The "good" refugee is welcome

On the role of racism, sexism, and victimhood when fleeing from war

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Discourses of War: The influence of the war against Ukraine on discourses worldwide

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The war against Ukraine has significant impacts on many societies world-wide, especially in Europe. The war changes public debates and political discourses in many countries. In addition to that, economic, technical, academic and other discourses are also influenced by this new state of things. We invite Short Papers (1200–3000 words) which reflect on these discourses.

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Ukrainian refugees arriving in Germany in 2022 dredge up memories of Syrian refugee immigration in 2015. This paper examines whether there is a stereotype of a "good refugee" who is welcome to the EU as it studies the coverage of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees by a major German daily newspaper from a sociology of knowledge approach. As racist and sexist prejudices prevail, the media clearly favors Caucasian, non-Muslim women accompanied by young children as the "good" refugee who is welcome.

Keywords: *refugee, Ukraine, Syria, sexism, racism, victimhood, prejudice, media analysis, sociology of knowledge approach to discourse*

Ukrainian refugees arriving in Germany in 2022 dredge up memories of Syrian refugee immigration in 2015. However, both the context that caused people to flee their home country and the reaction of the receiving society are different. This paper examines whether there is a stereotype of a "good refugee" who is welcome to the EU as it studies the coverage of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees by a major German daily newspaper from a sociology of knowledge approach. Concluding, the paper discusses the shaping of discursive knowledge construction through racist and sexist prejudices and explains what constitutes "good" and thus welcome refugees from a German media perspective.

Theory

Media are the means of distributing information in an accessible way to a specific audience. Yet media are not unbiased. Rather decisions over what is being reported and the way it is being reported are expressions of a specific discourse of knowledge construction, which contributes to power dynamics within society. Media discourse can thus be a means for co-constructing and distributing stereotypes, prejudices, and racism (Van Dijk, 1993; 2000). This includes 'new racism' which stresses any intergroup differences between the receiving community and the newcomers (Entman, 2009).

Research on the 2015 immigration of Syrian refugees to the EU heavily relied on frames of "crisis", "risk", "threat" and natural disasters (e.g., wave, flood) (Kantor & Cepoi, 2018; Fotopoulos & Kaimaklioti, 2016). Some authors even found that "[t]here is a global perception that immigrants are the source of all evil" (Fox, 2018, p. 88), despite scientific evidence on the impact of receiving migrants, including refugees, disproving such claims (Fratzscher & Junker, 2015; Legrain, 2016).

Methodology

The sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD) is a broad theoretical and methodological perspective for undertaking discourse analysis such that knowledge production, co-creation, and dissemination as well as societal power structures are highlighted (Keller, 2005). While theoretically this approach is based on Foucault's focus on power in discourse (Foucault, 1981) and Berger and Luckmann's emphasis on constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1968), it methodologically endorses the tools of grounded theory (Strauss, 1998). SKAD is well suited to investigate the media discourse on refugees and discuss the societal ramifications of the dominant media portrayal.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), one of the most read German superregional newspapers, was chosen as the media outlet of interest. It embraces a politically rather conservative view combined with a neoliberal economic ideology (Fazit Communication GmbH & Auswärtiges Amt, 2020). The digital archive was searched for "Syrian refugees" (*syrische Flüchtlinge*) in 2015 as the year of the highest war-associated Syrian immigration to Germany and "Ukrainian refugees" (*ukrainische Flüchtlinge*) referring to the period from January 1 to April 10, 2022. After conducting theoretical sampling, the Syrian sample comprised 98 articles (of 208), the Ukrainian sample 57 (of 127). Included articles were subjected to further analysis through memo writing and mindmapping to formulate a condensed characterization of the refugee phenomenon across the two different contexts, thus focusing on the phenomenological structure and interpretative schemes. Please note that all citations below are the author's translations of the German original.

On "wanted" and "unwanted" refugees

The media discourses on refugees in 2015 and in 2022 comprise a number of both similarities and differences, as synopsized in Figures 1 and 2. The main dimensions and relations of the discursive structure (here also including elements of discourse and interpretative schemes to illustrate different concepts inherent to the discourse) are comparable across the two contexts and comprise a characterization of the refugee group in question, the reasons for their flight, and their relationship with the receiving German society, which again is characterized by the anticipated duration of the refugees' stay as well as by the fields of tension 'administrative challenge vs welcome culture' and 'benefit vs threat'. In the current scenario, the experience of receiving refugees in 2015 additionally plays a role in how Germany prepares itself for the newcomers.

