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# **Disparities in Media Discourse on Refugees: A Content and Critical Discourse Analysis of Media Discourse on Syrian and Ukrainian Refugees in Dutch Newspapers**

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# **Disparities in Media Discourse on Refugees:**

**A Content and Critical Discourse Analysis of Media Discourse on Syrian  
and Ukrainian Refugees in Dutch Newspapers**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines to what extent public opinion about Syrian and Ukrainian refugees is either perpetuated or challenged by media discourse in Dutch newspaper media. Currently existing studies mainly focus on the reception and perceptions of refugees coming from the Global South. By specifically focusing on war refugees, and adding the comparative component of Ukrainian refugees, this thesis aimed to identify whether disparities that are apparent in public opinions, are also traceable in the Dutch newspapers *NRC*, *De Telegraaf*, and *De Volkskrant*. Dutch public opinion shows a greater support of the reception of Ukrainian refugees, than any other group of war refugees. To examine whether the latter is apparent in media discourse, this study combines two methods: Corpus Linguistics (Content Analysis) and the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Corpus Linguistics shows the presence of three prominent themes in word usage in articles regarding both comparative cases: pronouns, locations, and times and quantities. These three themes served as a foundational base for the CDA. CDA shows a prominence of the 'us versus them' dichotomy in media discourse, mainly through the use of 'othering' language. Additionally, the presence of discussions of repatriation in case of Syrian refugees, perpetuates the disparity in support of reception of both groups of war refugees. With the contribution of academic literature, the content analysis, and critical discourse analysis, this paper concludes that Dutch media discourse perpetuates public opinions regarding Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. However, it is important to note that due to contextual factors, it is important to be aware of the nuances that might apply.

# Table of contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	4
1.1 Introduction	4
1.2 Problem statement, relevance, and research question	5
1.3 Contribution to literature	6
1.4 Defining terms	6
<i>1.4.1 Refugees</i>	6
<i>1.4.2 The Refugee crisis</i>	7
<b>Chapter 2: Literature review</b>	9
2.1 Introduction	9
2.2 Narrative theory and Representation	9
2.3 The ‘Us versus Them’ Dichotomy and the Securitization of the Refugee	10
2.4 Conclusion	13
<b>Chapter 3: Context</b>	15
3.1 Influx of Syrian Refugees to The Netherlands in 2015	15
3.2 The Invasion of Ukraine	15
3.3 The Reception of war refugees	16
3.4 Summary	18
<b>Chapter 4: Methodology</b>	19
4.1 Corpus Linguistics and the Discourse-Historical Approach	19
4.2 The Samples	21
<b>Chapter 5: Identifying Themes and Discourse Analysis</b>	23
5.1 The Content Analysis: Identifying Themes	23
<i>5.1.1 Pronouns</i>	24
<i>5.1.2 Locations</i>	25
<i>5.1.3 Time and Quantities</i>	25
5.2 The Critical Discourse Analysis: Explaining Themes	26
<i>5.2.1 “Our Country:” the ‘Us versus Them’ Dichotomy</i>	26
<i>5.2.2 Repatriation and Shelter: Moving towards Different Locations</i>	28
<i>5.2.3 Humanization of Ukrainian Refugees</i>	30
5.3 Discussion	30
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion</b>	33
6.1 Answering the Research Question	33
6.2 Further Research and Limitations	35
6.3 Final thoughts	35
<b>Chapter 7: Appendix</b>	36
<b>Chapter 8: Bibliography</b>	37

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

In the night from the 23<sup>th</sup> to the 24<sup>th</sup> of August in 2022, around 700 people slept on the streets next to the refugee registration center of The Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) in Ter Apel.<sup>1</sup> The situation in Ter Apel had worsened, and for the first time in history, Doctors Without Borders had to intervene in The Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the people sleeping on the streets fled Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Eritrea, Yemen, and Somalia.<sup>3</sup> Refugees from Ukraine did not have to register at the IND in Ter Apel, and were therefore immediately provided refuge shelter upon arrival in The Netherlands.<sup>4</sup>

After a continuing increase of refugees from varying countries to the European continent, the Netherlands has been struggling with the ‘refugee crisis’. After the Russian invasion in Ukraine in the beginning of 2022, policies and public opinion regarding Ukrainian refugees revealed great differences compared to refugees from the global south. Different from the people stranded at the registration center in Ter Apel, Ukrainian refugees were being welcomed in the Netherlands.

It is for the first time in modern European history that the European continent has to ‘juggle’ and ‘balance’ different waves of migrants from different geographical locations, both from within the continent and from outside of the continent. The surge in refugees entering the country tends to garner a significant amount of media coverage and different media reports on the refugee situations in The Netherlands. It can be said that “socio-political, cultural and historical contexts play a key role in shaping media coverage of migration”<sup>5</sup> and, arguably, vice versa.

Against the backdrop of contemporary global migration, this thesis aims to investigate the representation of different groups in Dutch media discourse, with a particular focus on

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<sup>1</sup> “Asielcrisis Ter Apel: vannacht hebben 700 mensen buiten geslapen,” NOS, last modified August 24, 2022, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2441854-asielcrisis-ter-apel-vannacht-hebben-700-mensen-buiten-geslapen>

<sup>2</sup> “Crisis bij aanmeldcentrum Ter Apel,” Artsen Zonder Grenzen, Accessed May 1, 2023, <https://www.artsenzondergrenzen.nl/projecten/nederland-ter-apel/#:~:text=De%20meeste%20mensen%20komen%20uit,meteen%20terecht%20in%20een%20opvangcentrum>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Veronica O’Regan, Elaine Riordan, “Comparing the representation of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in the Irish and UK press,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 17:6 (2018): 763.

refugees from Ukraine and Syria. It seeks to dissect the dynamics by which narratives regarding different groups of refugees, either perpetuate or challenge each other. In the captivating realm of media, the power to shape perception, values, and beliefs unfolds with each frame and headline, making it a compelling topic for the examination of representation and its implications.

### 1.2 Problem statement, relevance, and research question

The different treatment of Ukrainian and Syrian refugees in a host country raises concerns regarding the equity and fairness of (international) responses to refugee crises. Despite facing rather similar challenges of forced migration, disparities in reception, integration, acceptance, and help, might suggest underlying biases. Keeping the influential nature of (print)media in consideration, media coverage of refugees might contribute to shaping public perception, reflecting public perceptions, or influencing policy and decision making. This thesis aims to examine whether the media's representation of refugees may perpetuate or challenge existing disparities in public opinion regarding both refugee groups.

The relevance of this topic finds itself in broader discussions regarding the role of media discourse in the representation of people, shaping of public opinions, but also vice versa, i.e., reflecting public opinion through media discourse. Understanding and studying media discourse in the context of the refugee crisis in The Netherlands serves as a case study to contribute to a broader understanding of the role of media in representing and thereby either perpetuating or reflecting attitudes towards diverging groups of refugees. The understanding of deep-rooted conscious and unconscious differences in discourse, might aid the humanization and understanding of certain groups caught in the refugee crisis.

In the case of this study, analyzing media discourse regarding refugees of different groups, could contribute to the understanding of the media's influence on public perception, political policies, humanitarian concerns, International Relations, media responsibility, and the broader implications of the refugee crisis. It will specifically investigate whether the media reflects public opinion. This thesis aims to answer the question: *To what extent does Dutch media either perpetuate or challenge public opinion regarding Syrian and Ukrainian refugees?* By looking into the representation of Syrian refugees after the surge of migrants entering The Netherlands in 2015 and comparing this to media reports of Ukrainian refugees in The Netherlands after the invasion by Russia in 2022, this thesis aims to investigate to what extent Dutch public opinion is reflected in Dutch newspapers.

The second chapter will provide a literature review on the concept of narratives and the representation of migrants in media. After the literature review, the third chapter will establish the methods and methodologies that will be applied for this research. Chapter four will function as an overview of the background on the public opinion on the reception of war refugees in The Netherlands. The latter will aid the contextualization of both cases further on in the fifth chapter. Chapter five will hold the content analysis and critical discourse analysis, including the discussion of the results and findings. Finally, the concluding chapter will summarize the main points of this thesis with the aim of answering the research question.

