons of grain from Ukraine to be imported without control. Local feed producers bought it because it was half the price of Polish grain. It was also emphasized that “Ukrainian grain is not of proper quality; it was not accepted in Germany, and what is in it is unknown”⁷ (Kacprzak & Zawadka, 2023a, p. 4). The connotation of this article was negative. Similar issues regarding the Ukrainian grain rush and its low quality were covered in subsequent publications (Kozubal, 2023; Kacprzak & Zawadka, 2023b; Pietryga, 2023). On 19 April (Skwirowski, 2023), there was also a publication about the embargo on the import of Ukrainian eggs and chicken, and later, on raspberries. The tone of these publications was negative.

However, from the summer onwards, other points of view began to appear in *Rzeczpospolita*. These included interviews with bank consultants, the Ukrainian vice-minister, the director of a Ukrainian agro company, etc., who explained that Ukraine wanted to find a compromise and was ready for discussion. Also notable was an interview with Ukrainian political scientist Vitalii Portnikov under the heading “Ukrainian Political Scientist: Duda Insults Ukraine”, where the interviewee declared that “‘The actions of the Polish government help Russia achieve its goals’ and explained that ‘Selling grain is not a crime; that’s how the free market works’”⁸ (Szozzyn, 2023b, p. A3). The connotation of this publication was positive towards Ukraine and demonstrated the editorial office’s attempt to stay balanced, though coverage of economic issues related to Ukraine in 2023 mostly maintained a negative tone.

⁶ Author’s note: The text of the quotation in the original language: “Nie będzie dobrych relacji między Polską a Ukrainą, jeśli ukraińskie władze będą chwalić Banderę – twierdzi Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, lider PSL” (Nizinkiewicz, 2023, p. 3).

⁷ Author’s note: The text of the quotation in the original language: “Ukraińskie zboże nie ma odpowiedniej jakości; nie zostało przyjęte w Niemczech, a to, co w nim jest, jest nieznanne” (Kacprzak & Zawadka, 2023a, p. A4).

⁸ Author’s note: The text of the quotation in the original language: “‘Działania polskiego rządu pomagają Rosji osiągnąć jej cele’ i wyjaśnił, że ‘Sprzedaż zboża to nie przestępstwo; tak działa wolny rynek’” (Szozzyn, 2023b, p. A3).

On the other hand, the subtopic of Ukrainian start-ups in Poland was generally covered positively. For example, the article “Ukrainian Artificial Intelligence Wants to Check the Eyes of Poles” (Duszczuk, 2023) informed about a start-up that will help people with diabetes. In total, there were 5 publications on this subtopic, and all of them had a positive tone.

Social and humanitarian issues were covered in *Rzeczpospolita* in 2023 with neutral or positive connotations. These articles were mostly written in the information genre or in the form of reports from surveys. Compared to 2022, the number of such publications decreased by almost half (26 publications). This decrease is likely due to the reduced number of Ukrainian refugees and the fact that those who remained had become more adapted. For example, most of them had found jobs (Błaszczak, 2023a), Ukrainians wanted to develop their skills in Poland (Błaszczak, 2023b), and some of them were planning to move on to other countries like Germany and Canada (Błaszczak, 2023c). However, surveys showed a worsening attitude among Poles toward Ukrainian refugees and their unwillingness to help them (Kacprzak, 2023a; Kacprzak, 2023b). Meanwhile, the coverage of the integration of Ukrainian pupils into the Polish educational system remained consistent with 2022.

The internal policy of Ukraine became the center of attention in 13 publications of *Rzeczpospolita* in 2023. These materials focused on issues such as corruption and avoiding mobilization. For example, a problem article under the heading “Some Fight, Others Pay 10 Thousand Dollars” was based on information published in *The Economist*, stating that Ukrainian men escape the country and mobilization by “crossing rivers and conquering mountains on motorcycles. Many Ukrainians continue to flee the military abroad, not without the help of corrupt military personnel and officials”⁹ (Szozzyn, 2023c, p. A7)

In 2023, *Rzeczpospolita* also paid attention to an internal issue in Poland – disinformation. In particular, two articles were dedicated to fake news about Ukrainians. These articles described how, on social networks, individuals with fake profiles spread disinformation about Ukraine and Ukrainians, aiming to incite interethnic hatred (August, 2023).