Both refugee groups are fleeing from violence, potentially even from Russian bombs (Staib, 2022), and living conditions that endanger their very survival. Both groups are frequently referred to as 'refugees', thus turning their experience and legal situation into their dominant characteristics. This aspect is reminiscent of study results on the press coverage on refugees in the EU in 2014 and the first half of 2015, when three other German papers showed the same linguistic preference (Berry, et al., 2016).

Both groups are traumatized by what they have gone through and are potentially victimized in neighboring countries in which they initially sought refuge. Nevertheless, Syrians attempting to enter the EU face severe obstacles which are nonexistent for Ukrainians due to different legal and associated administrative stipulations. These also manifest in the receiving societies' experienced burden of
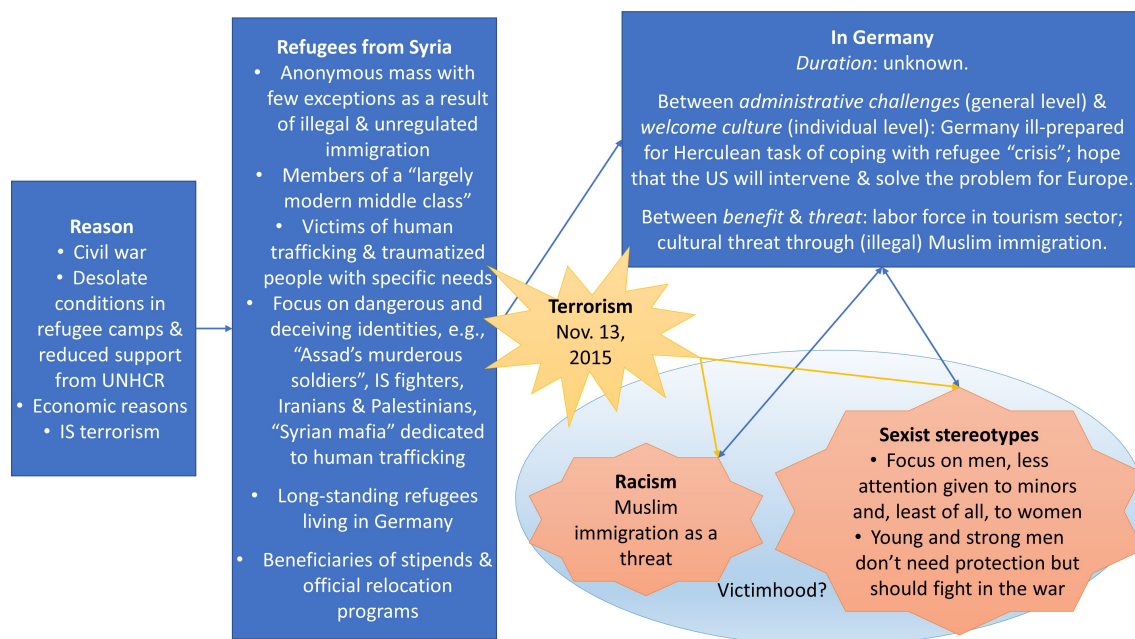

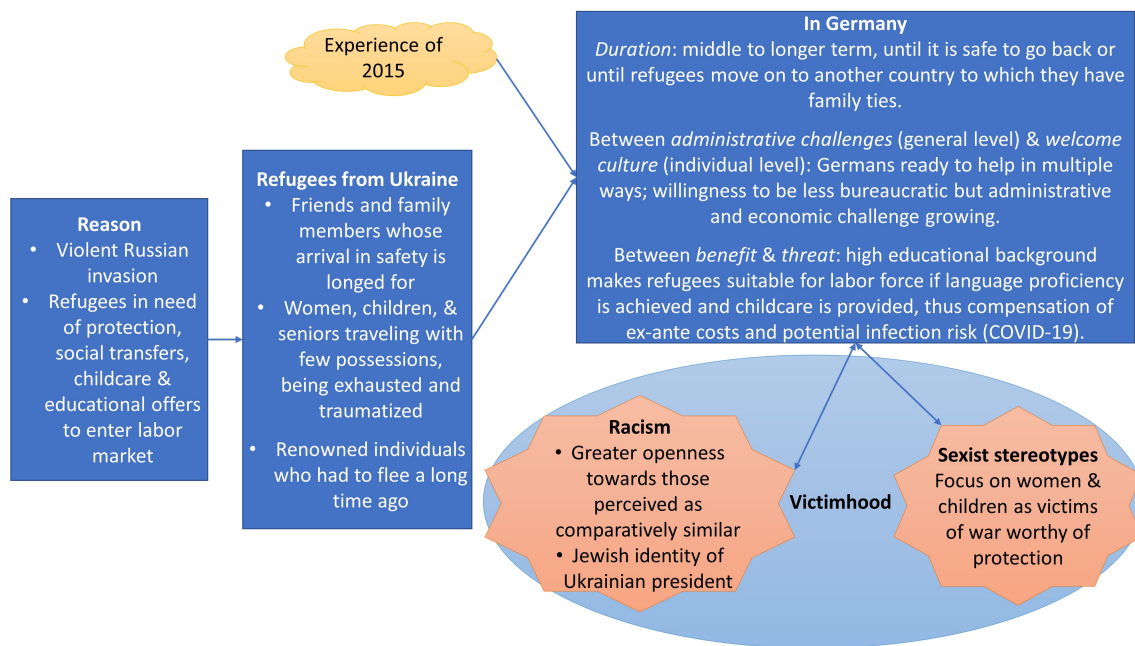Fig. 1: Core elements of the media discourse on refugees from Syria