### 1.3 Contribution to Literature

Currently, existing literature has not yet broadly explored the representation of refugees originating from the European continent in (Dutch) media. This thesis aims to fill this gap. The movement of refugees across the European continent simultaneously with the movement of refugees from the global south to the European continent is a rather new phenomenon in modern history. There has been extensive research on the topic of Islamic migrants, mainly from the Global South, seeking refuge in European countries. Most of these studies revealed similar notions, emphasizing the ‘us vs. them’ narratives, tendencies to relate terrorism to the refugee crisis, and revealing implicit biases in media news reports.

By expanding on current research regarding Syrian refugees and adding the comparative component of Ukrainian refugees, this thesis aims to add a new perspective on underlying power dynamics in society, revealing implicit biases, and adding a critical analysis to the influential media news reports that reach great parts of society. The contribution to literature will be further explored in the literature review.

### 1.4 Definitions of Terms

The following terms and their definitions may be considered contested. It is exactly the nature of these terms that will be interesting to explore in the analytical chapters of this thesis. However, it is important to establish a clear understanding of the terms and their usage, for the following background chapter and literature review.

#### *1.4.2. Refugees*

The conceptualization of refugees requires an understanding of the complex nature of displacement, including the experiences of the individuals, but also the broader social, political,

and legal frameworks regarding forced migration. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refugees are defined as follows:

*“A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religions, nationality, political opinions, or membership in a particular social group.”*<sup>6</sup>

Unlike forced migrants and asylum seekers, refugees have a specific standing in international law. During the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the United Nations established a few foundational principles, with the focus on non-discrimination, non-penalization and non-refoulement of the refugees in question.<sup>7</sup>

As described by the European Commission, a forced migrant can be defined as “a person subject to a migratory movement in which an element of coercion exists, including threats to livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes”.<sup>8</sup> The term ‘forced migrant’ includes refugees and asylum seekers as well. When referring to refugees throughout the thesis, it is important to note that the term specifically denotes war refugees.

#### *1.4.3 Refugee Crisis*

The use of the term ‘refugee crisis’ is highly contested. By using the word ‘crisis,’ one suggests that the displacement of people is a temporal situation or occasion, whereas the displacement of people has been an ongoing issue due to varying factors (conflict, climate change, inequality, etc.). Additionally, the use of the word ‘crisis’ connotes the implication that refugees are considered problematic or a burden to their host countries, instead of people in need of protection, help, and guidance after forcefully having fled their home countries. Therefore, the

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<sup>6</sup> UNCHR, “What is a refugee?” accessed January 3, 2023, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/#:~:text=A%20refugee%20is%20someone%20who,in%20a%20particular%20social%20group.>

<sup>7</sup> UNCHR, “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” accessed January 2, 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees>

<sup>8</sup> “Forced migrant,” European Commission, Accessed May 1, 2023. [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/forced-migrant\\_en#:~:text=A%20person%20subject%20to%20a,environmental%20disasters%2C%20chemical%20or%20nuclear.](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/forced-migrant_en#:~:text=A%20person%20subject%20to%20a,environmental%20disasters%2C%20chemical%20or%20nuclear.)



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term 'refugee crisis' will mainly be referred to as 'refugee situation' or 'refugee emergency' from now on.

## Chapter 2: Literature review

### 2.1 Introduction

This literature review will explore current literature on the topic of refugee representation in media. First introducing narrative theory and its relation to representation, the literature review will then proceed to further explore literature regarding narratives and representation of refugees (in media). When examining existing literature, different positions can be identified. Main positions that arise are notions of the ‘us versus them’ narrative being apparent in media discussing refugees, the tendencies to relate the refugees and the refugee situation to terrorism and revealing implicit biases in media. By establishing a clear overview and critically engaging with existing literature on the respective topics, the literature review will then aim to clearly situate and contextualize the thesis by identifying gaps in the current academic debates.

### 2.2 Narrative theory and Representation

Narrative theory aims to understand the complex layers of human language. As described by Sadriu, by studying narratives one aims to unfold “the meanings of subtle or overt cues in storytelling, [...] as part of the human understanding of any given situation.”<sup>9</sup> According to narratology, the narrator, or the storyteller, is the body that conveys and shapes the narrative, communicating it, and subscribing to a specific truth that is pertinent to that of a “reference world.”<sup>10</sup> The extent to which a narrative is accepted, supported, and perceived depends on the the power and dominance of the narrator and the presented narrative. As argued by Sadriu, “narratives are instrumental to constituting norms and identities.”<sup>11</sup> By constituting norms and identities, narratives can construct (new) realities.<sup>12</sup>

Narratives play an important role in constructing representations of reality. Hayden White asserts that, in the context of historiography, the value people hold to narratives and narrativity emerges from the “desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and close of an image of life can only be imaginary.”<sup>13</sup> The latter entails that people

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<sup>9</sup> Behar Sadriu, “Narratives in International Studies Research,” *SOAS University of London* (2021), 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

<sup>13</sup> Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the *Representation* of Reality,” in *Narratology: An Introduction*, ed. by Landa Garcia, Jose Angel, and Jaen Susana (Abingdon Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 284.

long for representation of the world in the form of a narrative to be able to construct an understanding of reality.

Narrative techniques contribute to the representation of reality. These representations can be seen as part of a narratives and can signify broader concepts that are apparent within the asserted narrative. As discussed by White, representation is bound to be imaginary and different from reality.<sup>14</sup> Due to the process of focalization, a narrative, and therefore a representation, is depended on the perspective of the narrator. According to Taisuke Akimoto and Takashi Ogata, focalization is defined as a “narrative discourse technique that produces different narrative structures based on choosing specific perspectives from which to present a story.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it can be said that the perspective from which a narrative is constructed (focalization) is integral of the actual formation of the narrative, which influences representation. In the context of media, this could imply that newspaper articles and the narratives they contain, will always be subject to the perspective of the narrator. In the case of newspaper articles, the narrator could be the writer of the article, but also the corresponding newspaper agency it is published by.

### 2.3 The ‘Us versus Them’ Dichotomy and the Securitization of the Refugee

Recent studies on the representation of refugees in media have mainly studied the representation of refugees from the global south. Several studies argue that it is the “us vs. them” narrative that is most prevalent in current media when discussing refugees. As Aswad argues, the ‘us vs. them’ narrative” leads to the “depersonalization and dehumanization of forced migrants.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, O’Regan and Rioardan, who studied the representation of refugees in Irish and UK press, found that there is a higher frequency of the use of the word “they” when referring to forced migrants.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, Palmgren et al. analyzed Swedish reports by alternative media about immigration after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Their study mainly highlighted the differences in reports concerning Muslim immigrants and Ukrainian immigrants. They discovered that “alternative media relied heavily on Islamophobic expressions to demonstrate that Muslim

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Taisuke Akimoto and Takashi Ogata, ““Experimental Development of a Focalization Mechanism in an Integrated Narrative Generation System,” *Journal of Artificial Intelligence and Soft Computing Research* 5, no. 3 (2015): 177.

<sup>16</sup> Noor Ghazal Aswad, “Biased neutrality: the symbolic construction of the Syrian refugee in the New York Times,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 36:4 (2019): 370.

<sup>17</sup> O’Regan et al., “Comparing the representation,” 763.

immigrants are a subordinate group, while at the same time demonstrate the similarities of Ukrainians to ‘real’ Swedes.”<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, in his book *Global Media Representation on Islam and Muslim Issues*, Kasmani argues “through a discourse identified as ideological representation, the value, culture and even civilization of Islam are said to be subordinated and marginalized through the Western media’s propagation of a hegemonic ideological stance.”<sup>19</sup> Edward Said argues that the West has a distorted and essentialized image of the so-called ‘Orient,’ which is based on power relations and stereotypes, rather than actual knowledge.<sup>20</sup> By painting the picture of the ‘Orient’ as not being able to represent itself, the West has taken control of the narrative by distortedly representing the ‘Orient’ as less-civilized societies. Kasmani argues that this narrative and global discourse regarding the subordination of the ‘orient’ has been usefully sustained by transnational media, reinforcing the notion of the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy.<sup>21</sup>

Recent publications, however, argue that the sharp distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ has dulled down due to the rapid globalization of the world. According to Samiei, a more prevalent presence of Muslims worldwide, helped produce more sympathetic perspectives of Islam.<sup>22</sup> However, “global networks of terror” have been able to “reinforce hostility and otherness,” once again constructing a faulty representation of Islam in the West, associating refugees from Islamic countries with the latter.