When comparing the coverage of Ukraine and Ukrainians in 2023 between two of the most influential Polish newspapers, *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*, significant differences were observed. Firstly, the number of publications was slightly higher in *Rzeczpospolita* than in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, though in 2022, the opposite was true. Nevertheless, in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, there were more publications with positive or neutral connotations than in *Rzeczpospolita*. The most striking difference could be seen in the depiction of the grain crisis. The materials in *Gazeta Wyborcza* were more balanced and factually supported, while in *Rzeczpospolita*, publications about Ukrainian grain were more emotionally charged. The highest concentration of publications with negative connotations towards Ukraine and Ukrainians in *Rzeczpospolita* occurred during the spring-summer of 2023. However, in autumn, the grain issue was depicted in a more balanced and discreet manner. Nevertheless, *Rzeczpospolita* did publish materials about Ukrainian start-ups, which had a positive tone. At the same time, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published articles accusing the Polish political party PiS of spreading hate speech against Ukraine.

3.5 Year 2024: Less Interest in Ukraine or Hope for a Truce?

In 2024, the number of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians decreased in both newspapers compared to the previous two years. In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, there were 98 publications that directly focused on Ukraine or Ukrainians. As in previous years, the majority of them were dedicated to military topics (Figure 3) and could be further divided into two subtopics: the

⁹ Author’s note: The text of the quotation in the original language: “Mężczyźni ukraińscy uciekają z kraju i mobilizacji, przekraczając rzeki i zdobywając góry na motocyklach. Wielu Ukraińców nadal ucieka przed wojskiem za granicę, nie bez pomocy skorumpowanych wojskowych i urzędników” (Szozzyn, 2023c, p. A7).

situation on the battlefield and military aid. Military aid was closely related to international relations. These publications focused on military assistance in the context of Ukraine's relations with different countries, as well as the outcomes of important international events or meetings. For example, an article published on the front page of *Gazeta Wyborcza* on 11 July 2024 (online on July, 10), under the heading NATO Summit in Washington, informed readers about the international event and highlighted a "significant package" of support for Ukrainians (Czarnecki, 2024). The connotation of the materials on military topics was mostly neutral, with some cases being positive (such as the intention of Ukrainians to create a buffer zone in Kursk).

The social topic remained an important part of the coverage of Ukrainians in *Gazeta Wyborcza* in 2024. The most frequently covered subtopic focused on Ukrainian children and their adaptation to life in Poland and in Polish schools. Another social theme dealt with the employment of Ukrainian refugees. The tone of these publications was positive. One thematic issue was dedicated to a Ukrainian doctor who was judged for unprofessional behavior that had led to the death of a patient. *Gazeta Wyborcza* covered this case discreetly, without accusations. Ultimately, the doctor was acquitted because he acted according to protocol (Watola, 2024a, 2024b).

The economic topic was covered much less than in 2023 or 2022. There were 12 publications, of which 7 focused on the grain issue. The remaining articles discussed Russian assets, Ukrainian entrepreneurs who started companies in Poland, and the export of Polish goods to Ukraine.

One more area that was highlighted in *Gazeta Wyborcza* was sport. This includes not only the coverage of the Olympic Games in Paris, but also other sports events. For example, there were publications about the first and second victories of Ukrainian boxer Oleksandr Usyk in his fight against Tyson Fury (Leniarski, 2024a, 2024b). In both articles, Ukrainian athletes were depicted in the best possible light. Special attention is to be paid to the topic of fake news and disinformation in the Polish media space. In 2024, *Gazeta Wyborcza* published six articles dedicated to debunking fakes. For instance, on 10 April 2024, the print version of the newspaper featured an interview with an Internet analyst Anna Mierzyńska, a member of the OKO.press editorial team, about the influence of Russian disinformation on public opinion in Poland: "In social media, the most disinformation is focused on Ukraine. This disinformation is created by Russian special services. They build networks of communication channels, websites, blogs, and accounts on various social media platforms"¹⁰ (Pas, 2024, p. 9). Other publications on this topic focused on refuting stereotypes about Ukrainians, explaining that they want to live normal lives like other people and that it is common for them to go to cinemas, theaters, restaurants, etc. Thus, the connotation was positive regarding Ukraine and Ukrainians.

Publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians in *Rzeczpospolita* in 2024 differed significantly from those in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. In total, there were 109 publications in *Rzeczpospolita* in which Ukraine and Ukrainians were the main focus (Figure 3). The largest number of publications (37 articles) was dedicated to social topics, with subtopics such as Ukrainian students in Polish schools, a decrease in payments for Ukrainian refugees, drunk Ukrainian drivers on Polish roads, Ukrainian doctors who still haven't learned Polish, and the worsening attitude of Poles toward Ukrainians. For example, on November 6, 2024, a survey report was published under the heading "What Are Poles Afraid of?" which emphasized that the percentage of Poles who believed that Ukrainians negatively affected Poland had increased from 30% to 50% during the year (Kacprzak, 2024). The publication also stated that Poles believed it was Ukrainians who were responsible for the rise in crime. This negative image of Ukrainians as criminals was reinforced by other publications in *Rzeczpospolita*. For instance, on September 2, 2024, a report was published under the heading "Ukrainian Business", which stated that "CBŚP dismantled

¹⁰ Author's note: The text of the quotation in the original language: "W mediach społecznościowych najwięcej dezinformacji koncentruje się na Ukrainie. Dezinformację tę tworzą rosyjskie służby specjalne. Budują one sieci kanałów komunikacyjnych, stron internetowych, blogów oraz kont na różnych platformach mediów społecznościowych" (Pas, 2024, p. 9).

a laboratory set up by Ukrainians; an international cartel had set up methadone production in Poland. This is the first CBŚP-dismantled methadone lab in Poland in its history. It was set up by Ukrainians”¹¹ (Zawadka, 2024, p. 4). Such publications draw attention not to criminals, who can be of various nationalities and operate in different countries, but specifically target Ukrainians as criminals. Even the title and lead of the publication contribute to this.

However, there were also more positive publications about Ukrainians in *Rzeczpospolita*. For example, there were articles addressing the need for Ukrainian refugees in the labor market, which can be classified as economic issues. This was the second largest thematic category about Ukraine and Ukrainians in *Rzeczpospolita*. Only six articles were dedicated to the grain crisis. On 17 January 2024, Polish farmers stopped blocking roads and customs, so the subsequent publications focused on exposing companies that illegally purchased Ukrainian grain. Other publications on economic topics described, on one hand, the opening of Ukrainian start-ups in Poland, and on the other hand, the need for Polish companies to enter the Ukrainian market. Special attention was paid to the prospects of Ukraine becoming a full member of the European Union and the consequences this could have for Poland. This issue was mainly covered in analytical articles that were balanced and presented different points of view, as well as possible steps for fostering good economic relations.

The military topic was less frequently presented in *Rzeczpospolita*, compared to previous years. There were 21 publications directly related to the situation on the battlefield and military aid for Ukraine. The tone of these articles was neutral or positive, particularly regarding the occupation of Kursk by Ukrainian forces. Additionally, Russian rocket attacks on the children’s hospital Okhmatdyt and on residential blocks in central Lviv were covered sympathetically.