Fig. 2: Core elements of media discourse on refugees from Ukraine

refugee accommodation, such that the 2015 scenario shows a comparatively stronger focus on socioeconomic and political struggle with terms like "migratory emergency" (FAZ, 2015d) and "refugee crisis" frequently being used. The extent of the 2015 crisis is portrayed as enormous and uncontrollable, like an avalanche (FAZ, 2015a), such that tackling it requires (supernatural) herculean powers (FAZ, 2015b). Given that this present analysis includes only the first weeks of press coverage on Ukrainian refugees and compares it to that on Syrian refugees throughout the entire year of 2015, it cannot be ruled out that the 2022 discourse will still shift towards increased concern and hesitation about the newcomers. While today, seven months into the war in Ukraine, tendencies in this direction are at times visible, they are far from being prominent. Rather than attributing concern and fear to receiving refugees from the Ukraine in particular, the shift in tone is linked to the general situation of economic difficulties due to more than two years of struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic but also due to the economic impact of the war in Ukraine (Carstens, 2022). The discourse may thus even allow for a sense of joint victimhood of Ukrainian refugees fleeing from war and German citizens fearing the economic consequences of Putin's policies as well as the sanctions implemented against Russia.

Certainly, the contexts that the two groups of refugees are fleeing from differ: A civil war implies that citizens of the affected state are not easily distinguished as 'victims' or 'perpetrators'. There is uncertainty about the identity and the potential culpability of those seeking refuge in the EU leading to victim blame (Zagefka, Noor, Brown, Randsely de Moura, & Hopthrow, 2011). An interstate war, by con-

trast, which started through the violent invasion of one country by another, is much more suitable in complying with such a simple binary stereotypization. Interestingly, it is portrayed as positive if refugees of an interstate war show patriotism (Strauss, 2022). This may signal their intent to return to their home country in future; victims of a civil war, especially within the broader context of politicized Islam, on the contrary, are easily perceived as threatening if they express patriotism for their country of origin. Moreover, as Ukrainians seek refuge in (Central and Western) Europe, they may find receiving communities with some degree of Slavic language proficiency, thus facilitating communication and common in-group categorization, while others, especially hosting seniors, might themselves have experience with feeling victimized by Soviet occupation towards the end of World War II and in its immediate aftermath.

However, the main difference seems to be attributed demographic characteristics of the two refugee groups themselves. These link to the interpretative schemes of racism, sexism, and victimhood.

Racism – Islamist threat vs protecting Jews

Syrian refugees are identified as different from the receiving society. They are Muslim, and religious and cultural Islam is hardly distinguished from militant Islamism (Ross, 2015b) such that the refugees' presence is feared to endanger German "identity and integrity" (Lohse & Schäffer, 2015). Syrian refugees, on the part of US presidential candidates, are even compared to rabies-infected dogs, which must not be let near children, and Muslims are equated

with Nazis (Ross, 2015b). Allowing Muslim refugees to enter the country (here, the US) is said to equal suicide; only Christian refugees may be safe while the Koran should be banned like Hitler's *Mein Kampf* – this is the quintessence of the Western right-wing discourse (Ross, 2015a). This Islamophobia becomes clearly dominant after the Islamist terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015. If previously refugee immigration, though not fully endorsed, had been portrayed as a humanitarian emergency, it then becomes not just a cultural threat to the receiving society but a threat to safety and life (Frankenberger, 2015).

Ukrainian refugees are not subjected to racism in the same way. Instead, support is buoyed even by members of right-wing parties as an act of European solidarity (Wiegel, 2022; Witzek, 2022), thus focusing on cultural-geographic commonality. The Dublin regulation is officially suspended due to mass immigration, a legal means that was established in 2001 as a reaction to the Yugoslav wars but was not previously utilized (Becker, 2022). This is a further signal to receiving communities indicating that the newcomers are welcome and that it is on the former to open up to integration (Staib, 2022), which manifests, amongst other, in Germany's willingness to make concessions to schooling for Ukrainian children that were unthinkable in the past.