O’Regan and Riordan have identified a similar component in public debate. They argue that media, and public debate, have a “conscious and unconscious tendency [...] to link terrorism with the refugee crisis,” in the context of refugees from countries where Islam is the dominant religion.<sup>23</sup> O’Regan and Riordan noted that terrorist attacks were often mentioned in articles referring to the refugee situation in Irish and UK press.

The idea of violence and safety being at the center of the debate when discussing the refugee situation in Europe, and the refugees individually, illustrates the securitization of migration. Jef Huysmans argues that the latter results from “powerful political and societal

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<sup>18</sup> Amanda Palmgren et al., «Refugees versus ‘refugees’: The toll of Islamophobia in Swedish alternative media’s reporting on Ukrainian asylum seekers,” *Media, culture and society* 45, no. 7 (2023): 1411.

<sup>19</sup> Mohd Faizal Kasmani, *Global Media Representation on Islam and Muslim Issues* (Malaysia: Usim press, 2017), 26.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> Kasmani, *Global Media Representation*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Mohammad Samiei, “Neo-Orientalism? The Relationship Between the West and Islam in Our Globalized World,” *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 7 (2010): 1150.

<sup>23</sup> O’Regan et al., “Comparing the representation,” 763.

dynamics reifying migration as a force which endangers the good life in west European societies.”<sup>24</sup> Additionally, media, political discourse and rhetoric have connected migration “to the destabilization of public order,”<sup>25</sup> framing it as a threat and potential danger to the security and stability of the national community and country.

The notion of belong to a community, which according to Benedict Anderson, can be defined as “an imagined political community.”<sup>26</sup> Anderson’s theory of *imagined communities*, consists of several aspects. First, communion refers to a feeling of connectedness to all that ‘belong’ to the same community.<sup>27</sup> Community itself is “conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” between people, conceptualizing the latter described feeling of connectedness. However, these feeling of communion and communities are imagined, because one will never know everyone that is part to this community.<sup>28</sup> Lastly, imagined communities are considered to be “inherently limited,” because “even the largest of them [...] have finite boundaries, beyond which lie other nations”.<sup>29</sup> In essence, Anderson argues that communities are inherently imagined and invented by people, and kept in place by laws and agreements, building on the imaginative idea of definite community or state.

The notion of a definite state plays into the idea of the previously mention ‘us vs. them’ narrative. The establishment of an (imagined) community, creates a partition between the community one is part of (‘us’), and the communities the refugee originates from (‘them’). The idea of a community can be linked to the conception of national identity. If nations are constructed through an imaginative idea of, for instance, a geographical space within borders (a country or a state), one could argue that, likewise, national identity is also imagined.

Research by Kotilainen and Pellander reveals an interesting new layer to the representation and corresponding perceptions of refugees in media. Their research reveals that “perception as to ‘deserving’ and ‘underdeserving’ refugees are linked to historically formed hierarchical notion of habitus and agency underpinned by racial and global-politics-connected motivations.”<sup>30</sup> By looking into the representations of refugees in Finnish media, they argue

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<sup>24</sup> Jef, Huysmans, “The European Union and the Securitization of Migration.” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 38, no. 5 (2000): 752.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 754.

<sup>26</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016), 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Noora Kotilainen, Saar Pellander, “(Not) Looking Like a Refugee: Symbolic Borders of Habitus in Media Representations of Refugees,” *Media history* 28, no. 2 (2022): 278.

that representation of refugees surpasses the often-discussed “victim/threat dichotomy.”<sup>31</sup> They present the concept of (symbolic) bordering; regulatory norms that dictate the eligibility, manner, and way in which certain individuals may be present in Western public spheres.<sup>32</sup> Their analysis showed that refugees from the Global South only evoke empathy “when inscribed with famine of suffering harsh physical conditions”, whereas, in the Finnish context white European political refugees did not have to demonstrate their hardship through (physical) frailty.<sup>33</sup> Similar to previously presented literature by O’Regan and Palgrem et al., the latter emphasizes the notion of othering and the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy.

Similar to the concept of imagined communities, Kotilainen and Pellander link the manner in which different groups of refugees are represented in media to the concept of habitus. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, refugees coming from the Global South are expected to visually symbolize a weak and frail ideation of a refugee. According to Kotilainen and Pellander, “global borders of habitus divide between those allowed to use given capital and ‘others,’ for whom this is deemed inappropriate.”<sup>34</sup> Habitus is defined what signifies belonging to a group and can be a great instrumental tool to “social and political differentiation: a way of fortifying societal, global, and regime-driven hierarchies.”<sup>35</sup> The latter suggests the way in which refugees are presented in media influences and/or shapes the perceptions of refugees; if refugees are presented too closely to ‘us,’ in this case the Finnish, they are perceived to not be deserving enough for feelings of empathy and compassion. Media holds the power of differentiation of groups.

## 2.4 Conclusion

Analysis of existing literature on the topic of the representation of refugees in media illuminates the presence of the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy in all debates. Within the debate of the ‘us versus them’ narrative, research shows the systemic connection of refugees to issues regarding terrorism and the securitization of refugees. While many studies briefly touch upon the representation of refugees that do not come from the Global South, there is often missing a more in-depth analysis and comparative angle to the research of the respective topic.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 2

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Currently existing literature has not yet broadly explored the representation of refugees originating from the European continent in (Dutch) media. This thesis aims to fill this gap. The movement of refugees across the European continent simultaneously with the movement of refugees from the global south to the European continent is a rather new phenomenon in modern history. There has been extensive research on the topic of Islamic migrants seeking refuge in European countries. These studies revealed similar notions, emphasizing the ‘us vs. them’ narratives, tendencies to relate terrorism to the refugee crisis, and revealing implicit biases in media news reports.

By expanding on current research regarding refugees from the Global South (Syrian refugees) and adding the comparative component to refugees from the European continent (Ukrainian refugees), this thesis aims to add a new perspective on underlying power dynamics in society, revealing implicit biases, and adding a critical analysis to the influential media news reports that reach great parts of society.

## Chapter 3: Background

To have a clear understanding of the general perception of refugees in The Netherlands, the next chapter will serve as a background chapter. To establish a foundational understanding of the contexts in which the thesis is situated, a brief introduction will be provided on the refugee situations in both 2015 and 2022. After that, the chapter will be looking into the different opinions that were apparent in the 2015 and 2022. This will be done by engaging with opinion panels and research done by different Dutch research institutes. This chapter aims to discuss the diverging opinions in relation to the reception of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in The Netherlands.

### 3.1 Influx of Syrian Refugees to The Netherlands in 2015

The Syrian civil war has been ongoing since 2011 and has led to widespread violence, humanitarian crises, and many Syrians seeking refuge elsewhere. In 2015, The number of Syrian refugees seeking asylum in The Netherlands reached an unsurpassed summit. The number of Syrian refugees had almost doubled compared to the year 2014.<sup>36</sup> The influx of Syrian refugees sparked discussions about whether The Netherlands should provide shelter.

### 3.2 The Invasion of Ukraine

Similar to the case of the influx of Syrian refugees, a significant number of Ukrainian refugees had to seek shelter in 2022. After Ukraine faced a sudden attack in February 2022 from its neighboring country Russia, millions of Ukrainians had to flee their homes and sought shelter in all of Europe. In the first three months after the invasion, The Netherlands had already accommodated more than 30.000 Ukrainian refugees.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> NOS, “De vluchtelingencrisis in vijf grafieken,” accessed December 20, 2023, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2063227-de-vluchtelingencrisis-in-vijf-grafieken>

<sup>37</sup> Rijksoverheid, “Cijfers opvang vluchtelingen uit Oekraïne in Nederland, accessed December 29, 2023, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/opvang-vluchtelingen-uit-oekraïne/cijfers-opvang-vluchtelingen-uit-oekraïne-in-nederland#:~:text=1%20juli%202022%3A%20Vluchtelingen%20uit,betaald%20werk%20hebben%20in%20Nederland.>



### 3.3 The Reception of war refugees

The Opinion Panel of *EenVandaag* has kept records of the support for the reception of (war)refugees over the past decade. *EenVandaag* is a current affairs television program that covers a wide range of topics, with a focus on politics and social issues. *EenVandaag* is renowned for its focus on in-depth analyses and reports on important events and issues in The Netherlands, airing on the Dutch public broadcast station AVROTROS.

