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**Beyond the Binary in Refugee Othering: Law and Justice (PiS)-led
Government's Discursive Constructions of Middle Eastern and
Ukrainian Refugees in Poland**

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the European Union has faced two major war-induced refugee movements: the 2015–2016 influx from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and the mass displacement of Ukrainians following Russia’s full invasion in 2022. Despite the comparable humanitarian nature of these movements, the Polish Law and Justice/ Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS)–led government adopted sharply divergent responses: rejecting Middle Eastern refugees while welcoming over one million Ukrainians under the Temporary Protection Directive. This thesis examines how these contrasting stances were discursively constructed between 2015 and 2023, focusing on how refugee “Others” were represented in relation to Polish national identity. Drawing on Bahar Rumelili’s dual conception of securitisation (ontological and physical) and integrating biopolitical and ontological perspectives, the study develops the concepts of the “Ontological Security Other” and the “Biopolitical Other” to analyse the symbolic boundaries and hierarchies embedded in PiS narratives. Using qualitative discourse analysis of 38 official speeches, statements, and interviews, the findings reveal that while Ukrainians were initially portrayed as fraternal “Our Others”, this framing eroded over time amid economic strain and bilateral tensions. Conversely, Middle Eastern refugees were consistently depicted as culturally incompatible “Muslim Others” and burdens imposed by the EU. Yet, portrayals of vulnerable subgroups (women, children, elderly) across both cases show moments of humanitarian inclusion that complicate a strict binary. By tracing the fluidity and contradictions in these narratives, the thesis contributes to scholarship on Othering, identity politics, and refugee governance, highlighting how state self-conceptions are negotiated through differentiated refugee reception.

Keywords: Law and Justice (PiS), Refugees, Discourse, Others, Ontological Security, Biopolitics

Abstrakt

W ciągu ostatniej dekady Unia Europejska stanęła wobec dwóch znaczących, wywołanych wojną ruchów uchodźczych: napływu z lat 2015–2016 z Syrii, Afganistanu i Iraku oraz masowych przemieszczeń Ukraińców po pełnoskalowej inwazji Rosji w 2022 roku. Mimo porównywalnego humanitarnego charakteru tych ruchów, rząd Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej kierowany przez Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) przyjął diametralnie odmienne strategie: odrzucając uchodźców z Bliskiego Wschodu, a jednocześnie przyjmując ponad milion Ukraińców w ramach Dyrektywy o Tymczasowej Ochronie. Niniejsza rozprawa analizuje, w jaki sposób te kontrastujące postawy były dyskursywnie konstruowane w latach 2015–2023, koncentrując się na reprezentacjach uchodźców jako „Innych” w relacji do polskiej tożsamości narodowej. Odwołując się do dwuwymiarowej koncepcji sekurytyzacji Bahar Rumelili (ontologicznej i fizycznej) oraz integrując perspektywy biopolityczną i ontologiczną, w pracy rozwinięto pojęcia „Bezpieczeństwa Ontologicznego wobec Innego” oraz „Biopolityki Innego” w celu analizy symbolicznych granic i hierarchii zakodowanych w narracjach PiS. Na podstawie jakościowej analizy dyskursu 38 oficjalnych przemówień, oświadczeń i wywiadów, ustalenia wskazują, że choć Ukraińcy początkowo byli przedstawiani jako braterscy „Nasi Inni”, to wizerunek ten uległ stopniowej erozji w obliczu obciążeń gospodarczych i napięć bilateralnych. Z kolei uchodźcy z Bliskiego Wschodu konsekwentnie prezentowani byli jako kulturowo niekompatybilni „Muzułmańscy Inni” oraz jako ciężar narzucony przez Unię Europejską. Niemniej jednak, przedstawienia grup szczególnie wrażliwych (kobiet, dzieci, osób starszych) w obu przypadkach ujawniają momenty humanitarnej inkluzji, które komplikują sztywny binarny podział. Analizując płynność i sprzeczności tych narracji, rozprawa wnosi wkład do badań nad innością, polityką tożsamości i zarządzaniem uchodźstwem, podkreślając, w jaki sposób autopercepcje państwa są negocjowane poprzez zróżnicowane praktyki przyjmowania uchodźców.