Thematic diversity of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians in *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2024; %

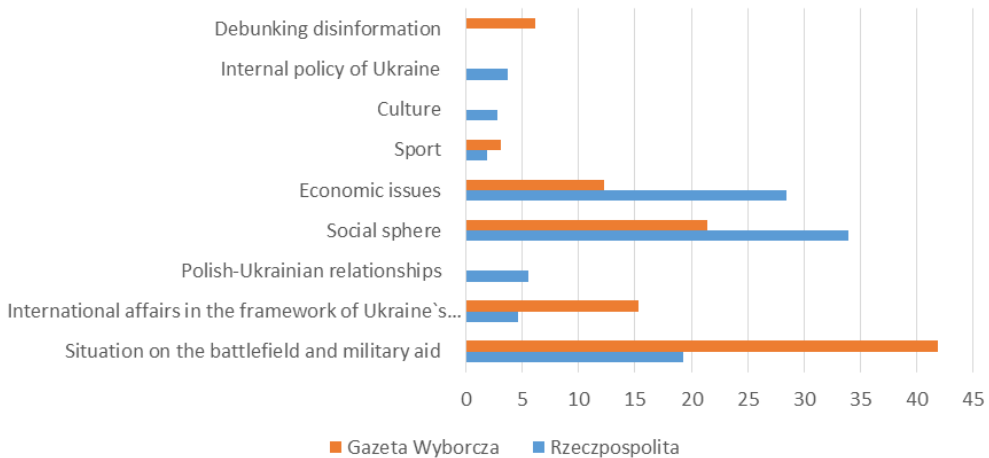


FIGURE 3: Thematic diversity of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians in *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2024

Source: own processing, 2025

¹¹ Author’s note: The text of the quotation in the original language: “CBŚP zlikwidowało laboratorium założone przez Ukraińców; międzynarodowy kartel uruchomił produkcję metadonu w Polsce. To pierwsze w historii CBŚP zlikwidowane laboratorium metadonu w Polsce. Zostało założone przez Ukraińców” (Zawadka, 2024, p. 4).

International relations were covered neutrally and positively within the framework of Ukraine's future (5 publications about entering NATO and the European Union). However, Ukrainian-Polish relations were covered differently. For example, on July 11, 2024, a publication titled "The Volhynia massacre in our minds" (Kozubal, 2024) declared that without Ukraine's consent to the exhumation of Polish victims of the UPA, Russian propaganda would continue to drive a wedge between Polish-Ukrainian relations. At the same time, in subsequent publications, it was pointed out that Poland should not block Ukraine's accession to the EU due to historical issues and that, given our common values and ideals, Ukraine and Poland should stand together (Buras, 2024).

As in previous years, the internal policy of Ukraine remained a central focus in *Rzeczpospolita*. The connotation of publications on this topic was mostly neutral or negative, addressing issues such as corruption, problems with mobilization, the legitimacy or illegitimacy of Volodymyr Zelensky as the President of Ukraine, the need for elections, and the attitude of Ukrainians towards the war. For example, in the article titled "Do Ukrainians Want Peace Negotiations with Russia? Polls Are Clear", it is stated that "more than half of Ukrainians no longer want to wait for victory in the fight against the Russian invader; they believe it is time to start negotiations"¹² (Szozzyn, 2024, para. 3). The publication presents results from various polls and comments from different experts, so the connotation is neutral and the content is well-balanced.

The representation of other topics in the newspaper was much smaller, particularly in the areas of culture and sports. The percentage ratio of thematic issues about Ukraine and Ukrainians in *Rzeczpospolita* is presented in Figure 3.

4 Discussion

As we can see, in two of the most influential newspapers in Poland, the quantity, thematic variety, and connotation of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians have significantly changed during almost three years of war. The results of this research coincide with the statement by Kościński (2024) that, from the beginning of the war, Polish media produced a range of reports from the Polish-Ukrainian border and Polish cities that received Ukrainian refugees. The main aim of such publications was to show how well-organized the humanitarian aid for Ukrainian refugees, mainly women with children, was.

In 2022, when the war began, the popular genre for publications about refugees, as well as military fighters and victims, was the interview. This can be explained by the thought of Bulisz (2016), who highlights that in opinion-making media, one of the most important genres is the interview, especially when it includes a photo of the interviewed person. It shows the importance and value of the person and allows for reflection on the assertions made in the interview. Another genre that was popular in the analyzed newspapers was war correspondence. A war correspondent is the media worker who constantly risks their life, staying on the front lines to show society more than what is conveyed by politicians (Mroziewicz, 2006).