As illustrated by the Opinion Panel of *EenVandaag* in the graph below (figure 1), the reception of war refugees in The Netherlands in 2015 was researched to be supported by 57% of the people, while 38% was against the reception of war refugees, and 5% did not know whether they supported the reception of war refugees. According to *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek*<sup>38</sup>, in 2015, the majority (43%) of refugees in The Netherlands originated from Syria, and over two-thirds of the follow-up migrants were Syrian.<sup>39</sup> Other nationalities that sought asylum in The Netherlands fleeing from war included, Eritrean, Iraqi, and Afghan. The latter reveals that the majority of registered refugees in The Netherlands in 2015, were war refugees. The graph below shows The Netherlands' support for the reception of the earlier mentioned groups of refugees in 2015.

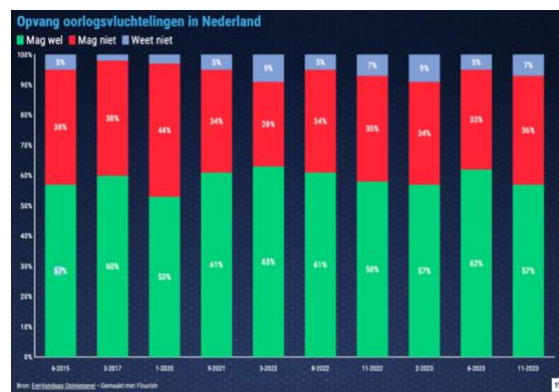


Figure 1 Support for the Reception of War Refugees in The Netherlands<sup>40</sup>

Figure 1 does not show a surge in support for the reception of Ukrainian refugees after the invasion of Russia in 2022. However, Ukraine specific research reveals a different division of

<sup>38</sup> Central Bureau for Statistics is the national statistical office of The Netherlands which collects and processes statistical information on Dutch society (e.g. population, economy, social trends, etc.).

<sup>39</sup> Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, "In 2015 twee keer zo veel asielzoekers en nareizigers als in 2014," accessed December 4, 2023, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2016/04/in-2015-twee-keer-zo-veel-asielzoekers-en-nareizigers-als-in-2014#:~:text=Vooral%20de%20oorlog%20in%20Syrië,staatlozen%20zijn%20Palestijnen%20uit%20Syrië.>

<sup>40</sup> EenVandaag, "Steun Opvang Vluchtelingen Algemeen," accessed December 4, 2023, [https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/peilingtrends/immigratie/steun-opvang-vluchtelingen-algemeen/.](https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/peilingtrends/immigratie/steun-opvang-vluchtelingen-algemeen/)

support. Figure 2 shows a graph with the support for the reception of specifically Ukrainian war refugees. Right after the invasion by Russia in February 2022, 84% was in support for the reception of Ukrainian refugees, 11% was against and 5% did not know. The support even increased to 89% in March of 2022.

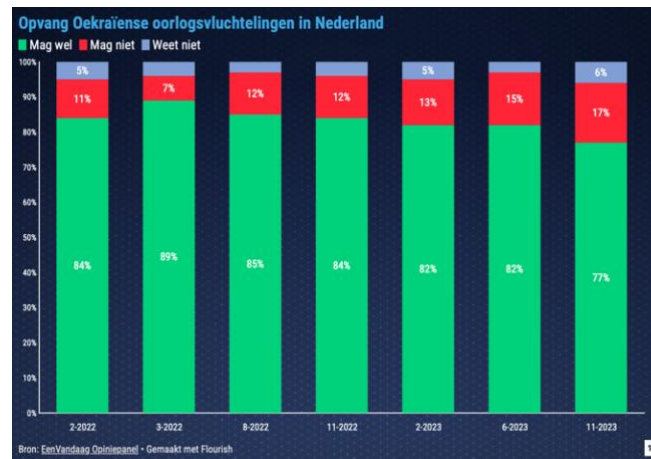


Figure 2 Support for the Reception of Ukrainian War Refugees in The Netherlands<sup>41</sup>

Findings by *I&O Research*<sup>42</sup>, reveal similar conclusions. Participants were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: “The Netherlands should generously accept Ukrainian refugees.”<sup>43</sup> Participants could choose between ‘agree,’ ‘neutral,’ ‘disagree,’ and ‘I don’t know.’ 78% agreed with the statement and 13% was neutral, 8% disagreed, and 2% did not know. The latter shows a mere 8% that is overtly against the reception Ukrainian refugees in The Netherlands. This is in great contrast to the support of reception of war refugees (from e.g. Syria and Eritrea) in 2015. As previously mentioned, 38% of The Netherlands was against the reception of war refugees in 2015. As can be seen in figure one, this percentage does decrease to 28% in March 2022, however, this can be attributed to the general support for the reception Ukrainian war refugees in 2022.

<sup>41</sup> EenVandaag, “Steun Opvang Oekraïense Vluchtelingen,” Januari 27, 2016,

<https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/peilingtrends/immigratie/steun-opvang-oekraïense-vluchtelingen/>

<sup>42</sup> I&O Research is a Dutch research and consultancy firm with a specialization and focus on social and public sector research often in collaboration with government agencies and NGO’s. I&O provides evidence-based information to aid decision-making and policymaking.

<sup>43</sup> I&O Research, “Oorlog in Oekraïne,” published March 2022,

<https://206.wpcdnnode.com/ioresearch.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/rapportage-oorlog-in-oekraïne-maart-22.pdf>

### 3.4 Summary

The background information provided in this chapter, shows a diverging amount of support for the reception of different groups of migrants. Both groups of refugees led to a great influx of war refugees going to The Netherlands. However, the reception of Ukrainian refugees received (and still receives) greater support from the public. Research and opinion panels show a significant difference in the support for Ukrainian war refugees and war refugees from the Global South. Therefore, this thesis will proceed to compare specifically media discourse regarding Syrian refugees and Ukrainian refugees.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

### 4.1 Corpus Linguistics and Discourse-Historical Approach

This study will mainly be situated within a poststructuralist framework but will use an interdisciplinary approach by engaging with different fields of study. Poststructuralism asserts that life (encompassing society, politics, and identities) is shaped by collectively shared ideas rather than being fixed, “it is not to be defined solely by science, but by the layers of history and future creations captured in wider senses of languages, thought, and experience.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, poststructuralist theories focus on the fluidity of the social world and the ability of individuals to construct this social world. Discourse and language are argued to be fundamental elements in the construction of our understanding of reality. Michel Foucault describes discourse as “a linguistic system which orders states and concepts.”<sup>45</sup>

Poststructuralist theory neatly ties in with the objectives of this thesis, as it explores the perception and diverging narratives regarding refugees in the Netherlands, in relation to existing (mass) media. Poststructuralist perspectives on narratives emphasize the contingent, constructed, and dynamic nature of narratives. They challenge the traditional notions of the coherence of narratives, and aim to explore different perspectives, revealing power relations and the role of discourse in shaping narratives, their interpretation, and opinions.

This thesis will combine quantitative with qualitative methods, namely, content analysis and critical discourse analysis. Content analysis is useful to examine surface-level characteristics of the news reports (for instance frequency of keywords or themes). Critical discourse analysis will function as an expansion of the findings made through the content analysis. It will help to delve deeper into underlying power structures, ideologies, and social contexts that shape the news reports. By combining both methods, this thesis will be able to establish a more comprehensive understanding of the text, addressing both the “what” (content analysis) and the “how” and “why” (CDA) aspects of the respective discourse.

The main objective of this thesis is to identify patterns in media coverage about certain groups of refugees in Dutch print media and to critically analyze and compare how they are

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<sup>44</sup> James William, *Understanding Poststructuralism* (London: Routledge, 2014), 16.