The different treatment of Syrian and Ukrainian suggests a racist two-class-system of refugees which further limits the access to resources of those most in need as Syrian family reunification may be at risk if Germany's hosting capacities are now exclusively focused on Ukrainians (Staib, 2022). Despite the unequal treatment that refugees receive through the media discourse, the dangers of a racist two-class-system for refugees are viewed critically:

> The BBC talked about the fact that it was 'European people with blue eyes and blond hair' who were being killed, which is why everything was much more emotional for 'us' Christian Europeans. An American journalist reported from Kiev that Ukraine could not be compared to Iraq or Afghanistan because it was a 'European' and 'civilized' country. [...] In 'Der Spiegel' [i. e. news magazine] we read that 2015 will fortunately not 'repeat itself' because Ukraine and Germany are two countries that 'belong to the Christian-influenced cultural circle and not to a Muslim-influenced one'. Does that mean Jewish and Muslim Ukrainians are harder to integrate? (Cheema & Mendel, 2022)

This critical question links to yet another racial dimension of the refugee discourse. Ukrainian President Zelenskyy is recognized as a Jewish political leader (FAZ, 2022b). While this ethnic component is not frequently mentioned in the period of reviewed media reporting, soon thereafter the identity politics at stake moved into the limelight: In an Italian TV interview on May 1, 2022, Russian Foreign Secretary Lawrow argued that his country was aiming to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine thus claiming that Zelenskyy's Jewish identity made him comparable to Hitler who according to Lawrow also had a Jewish background (Rüb, 2022). This incident was historically contextualized

by Zelenskyy, who pointed out that Russian attacks had targeted Shoah memorial sites in Ukraine (FAZ, 2022d). The Jewish identity of the war in Ukraine was further highlighted as Israeli Foreign Minister Lapid demanded that Russia apologize and President Putin subsequently talked to Israeli Prime Minister Bennett on the phone (Meier & Schmidt, 2022). In terms of Germany's political and public positioning, taking a stand with the Jewish victim – the President as well as the violated sites of commemoration – thus becomes essential in order to condemn its Nazi past and openly endorse the internationally accepted moral code of other Western states (Gallant & Gallant, 2022).

Sexism – militarized masculinity and feminine vulnerability

Contextually, it is obvious that children, women, and men are among the Syrian refugees, for instance, when men complain that women are served first, whom again hold this status due to being accompanied by their children (Pergande, 2015). Nevertheless, the focus of the discourse lies on male Syrian refugees. The drastic statement of a Christian conservative politician is cited by FAZ: "'Who should fight for peace and security in Syria if not these men? Should Germany send its men and women to fight the Islamic State, while the Syrians are provided for by the German welfare state?'" (FAZ, 2015c). In the same vein, a German political talk show master is quoted accusing Syrian men of being cowards and not sufficiently manly to defend their homeland (Cheema & Mendel, 2022). Other articles seek to explain the prevalence of comparatively more young men and children than, for instance, seniors with their advantageous physique which might increase their chances of reaching a safe haven from which to later reunite with their families (Gutschker, 2015).

Family reunification is nevertheless not portrayed as a relatable desire of refugees who had to leave behind their loved ones but as a potential impediment. Being focused on their wives and children might distract young men from integrating properly is the line of argument used in the discourse (FASZ, 2015). Lacking in this debate is, however, the question of how women and children left behind in precarious situations in third countries, will survive the threats they are exposed to. Instead, the focus is laid on young Syrian men potentially becoming problematic, for instance, by seeking semi-violent means (lighting something on fire) to draw attention to their need for support (Buchsteiner, 2015).

As the political debate on refugees becomes fiercer after the terrorist attacks of November 2015, the concept of "good" refugees, that is refugees who fit the stereotype of needing humanitarian aid, is narrowed down to families and individuals who have been wounded or fallen ill; "young and strong men" (Staib, 2015) no longer fit this concept of worthiness for protection.

The militarization of masculinity paired with the lack of consideration for Syrian women and children is counteracted by a focus on feminine vulnerability among Ukrainian refugees. Zelenskyy ordered men between the age of 18 and 60 years and fit for military service not to leave the country; the Republic of Moldova mimics this gender distinction by easing controls on women, children, and seniors to the registration of their names (FAZ, 2022e), and the media discourse similarly favors special treatment claiming "Belarus is not a safe location for Ukrainian refugees. One cannot send women and children there. To them it is an aggressor" (FAZ, 2022c).