After the first three months of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the genres and topics of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians began to change. Thus, reports of surveys, correspondences, and informational notes on the legal aspects of refugee reception became more frequent. The connotation of media publications significantly changed in 2023 and 2024 when compared to 2022. This change was especially noticeable in the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*. In 2022, the attitude toward Ukraine and Ukrainians in media materials was positive, but in 2023 and 2024, a more neutral and negative tone emerged. One possible explanation is that media outlets are

¹² Author's note: The text of the quotation in the original language: "Czy Ukraińcy chcą negocjacji pokojowych z Rosją? Sondaże są jasne – stwierdzono, że 'ponad połowa Ukraińców nie chce już czekać na zwycięstwo w walce z rosyjskim najeźdźcą; uważają, że nadszedł czas na rozpoczęcie negocjacji'" (Szozzyn, 2024, para. 3).

competing for consumers and are constantly in competition with each other (Cira, 2007). To understand the role of media in Polish society, it is worth examining the relationship between the media and state-regional-local authorities. In Poland, the demands of residents are often publicized via the media. Michalowski (2006) argue that the first and most significant issue in the relationship between the media and authorities are the needs of the inhabitants. They explain that local authorities often live in their own bubble and do not understand the needs of residents. In this case, the media act as a bridge between local politicians and the public. This assertion holds true in the context of how Ukraine and Ukrainians are depicted in local events.

At the beginning of the war, the media actively published information from the battlefield, correspondences about refugees and their needs, reports from the borders, and so on. However, after the first three months of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the narratives shifted, and the media began to focus more on audience-oriented materials. For example, there were reports on how Polish people helped refugees, how much money and personal resources they had spent, and so on. Polish media reflect the expectations of readers or local audiences. Otherwise, they would not be able to operate in the market. But the authorities do (Michalowski, 2006).

A vivid example of the reader-oriented media policy is the depiction of the so-called grain crisis in Polish-Ukrainian relations in the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*. Szumlewicz (2019) underscores that a significant social group in Polish society is represented by farmers, who play an important role in the market. Although Polish media outlets *Rzeczpospolita* and *Gazeta Wyborcza* are often referred to as intelligent media, positioning themselves as neutral and as “voices of reason” (Szumlewicz, 2019), their attitude toward the grain problem was demonstrated quite vividly. The sharpest position in this case was reflected in the media coverage of *Rzeczpospolita*, while publications in *Gazeta Wyborcza* were more balanced, presenting different points of view and refuting false information. At the same time, in the second half of 2024, the coverage of economic issues in *Rzeczpospolita* became more neutral and balanced. Mielczarek (2024) explains that the printed press is no longer profitable. However, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, for example, would continue to produce a print version as long as it remains of interest to readers. As an opinion-making media outlet, it will continue to operate in its current form as long as it retains its audience.

At this point, it is worth mentioning the competition between traditional and online media. Zwolińska (2014) emphasizes that information about emergencies, particularly about war, is a major focus of media coverage. In this case, online media function as a communicative product, driven by the pursuit of commercial benefit, much more than traditional media. Therefore, the approach to unbiased media coverage of the war in online media can be questionable.

Werner (2005) expressed concerns that the rapid development of new media could lead to widespread disinformation in various spheres. On the other hand, Załubski (2002) argues that online media provides printed media with new opportunities, particularly in terms of reaching a new audience. *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* are successful examples of the proper use of such opportunities, with both offering print and online versions to a wide audience. Both of these assertions are partly true because, nowadays, social media has become a source of fake and false information. At the same time, in Poland, based on survey results, traditional media, such as *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* remain at the top of the most opinion-forming sources of information.