<sup>45</sup> Lene Hansen, “Poststructuralism,” in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014).

constructed. Similar to a study by O'Regan and Riordan on the representation of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in the Irish and UK press, this study will integrate corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis.<sup>46</sup> Essentially, the latter entails a combination of content analysis and critical discourse analysis. "A corpus-based critical discourse analytical approach combines quantitative and qualitative methods making it possible to examine the data from different perspectives, enhancing the methodology and giving a wider range of findings than would be otherwise possible."<sup>47</sup>

Starting with Corpus Linguistics, which provides a comprehensive overview of the data, content analysis allows to identify intriguing patterns and potentially significant points of interest in the data. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) enables a more detailed examination of specific data revealed through the latter mapping process. The initial focus involves a corpus-based analysis, which aids highlighting noteworthy features for further investigation. Subsequently, Critical Discourse Analysis serves as a qualitative framework for interpreting and explaining the earlier identified potential patterns.<sup>48</sup> Incorporating elements from CDA will provide valuable insights that complement the quantitative approach of corpus linguistics. CDA's primary emphasis on the role of language in relation to ideology and unequal power relations align with the concerns of this particular study.

The approach that will be used to conduct CDA is the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) as presented by Ruth Wodak. DHA is an interdisciplinary approach that combines linguistics, discourse analysis, and social theory to study the relations between language and structures in society. With its emphasis on historical contexts, it examines how discourses evolve over time and how they are influenced by historical, social, and political factors.<sup>49</sup> Wodak mentions, "in investigating historical, organizational and political topics and texts, the discourse-historical approach attempts to integrate a large quantity of available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive 'events' are embedded."<sup>50</sup> A way to combat subjective biases when conducting such research, is by following "the principle of triangulation."<sup>51</sup> By basing the analysis on a "variety

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<sup>46</sup> O'Regan et al., "Comparing the representation," 748.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 748.

<sup>48</sup> Paula Baker, Tony McEnery, "A corpus-based approach to discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in UN and Newspaper texts," *Journal of Language and Politics* 4 (2): 293.

<sup>49</sup> Ruth Wodak, "The discourse-historical approach," in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: Sage, 2001), 64.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

of empirical data as well as background information,” a more comprehensive analysis can be constructed.

Through the content analysis, a list will be compiled, investigating word frequency as presented by Weber.<sup>52</sup> This word frequency list will be the foundation for further critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis provides the right tools to analyze the relation of the discourse used in news reports, to undercover power dynamics and (implicit) biases in the representation of refugees.

The limitations of this research can be found in the often reductive nature of content analysis. It reduces complex textual data to quantifiable elements, in this case word frequencies. This may oversimplify the data and lead to missing the nuances of these findings. Additionally, content analysis might lack a deeper understanding of the social and historical context in which the content is produced. By combining content analysis with CDA, one applies an additional dimension to the analysis, providing more contextual meaning to the data uncovered by the content analysis. CDA, however, might be influenced by personal bias and highly depends on the researcher’s perspective, leaving room for much personal interpretation.

#### 4.2 The samples

This study will use a sample of 20 newspaper articles from each of the following newspapers: *De Telegraaf*, *NRC*, and *De Volkskrant*, creating a sample size of 60 articles per comparative case. All three newspapers are some of the daily most read papers in The Netherlands.<sup>53</sup> *De Telegraaf* is generally considered a right-wing newspaper, the *NRC* more central, whereas *De Volkskrant* is generally viewed to be more left-wing. These three newspapers were chosen with the goal of creating an even representation of varying political orientations as far as this is possible.

The samples were taken from the database of LexisNexis by searching for the appearance of the term “Syrische vluchtelingen” (English: “Syrian refugees”) in newspaper articles between the 1<sup>st</sup> of October in 2015 up until the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2016, additionally filtering on the base of the respective newspapers. To compile a sample of 20 articles per newspaper, every other or every third article was selected to be added to the sample.

A similar selection process was applied for to compile data on the case of Ukrainian refugees. By searching for the appearance of the term “Oekraïense vluchtelingen” (English:

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<sup>52</sup> Robert Philip Weber, *Basic Content Analysis* (Los Angeles: Sage, 1990).

<sup>53</sup> Nationaal Onderzoek Multimedia, “Bereikeijfers,” accessed December 5, 2023, <https://www.nommedia.nl>.

Ukrainian refugees”) in articles between the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022 up until the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 2022, additionally filtering on the base of the respective newspapers. Similar to the articles about Syrian refugees, to compile a sample of 20 articles per newspaper, every other or every third article was selected and added to the sample.

The study begins by using the program MAXQDA to create a frequency list of the top 30 most appearing words in articles related to Syrian refugees in the three Dutch newspapers. All 60 articles by the three newspapers were added to a conjoined folder in MAXQDA, to generate a complete frequency list per comparative case. The frequency list and the analysis thereof will be presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: Identifying Themes and Discourse Analysis

The following chapter will analyze and discuss the results and findings. The first part of the chapter will provide the content analysis by presenting a frequency list of the 30 most frequently used words in the newspaper articles analyzed per comparative case. To ensure a substantial analysis and a selection of relevant words, the list was manually filtered by removing general words, which included words like ‘and,’ ‘the,’ ‘a,’ ‘or,’ etcetera. From this frequency list, the words will be divided according to three themes that can be identified by analyzing the frequency list. These themes will be presented in an overview table. The second part of the chapter will take a closer look at the findings from the content analysis, using critical discourse analysis to further examine the themes identified in the first section of this chapter.

### 5.1 The Content Analysis: Identifying Themes

Table 2 on the next page presents a frequency list of the top thirty most frequently used words in both newspaper articles about Syrian refugees and Ukrainian refugees. When analyzing the frequency list, the following themes can be loosely identified as: I. Pronouns, II. Locations, and III. Times and Quantities. The table below has divided the words per category and comparative case.

Table 1. Overview categories<sup>54</sup>

	<b>Syrian refugees</b>	<b>Ukrainian refugees</b>
<b>Pronouns</b>	Hij, ik, hun, we, je, haar, zij, mijn, onze	Ze, we, ik, je, hij, hun
<b>Locations</b>	Syrisch, uit, bij, Europa, Turkije, Nederland, land, Syrië, Syriërs, komen, daar, Nederlands, gaan, hier	In, voor, Oekraïense, Oekraïners, bij, Nederland, opvang, naar, Oekraïne, gemeenten
<b>Time and quantities</b>	Nu, al, jaar, veel, alleen	Meer, al, over, veel

<sup>54</sup> English translation of the table can be found in Chapter 7: Appendix.



Table 2. Frequency list

<b>Syrian Refugees</b>	<b>English translation</b>	<b>Freq.</b>	<b>Docs.</b>	<b>% of docs.</b>	<b>Ukrainian Refugees</b>	<b>English translation</b>	<b>Freq.</b>	<b>Docs.</b>	<b>% of docs.</b>
vluchtelingen	Refugees	372	60	100,00	in	In	962	60	100,00
naar	To (Describing movement)	335	59	93,65	voor		539	59	95,16
hij	He	306	41	68,33	vluchtelingen	For Refugees	496	60	100,00
ik	I, Me	276	28	46,67	niet	Not	351	54	87,10
Europa	Europe	179	38	63,33	ze	They, she	227	47	75,81
Syrische	Syrian	178	60	100,00	Oekraïense	Ukrainian	225	60	100,00
Turkije	Turkey	175	34	56,67	Oekraïners	Ukrainians	216	44	70,97
hun	They, their	174	47	78,33	bij	By, at	183	50	80,65
we	We	156	36	60,00	nederland	The Netherlands	183	47	75,81
je	You	154	29	48,33	we	We	180	42	67,74
mensen	People	136	41	68,33	ik	I, me	178	29	46,77
nu	Now	131	45	75,00	mensen	People	175	49	79,03
Nederland	The Netherlands	121	39	65,00	opvang	Shelter, accommodation	167	43	69,35
al	Already	115	43	71,67	nu	Now	166	52	83,87
jaar		113	43	71,67	naar	To (describing movement)	161	52	83,87
veel	Many	108	40	66,67	worden	To become	156	49	79,03
haar	Her	107	27	45,00	je	You	155	28	45,16
land	Country	105	39	65,00	dan	Then	154	45	72,58
waar	Where	104	41	68,33	Oekraïne	Ukraine	139	47	75,81
syrië	Syria	94	35	58,33	gemeenten	Municipalities	136	28	45,16
zij	She, they	93	32	53,33	meer	More	132	42	67,74
asielzoekers	Asylum seekers	92	21	35,00	tot		132	41	66,13
mijn	My	84	20	33,33		Until			
syriërs	Syrians	83	27	45,00	al	Already	130	47	75,81
komen	To come	77	36	60,00	over	Over, in, about	127	45	72,58
daar	There	75	28	46,67	hij	He	120	29	46,77
nederlands	Dutch	75	59	98,33	door	Due to, through	116	48	77,42
gaan	Tot go	72	37	61,67	hun	Their	112	39	62,90
hier	here	72	28	46,67	veel	Many	97	34	54,84
onze	our	68	40	63,49	wat	What	95	34	54,84
					Asielzoekers	Asylum seekers	94	23	37,10