The high prevalence of women with small children among Ukrainian refugees is strongly present in the welcome culture. The Christian conservative party suggests "to give all arriving women a German SIM card so that they can stay in touch with their home country" (FAZ, 2022a) as if this desire was merely feminine. Seeing pictures of fleeing women and children, German men are reminded of their own families and feel that as "dads" (Jürgs, 2022) it is their role to help. Yet the vulnerability of women does not end when entering Germany such that there are warnings of a second victimization of "helpless women being abducted" (Jürgs, 2022).

Sex and age of the refugees further play a role in that mass accommodation camps are viewed as unsuitable for women and children (Schug, 2022) while they were deemed appropriate also for longer-term stays of "young and strong Syrian men" (Staib, 2015) back in 2015. The fact that Syrian women, children, and unaccompanied minors were also subjected to these kinds of camps is not mentioned. Disregarding that both accompanied and unaccompanied minors made up a significant share of Syrian refugees, the claim is made that today's refugees are "young women with small children, some of them accompanied by elderly relatives or even relatives in need of care. This is a completely different situation than in previous years" (Schug, 2022).

Victimhood

Syrian refugees are portrayed with a stronger emphasis on their masculine identity which, especially after the terrorist attacks of November 2015, is associated with threat arising from young Muslim men entering the EU. These men are rarely given a face or a voice. They mostly remain a potentially dangerous and largely anonymous mass. Given that the non-personal, non-individualized portrayal is less likely to overcome group stereotypization associated with intergroup conflict (Pettigrew, 1998), this kind of discourse is prone to fortify prejudices towards and fear of the newcomers.

Unaccompanied Syrian minors entering the EU seem unable to counteract this negatively connoted sexism. Instead of recognizing Syrian minors as victims of war entirely deprived of their national, cultural, and familial support structures, they too become potential threats in the context of the debate about family reunification. If minors seek to reunite with their families on European turf, this is portrayed as a symbolic threat to the receiving community, as a potential estrangement of the values they identify with, especially as Syrian newcomers are frequently associated with Muslim culture.

Ukrainian women and children again seem to fit the stereotype of 'victimhood' very well. Seemingly helpless women and small children are granted a status of innocence and worthiness to be protected by all means possible. This goes hand in hand with recounting personal stories on the part of the media, thus making Ukrainian refugees relatable to the receiving society. Simultaneously the strong emphasis on the women's willingness to work and thus pay back the efforts of the receiving society are important, especially as the legal and bureaucratic obstacles faced by Syrian refugees implied a secondary systemic victimization that impeded their ability to contribute to the receiving society's social and economic wellbeing.

Conclusion

Is there a "good" refugee? As racism and sexism prevail in Germany, refugees are benefitted from having similar physical features to those of the receiving society, from being Christians (or secular), and from expressing an interest in contributing economically. Being female and accompanied by small children is the source of a host of social problems (sexual harassment, the double burden of work and childcare, etc.) but does have a benefit in how these refugees are perceived by German society. While this contribution focused on the German context, other researchers indicated in correspondence similar lines of discrimination of refugees in Eastern European contexts (e. g., Poland) (EESC, 2022). This includes, for instance, (initial) support of Ukrainian refugees through high-ranking politicians and public discourse in Bulgaria (Brito, 2022) – which stands in stark contrast to the previous endorsement and celebration as national heroes of self-declared "refugee hunters", a group of hypermasculine vigilante border patrollers around Dinko Valev, who were capturing, threatening, and humiliating Syrian refugees along the Bulgarian border with Turkey (Ilieva, 2021).

Given the hypersexualization of external border patrollers and the tendencies toward sexist discrimination it may not be surprising but rather cynical that it is the very stereotype of vulnerability and innocence that empowers those fleeing from war to relocate to the EU and show agency in their own interests. Nevertheless, there is a caveat linked to this assessment: The "good" refugee who is welcomed by the media discourse may also be the refugee who stays only for a short period of time, thus not imposing an excessive financial burden on the receiving society nor bringing about cultural change.

While this perspective is implied by the media discourse on refugees, it does not match scientific evidence on the economic contribution and net benefit that refugees bring to receiving communities longer-term (Fratzscher & Junker, 2015; Legrain, 2016). As this scientific insight is absent in the media discourse, "empowerment through victimhood" seems to be a short-term perspective for those fleeing from violence in their countries of origin, while seeking refuge longer-term might come with a second victimization through the resentments of the receiving society. What humanitarian aid for refugees lacks is a truly humane and supportive discourse in word and deed.

Acknowledgements

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