In 2024, both *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* published the results of surveys that presented public opinion – the attitudes of Poles toward Ukrainians as well as the views of Ukrainians regarding the war. Szurmiński (2023) outlines that public opinion is the target of propaganda activities. Public opinion is a key element of communicative activities that can depend on the techniques used in conducting surveys. Moreover, Ptaszek (2016) argues that it is increasingly common for user-generated news to be used by traditional media as a source of information about facts and events. The results of surveys published in the analyzed newspapers were conducted by sociological companies, but the sincerity of respondents’

answers does not always reflect the real state of affairs. In any case, Ptaszek (2014) is right in saying that any piece of information obtained not through education but through media messages must undergo evaluation and verification through cognitive operations, particularly critical thinking.

5 Conclusion

The results of this research proved the hypothesis that the image of Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Polish media has changed due to political, economic, and social reasons. However, we cannot state that Poland and the Polish people have grown tired of the war in Ukraine. On the contrary, media coverage of military issues, as well as the situation on the battlefield, remained extensive and thorough, though it decreased each year. The connotation of this thematic group was always neutral or positive, with no criticism or accusations directed at Ukraine for military mistakes.

Regarding events that could influence the media coverage of Ukraine in Poland, the main issue was the grain crisis, which led to the most visible changes in the coverage of economic topics. The grain crisis influenced not only Polish residents but also other European countries and politicians. The media did not remain detached and depicted the situation in different connotations. *Gazeta Wyborcza* remained more discreet and balanced, while *Rzeczpospolita* presented the situation in more negative tones. One of the reasons for this phenomenon could be political influence in the context of future elections, as well as the desire to please the audience. From this perspective, *Gazeta Wyborcza* promoted positions supporting the European Union, while *Rzeczpospolita* focused on the internal interests of Poland and the Polish people.

The image of Ukraine and Ukrainians in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* evolved over the three years. In 2022, Ukrainians were presented as refugees, victims, and people in need of financial, humanitarian, and psychological aid. However, in 2023 and 2024, new roles of Ukrainians emerged in the publications of the analyzed newspapers – as people conducting startups, highly educated migrants, refugees who had found work in Poland, as well as drunk drivers and criminals (in *Rzeczpospolita*).

The focus in the printed versions of *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* regarding Ukraine shifted over the three years of war. In 2022, the focus was on military aid and the situation on the battlefield; in 2023, it shifted to economic issues (such as the grain crisis); by the beginning of 2024, the focus moved to Ukraine's prospects of becoming a full member of the EU and NATO; in spring and summer of 2024, social issues (such as education and payments to refugees) took precedence, and in autumn 2024, discussions focused on the prospects for a truce.

The attitude of Poles toward Ukrainians worsened each year. The main reasons for this shift were economic issues and the unwillingness to spend taxpayer money on financial help for refugees. Additionally, stereotypes and disinformation significantly influenced Poles' attitudes toward Ukrainians. The analyzed newspapers did not spread fake narratives, which are often posted on social media. Instead, they published analytical articles, reports, and informational materials based on factual evidence, which debunked fake news and false data. Finally, both *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* strive to stay in touch with current affairs and defend the interests of their audiences, influencing public opinion by spreading information from reliable sources and making efforts to present different points of view.

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Author



Assoc. Prof. Mariana Kitsa, PhD.

Lviv Polytechnic National University
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication
Kn, Roman str. 5
Lviv, 79020, Ukraine
mariana.o.kitsa@lpnu.ua
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0704-5012

Mariana Kitsa is an Associate Professor, a guarantor of an undergraduate programme of Journalism at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at Lviv Polytechnic National University. She is also an expert in NAQA, Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and National Research Foundation of Ukraine as well as the Editor-in-Chief of the specialised Ukrainian scientific journal on social communications. She is the author of a monograph entitled Pathogenic Advertising in the Ukrainian Print Media, three chapters in collective monographs, more than 80 scientific articles in the field of communication, and two handbooks. Her research interests include disinformation, harmful narratives in media content, influence on public opinion, as well as the image of Ukraine and Ukrainians in different countries during the Russian-Ukrainian war.