### 5.1.1. Pronouns

The theme ‘pronouns’ encompasses the use of certain pronouns in either comparative case. As illustrated in the frequency list, in the newspaper articles regarding Syrian refugees, the Dutch word for “their” can be found in 78,3% of the articles, similar to the frequency of “our” of 63,5%. The articles concerning Ukrainian refugees shows a slightly different frequency of the use of these words. 62,9% of the articles contained the word “their.” The word “our” is not present in the top 30 of words, however, the word for “we” appears in 46,7% of the articles.

Words like “their,” “we,” and “our” evoke an association to the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy, which was also extensively discussed in the literature review. This narrative involves the framing of social, political, and/or cultural issues as a dichotomy between and in-group (us) and an out-group (them). According to the frequency list, both comparative cases utilize words that might correlate to the us versus them dichotomy. Utilizing insights from discourse analyst Wodak, specifically drawing upon the discourse-historical approach, the second part of this chapter will conduct a discourse analysis to further engage with the data and establish whether there is a differentiation to be found in the use of these words in both comparative cases.

### *5.1.2 Locations*

The theme of locations refers to physical locations, for instance countries and cities, nationalities and prepositions that imply a location or a movement. In articles discussing Syrian Refugees the word ‘to’ (indicating movement towards something or somewhere) appeared a total of 335 times in the newspaper articles. The same word appeared 161 times in articles discussing Ukrainian refugees. Interestingly, the articles regarding Syrian refugees, seem to mention countries/locations outside of Syria and The Netherlands. Words that were apparent in the 30 most used words are ‘Turkey’ and ‘Europe,’ whereas the list of words in case of the articles on Ukrainian refugees seems to include merely words of the countries in question; ‘Ukraine’ and ‘The Netherlands.’ Additionally, articles about Ukrainian refugees frequently also mention the words ‘shelter’ and ‘municipalities.’ The context in which these words are used will be further analyzed and explored in the second part of this chapter.

### *5.1.3 Time and Quantities*

The theme of time and quantities includes all the words referring to either a word indicating time and/or quantities. In the case of the newspaper articles regarding Syrian refugees, words like ‘now’ (used in 75% of articles), ‘already’ (present in 71,7% of the articles), ‘many’ (used in 66,7% of articles), and ‘year(s)’ (in 71,7% of articles) are frequently used. In articles discussing Ukrainian refugees the words ‘more’ (present in 67,7% of the articles), ‘already’ (appeared in 75,8% of the articles), and ‘many’ (present in 54,8% of the articles) are frequently used. The context in which these words are used will be further analyzed and explored in the second part of this chapter.

## 5.2 *The Critical Discourse Analysis: Explaining Themes*

The next part of the chapter will conduct the CDA through the Discourse-Historical approach. The MAXQDA frequency list program has the function to browse through each newspaper article that mentions a selected word. By manually reading through the articles that mention certain pronouns, locations, and time and quantities, some underlying narratives were possible to be traced. The following section of the chapter will aim to conduct a critical discourse analysis after having manually engaged with the articles in question.

### 5.2.1 *“Our Country:” the ‘Us versus Them’ Dichotomy*

A closer investigation of the newspaper articles reveals the presence of the ‘us versus them’ narrative in newspaper articles discussing Syrian refugees. Articles seem to emphasize that Syrian refugees are seeking shelter in a country that is not ‘theirs’. The latter is demonstrated by the following excerpts:

*“Last year, almost 60.000 asylum seekers and ‘family reunification migrants’ entered **our country**”*<sup>55</sup>

*“The Netherlands has already contributed 15 million for Africa; should **our country** transfer 117 million euros for aid to the Syrians in Turkey?”*<sup>56</sup>

*“Shelter in **our village**, without us being allowed to say anything about it.”*<sup>57</sup>

*“Even in the case that most Syrians do indeed long for a return to **their homeland** as soon as possible, that doesn’t say much.”*<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Unknown, “Die andere helft asielzoekers,” *De Telegraaf*, May 2, 2016.

Original text in Dutch: “Vorig jaar kwamen bijna 60.000 asielzoekers en ‘nareizigers’ ons land binnen.”

<sup>56</sup> Unknown, “Miljarden tegen vluchtelingenstroom,” *De Telegraaf*, November 13, 2016.

Original text in Dutch: “Nederland droeg al 15 miljoen bij voor Afrika, Zou ons land 117 miljoen euro moeten gireren voor de hulp aan de Syriërs in Turkije?”

<sup>57</sup> Marjon Bolwijn and Susanne Geuze, “Ze pikken onze huizen in!” *De Volkskrant*, October 10, 2015.

Original text in Dutch: “Opvang in ons dorp, zonder dat we er wat over mogen zeggen.”

<sup>58</sup> Maarten Huygen, “Geef Syrische jongere een horizon,” *NRC*, November 3, 2015.

Original text in Dutch: “Zelfs in het geval dat de meeste Syriërs inderdaad verlangen naar een zo snel mogelijke terugkeer naar hun thuisland, dan zegt dat niet zo veel.”

Utterances such as “our country,” “our village,” and “their homeland” create a clear distinction between the host country and the country the refugee had fled from, playing into the sense of belonging to (the community of) a geographical place. As also briefly discussed in the literature review, Benedict Anderson has presented the concept of imagined communities. He defines a community to be “conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” between people, referring to a feeling of connectedness.<sup>59</sup> Anderson argues that communities are inherently imagined and invented by people, and kept in place by laws and agreements, building on the imaginative idea of definite community or state.

The newspaper articles about Ukrainian refugees do not show a specific dominance of the ‘us versus them’ narrative, except for one specific article that explicitly discusses the differences in treatment of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. In the excerpt below, the newspaper article overtly asserts that human evolution is the reason behind different treatments of groups of refugees.

*“Evolutionarily, we are programmed to first help people who carry **our genes**: our children, our brothers, and sisters. The next circle to whom you provide assistance is the people in your **own social group**. Within that, we are often generous because an unwritten law suggests that we will receive that help in return when needed. If you provide help **outside your own group**, there is no reciprocity. Evolutionarily, there is therefore no benefit in doing so. In the animal kingdom, species that are primarily focused on their own group and are stingy towards the outside world have the best chances of survival.”<sup>60</sup>*

By explaining that “we” (Dutch people) feel inclined to help Ukrainian refugees because they are part of the “own social group” of Dutch people and referring to Syrian refugees as people “outside” of this group, the newspaper article is overtly ‘othering’ Syrian refugees. Besides

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<sup>59</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> Charlotte Huisman en Anneke Stoffelen, “Syriërs helpen Oekraïners, al doet dubbele standaard soms wel pijn,” *De Volkskrant*, March 22, 2022.

Original text in Dutch: “Evolutionair zijn we geprogrammeerd om als eerste de mensen te helpen die onze genen dragen: onze kinderen, onze broers en zussen. De volgende kring aan wie je hulp verleent zijn de mensen in je eigen sociale groep. Daarbinnen zijn we vaak genereus, omdat een ongeschreven wet zegt dat we die hulp terugkrijgen als dat nodig is. Als je buiten je eigen groep hulp verleent, is er niet die wederkerigheid. Evolutionair is daar dus geen belang bij. In de dierenwereld hebben soorten die vooral op de eigen groep gericht zijn en gierig naar de buitenwereld de beste overlevingskansen.”

Said's theory of Orientalism and Anderson's Imagined Communities, the concept of habitus as presented by Kotilainen and Pellander can be applied here. As discussed in the literature review, habitus is defined as the factor (or factors) that signify belonging to a group.<sup>61</sup> The latter includes visualities that might signify people belonging to a group, for instance, their clothing and (visible) capital, but could also include race, ethnicity, or even nationality.

### 5.2.2 Repatriation and Shelter: Moving towards Different Locations

As presented in Table 1 and 2, the newspaper articles regarding Syrian refugees mentioned more different geographical locations than the articles about Ukrainian refugees. A closer investigation of the data shows that the articles regarding Syrian refugees often discuss the topic of repatriation, something which is not apparent when examining the newspaper article regarding Ukrainian refugees.

*“Everyone understands that people living in a war situation like in Syria, should be taken in and provided with safety, at least until the war is over and they can **return to their home country**”*<sup>62</sup>

*“Last week, a Syrian in Heumensoord inquired about the possibilities of **returning to his home country** through Turkey.”*<sup>63</sup>

*“Even in the case that most Syrians indeed do long for a **return to their home country** as soon as possible, that does not say much.”*<sup>64</sup>

The word ‘to’ (naar in Dutch) in the Newspaper articles discussing Syrian refugees, often refers to the movement of going back to Syria. Oftentimes discussing both the possibilities for

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<sup>61</sup> Kotilainen and Pellander, “(Not) Looking Like A Refugee,” 278.

<sup>62</sup> Unknown, “Die andere helft asielzoekers,” *De Telegraaf*, May 2, 2026.

Original text in Dutch: “Iedereen begrijpt dat mensen die in een oorlogssituatie zoals in Syrië leven, opgevangen moeten worden en veiligheid moeten krijgen, in ieder geval tot de oorlog is afgelopen en ze weer terug kunnen naar hun thuisland.”

<sup>63</sup> Nadia Ezzeroili and Anneke Stoffelen, “Is opvang in tenten onverantwoord?” *De Volkskrant*, October 16, 2015.

Original text in Dutch: “Vorige week informeerde een Syriër op Heumensoord al naar de mogelijkheden om via Turkije terug te keren naar zijn geboorteland.”

<sup>64</sup> Ronald Veldhuizen, “Klopt dit wel?” *De Volkskrant*, October 20, 2015.

Original text in Dutch: “Zelfs in het geval dat de meeste Syriërs inderdaad verlangen naar een zo snel mogelijke terugkeer naar hun thuisland, dan zegt dat niet zo veel.”

refugees to return, or their own willingness to do so. Whereas the word ‘naar’ in articles regarding Syrian refugees is often used in the sense of moving towards a place, a homonymic definition of the word is applied in articles discussing Ukrainian refugees. The word ‘naar,’ which was previously translated as ‘to’ (indicating movement), in this case can be translated as ‘for.’

*“All municipalities are currently actively **searching for** vacant offices, hotels, holiday parks, sports halls, and cruise ships.”<sup>65</sup>*

*“All municipalities are **searching for** suitable location in their own way.”<sup>66</sup>*

The excerpts above illustrate that, in the case of newspapers discussing Ukrainian refugees, the focus lies on providing suitable shelter. This indicates a movement of refugees towards the Netherlands, whereas in the case of Syrian refugees, the newspaper articles highlighted the movement away from the Netherlands. Syrian refugees are expected to, eventually, (want to) return to Syria. Remarkably, the words ‘opvang’ (roughly translated as ‘shelter’ or ‘accommodation’) and ‘gemeente’ (municipality) are also frequently present in newspaper articles about Ukrainian refugees. The excerpt below illuminates the eagerness of the municipalities to provide accommodation for the Ukrainian refugees. As the two quotes above also suggest, the willingness of municipalities to provide shelter for Ukrainian refugees is a broadly discussed topic, this was less so apparent in the case of the Syrian refugees where the focus lies on their retaliation.

*“As long as there is a need for **shelter** due to the war in Ukraine, Ukrainians can use the houses, after which regular housing applicant can move in. This month, a few of the other **municipalities** have also announced that they are working on (semi)permanent housing for Ukrainians.”<sup>67</sup>*

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<sup>65</sup>Nadia Ezzeroili, “Kabinet beschouwt Oekraïense vluchtelingen als landelijke crisis en tuigt speciale organisatie op,” *De Volkskrant*, March 9, 2022.

Original text in Dutch: “Alle gemeenten zijn momenteel hard op zoek naar leegstaande kantoren, hotels, vakantieparken, sporthallen en cruiseschepen.”

<sup>66</sup>Peter de Graaf en Pieter `hotse `Smit, “Wie heeft er nog stapel-bedden in de aanbidding?” *De Volkskrant*, March 26, 2022.

Original text in Dutch: “Alle gemeenten zoeken op een eigen wijze naar geschikte plekken.”

<sup>67</sup>Charlotte Huisman, “Ineens kan het snel” Schagen bouwt 300 prefabhuizen voor Oekraïners,” *De Volkskrant*, April 21, 2022.

In case of the articles on Syrian refugees, the words “Turkey” and “Europe” were oftentimes utilized through the discussions of reception of refugees in the region of their country of origin or through the discussion of distributing the Syrian refugees across Europe. The latter illustrates the tendency of the newspapers to remove the mention of The Netherlands accommodating and providing shelter for Syrian refugees, and thereby (un)consciously absolving The Netherlands of the responsibility to aid this group of war refugees.

### 5.2.3 Humanization of Ukrainian Refugees

Upon closer inspection of the newspaper articles, the use of words indicating time and quantities do not particularly highlight clear narratives. However, it is noteworthy to mention the frequent use of the word for ‘many/a lot’ in relation to humanizing language with regards to Ukrainian refugees.

*“A lot of people are exhausted and hungry after a journey of three days. [...] We should offer them a warm welcome with soup, sandwiches, and a cup coffee or tea.”<sup>68</sup>*

The first part of the quotes emphasizes the suffering of Ukrainian refugees. Highlighting that most of the refugees from Ukraine have experienced difficult challenges before arriving into The Netherlands. The second part of the quote illustrates the inclination to help the Ukrainian refugees by offering them a warm welcome in The Netherlands. The words that were categorized under the theme of time and quantities, did not reveal any general identifiable narratives in the case of the articles about Syrian refugees.

## 5.3 Discussion

The analysis has revealed several interesting findings with regards to media discourse about Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Dutch newspapers. The most prominent identifiable narrative carries the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy. Close reading of the data shows great use of the

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Original text in Dutch: “Zolang door de oorlog in Oekraïne opvang nodig is, kunnen Oekraïners de woningen betrekken, daarna kunnen reguliere woningzoekende er in/ Ook een handjevol andere gemeenten heeft deze maand al aangekondigd te werken aan (semi)permanente woningen voor Oekraïners.”

<sup>68</sup> Nadia Ezzeroili, “Gastgezinnen staan klaar voor Oekraïense vluchtelingen, maar het koppelen laat op zich wachten,” March 14, 2022.

Original text in Dutch: “Veel mensen zijn uitgeput en hongerig na een reis van drie dagen. [...] We zullen bieden ze een warm welkom met soep, broodjes en een kopje thee of koffie.”-

possessive pronouns ‘our’ and ‘their’ in case of the Syrian refugees, often in combination with the reference to a geographical place, creating a clear distinction between where Syrian refugees belong and where they do not, when approaching the case through the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy. Similarly, O’Regan et al., identified a high frequency of the word ‘they’ in Irish and UK press about refugees.<sup>69</sup> Even though the frequency list showed a great number of articles containing the words ‘our’ and ‘their’ in case of the Ukrainian refugees, closer inspection of the material and CDA did not reveal any noteworthy findings.

The ‘othering’ of groups, in this case Syrian refugees, goes hand in hand with perpetuating the “hegemonic ideological stance”<sup>70</sup> The dichotomy has its roots in power relations and stereotypes. By actively engaging with the ‘us versus them’ narrative in media, the process of othering can result in the ‘marginalization and subordination” of Syrian refugees.<sup>71</sup>

Further analysis of the data shows that articles about Syrian refugees often discuss the topic of repatriation, something which is not apparent when examining the newspaper article regarding Ukrainian refugees. It is important to note that this disparity can be attributed to the longer enduring refugee situation of Syrians in both The Netherlands and Europe. At the time of publishing of the articles used for this research, the Syrian Civil War had been ongoing for 5 years. In the years preceding the articles, thousands of Syrian refugees had already sought accommodation in The Netherlands. Discussions regarding repatriation can be attributed to the longer lasting movement of Syrian refugees to The Netherlands.

Contrary to the Syrian refugees, Ukrainian refugees have not been part of the constant wave of refugees entering The Netherland before the publishing of the utilized articles. Articles about Ukrainian refugees are mainly focused on discussing providing suitable shelter. The articles were written directly after the invasion by Russia, right as thousands of Ukrainian refugees sought shelter all around Europe. It was the first time since World War II a major conflict unfolded on the European continent, resulting in high numbers of displaced persons moving within the continent.

In contrast to the frequent mention of shelter in Dutch Municipalities for Ukrainian refugees, articles regarding Syrian refugees showed a more frequent mention of locations outside of The Netherlands, often discussing Turkey’s and Europe’s overall role in the reception of refugees. The latter illustrates the tendency of the newspapers to remove the mention of The

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<sup>69</sup> O’Regan et al., “Comparing the representation,” 763.

<sup>70</sup> Kasmani, *Global Media Representation*, 26.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*



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Netherlands accommodating and providing shelter for Syrian refugees, and thereby (un)consciously absolving The Netherlands of the responsibility to aid this group of war refugees.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

As the culmination of this thesis, this final chapter will answer the research question with help of the analysis and the literature review. This thesis examined to what extent Dutch newspapers either perpetuate or challenge public opinion regarding Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands. By comparing prominent narratives about both refugee groups in newspapers, after having identified themes in most frequently used words, an analysis was conducted to further expand existing literature on narratives and representation of refugees in media.

In the literature review, it was established that current literature has mainly focused on the perceptions and narratives regarding refugees from the Global South, with little research comparing these refugees to refugees from the European continent. It is the first time in modern history that The Netherlands, and Europe, have had to face the challenges of waves of refugees both from within the European continent and outside of the continent. By expanding on current research regarding refugees from the Global South (Syrian refugees) and adding the comparative component to refugees from the European continent (Ukrainian refugees), this thesis aimed to add a new perspective on underlying power dynamics in society, revealing implicit biases, and adding a critical analysis to the influential media news reports that reach great parts of society.

### 6.1 Answering the Research Question and Further Research

The research question for this thesis was: *To what extent does Dutch media either perpetuate or challenge public opinion regarding Syrian and Ukrainian refugees?* To answer this question, it is best to first revisit the public opinion regarding Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. Information from several opinion panels in the Netherlands showed a disparity in support of the reception of both groups of refugees. Generally speaking, there is an overall greater support for the reception of Ukrainian refugees than Syrian refugees. According to the Dutch public, Ukrainian refugees are more deserving of shelter in The Netherlands than any other groups of war refugees.

The research started with a content analysis and a frequency list of the 30 most frequently used words in articles discussing Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. From this list, three main themes of words were identified, which were used as a starting point for the discourse analysis further on. The critical discourse analysis showed multiple disparities in the newspaper articles.

Articles about Syrian refugees revealed to heavily (either consciously or unconsciously) utilize ‘othering’ language when discussing Syrian refugees. Through specific use of possessive pronouns like ‘our’ and ‘their,’ often in relation to geographical places, the newspaper articles played into the notion of Syrian refugees not belonging in The Netherlands. It could be said that the latter is a perpetuation of the Dutch public opinion. However, the act of ‘othering’ does not directly imply being against the reception of war refugees, it necessitates a nuanced consideration of multiple factors and perspectives. Notwithstanding that the act of othering stems from an unequal power relation and is based on the perpetuation of stereotypes, as presented by Kasmani. The newspaper articles might not overtly be against the support of the reception of Syrian refugees, its discourse can still perpetuate certain opinions that are present in (Dutch) society.

Secondly, close reading of the data showed the predominance of the discussion of repatriation of Syrian refugees, which can be strictly contrasted with newspapers predominantly discussing the provision of shelter and accommodation in context of the Ukrainian refugees. In contrast to the act of othering not overtly perpetuating Dutch public opinion, the frequent discussion of the repatriation of Syrian refugees more clearly shows a disparity in support of the accommodation and reception of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. It is, however, important to note that the analyzed articles were written at a time where the wave of Syrian refugees had been ongoing for a longer period of time due to the continuation of the Syrian civil war. The articles regarding the Ukrainian refugees were written right after the escalation of the situation in Ukraine. It would be interesting to further research whether media discourse on Ukrainian refugees will shift to a more ‘repatriation oriented’ discourse as the conflict in Ukraine prevails.

Lastly, newspaper articles about Ukrainian refugees tend to present more humanizing language with regards to their reception in The Netherlands. The latter was not prominent in the articles discussing Syrian refugees. The two last findings can be considered perpetuations of the public being more in support of the reception of Ukrainian war refugees.

Overall, it can be said that Dutch media discourse perpetuates public opinion regarding Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. However, it is important to note that due to pivotal differences in the context of each comparative case, this thesis presents a more nuanced outcome. This thesis shows that media discourse perpetuates and even represents public opinions in the newspapers. However, further research is needed to solidify this conclusion.

## 6.2 Further Research and Limitations

As mentioned previously, it would be helpful to apply a similar research method to the analysis of newspaper articles discussing Ukrainian refugees a few years after the invasion of Russia in Ukraine. The latter with the intention of tracing whether media discourse has shifted over time, but also to identify whether public opinion regarding Ukrainian refugees might change. It would be interesting to then revisit the findings on media discourse regarding Syrian refugees as presented in this thesis. Additionally, to research the practical impact of media discourse on policy-making, it would be compelling to draw parallels between (Dutch) policy regarding refugees. Either refugees in general, or specific to Ukrainian and Syrian refugees. Due to the scope of this thesis and time constraints, it was not possible to add this extra layer of analysis into the research.

The main limitation of this thesis involves the interpretative nature of CDA. In case of CDA, results can be highly influenced by the perspective of the analyst and any existing biases. By combining CDA with content analysis, this thesis aimed to add a quantifiable layer to study. However, the interpretation of the frequency list as presented in chapter 5 may also be subject to personal interpretation and bias.

### 6.3 Final thoughts

As briefly discussed in the introduction, the disparities in treatment of Ukrainian and Syrian refugees in The Netherlands raises concerns regarding the equity and fairness of responses to refugee crises. Despite facing rather similar challenges of forced migration, disparities in reception, integration, and acceptance might suggest underlying biases. Keeping in consideration the influential nature of media, media discourse of refugees might contribute to shaping public perception, reflecting public perceptions, or influencing policy and decision making. This thesis revealed that differences in public opinion regarding Syrian and Ukrainian refugees is traceable in the three of the most read newspapers in The Netherlands. Addressing and potentially rectifying the disparities in media discourse of war refugees with different nationalities is a crucial step towards fostering empathy, understanding, and, ultimately, a more equitable and inclusive society.

## Chapter 7: Appendix

English translation of table 1.

	<b>Syrian refugees</b>	<b>Ukrainian refugees</b>
<b>Pronouns</b>	He, I, their, we, you, her, she/they, my/mine, our	Ze, we, ik, je, hij, hun
<b>Locations</b>	Syrians, from, at, Europe, Turkey, The Netherlands, country, Syria, Syrians, to come, there, Dutch, go, here	In, for/in front, Ukrainian, Ukrainians, at, The Netherlands, shelter/accommodation, to, Ukraine, municipalities
<b>Time and quantities</b>	Now, already, year(s), many, just	More, already, in, many

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