Słowa Kluczowe: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), Uchodźcy, Dyskurs, Inni, Bezpieczeństwo Ontologiczne, Biopolityka

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the European Union (EU) has witnessed two of the most significant refugee movements in recent history, both triggered by large-scale wars that led to severe humanitarian issues. The first wave occurred in 2015–2016, when conflicts in the Middle East, most notably the Syrian civil war, but also ongoing civil violence in Afghanistan and Iraq, which triggered an unprecedented influx of refugees. Among these refugees, some of them were from North Africa but left for economic reasons and persecution, but the proportion is relatively small, therefore, this group is not the focus of the thesis due to its smaller proportion and non-war factors as refugees. During this period, the EU received approximately 1.2 million first-time asylum applications each year (Eurostat, 2024a). Although applicants came from a range of regions, asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq accounted for more than half of all applications. Syrians alone comprised nearly 30% of arrivals and had the highest protection recognition rates. Globally as well, more than half (55%) of all refugees originated from just three countries: Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, which highlight the dominant role of Middle Eastern conflicts in shaping refugee flows (UNHCR, 2017). Accordingly, this thesis refers to the 2015/16 influx primarily as the “European refugee crisis” with a special focus on Middle East refugees that were caused by war.

The second major refugee movement began in 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The war forced an estimated 6.6 million Ukrainians to flee abroad (UNHCR, 2024), and by mid-2023, more than 4 million had registered for temporary protection within the EU (Eurostat, 2024b). In response, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for the first time since its adoption in 2001, providing immediate and group-based protection to displaced Ukrainians without requiring individual asylum procedures. This marked a significant departure from the EU’s legal approach during the 2015–2016 crisis. At that time, though a bigger scale of displacement caused by wars in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the Temporary Protection Directive was not activated. Instead, the EU relied on the standard asylum procedures outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Dublin Regulation. These procedures required individual processing and placed a disproportionate burden on border states such as Greece and Italy.

The contrasting legal responses, like the activation of TPD for Ukrainians versus its non-use during the

2015-2016 crisis and directly shaped Poland's refugee policy approaches. This divergence provides a crucial lens through which to examine then Polish government's differential treatment of refugee groups led by the Law and Justice Party (PiS). PiS, which governed Poland from 2015 to 2023, is one of the state's two dominant political forces and has consistently held key executive positions, including the prime ministership, presidency, and the majority of ministerial posts (Kabata & Jacobs, 2023). It is widely understood as a right-wing populist and nationalist-conservative party that blends traditional Catholic values with welfare-oriented economic policies. Its ideological stance is defined by three core principles: right-wing populism, national conservatism, and strong social conservatism. PiS mobilises support through narratives opposing liberal social reforms and aspects of European integration, frequently articulating a "People vs. Elites" populist division. Its identity is deeply rooted in ethnic-nationalist Catholicism, anti-communism, and advocacy for a strong interventionist state (Gwiazda, 2021; Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2020). While rejecting Middle Eastern asylum seekers during the earlier crisis, Poland had accepted approximately 1 million Ukrainian refugees under TPD by mid-2024 (UNHCR, 2024). Such starkly contrasting stances seems to reveal how PiS-led government constructed distinct political narratives around these two refugee populations.

A growing body of scholarly literature has examined the stark contrast in the PiS-led discursive treatment of refugee groups from the Middle East and North Africa compared to those from Ukraine, particularly under the rule of the Law and Justice Party/ Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) between 2015 and 2023 (Sandecki, 2022; Klaus et al., 2018; Klaus, 2020), when it came to power. Researchers have attributed these divergent narratives to a range of potential factors, including the pervasive influence of racism and Islamophobia, as well as the cultural salience of inherent stereotypes about Muslims and individuals of non-European origin. The 2015 "refugee crisis" is widely regarded as a pivotal moment. It made a sharp escalation in anti-immigration rhetoric and the implementation of restrictive asylum policies in Poland, which were often justified through securitarian and civilisational discourses (Klaus, 2017; Pędziwiatr, 2017). Within these frameworks, refugees from the Middle East were frequently constructed as existential threats to national security, social order, and public health, reinforcing an "Us vs. Them" paradigm that resonated with nationalist and culturally conservative segments of Polish society (Esses et al., 2017: 85; Cap, 2018; Kabata & Jacobs, 2023).

At the core of PiS-led opposition to admitting Middle Eastern refugees, scholars such as Drewski and Gerhards (2024b) have identified a broader ideological construction of Polish national identity, one that imagines Poland as a culturally homogenous and Catholic nation, with neither historical nor moral responsibility to accommodate Muslim refugees, who are seen as culturally and civilisationally incompatible. This position is further reinforced by a national narrative of victimhood and resistance, which frames Poland as a subordinate member of the EU whose sovereignty is threatened by externally imposed refugee quotas, particularly from Brussels under the influence of powerful member states like Germany (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024b). Within this logic, Middle Eastern refugees become doubly excluded: both as religious-cultural outsiders and as burdens imposed by foreign powers.

In contrast, several studies (Theiss, 2022; Drewski & Gerhards, 2024a) have noted that Ukrainian refugees, who flee from a conflict that is geographically close and historically significant, have generally been portrayed in more sympathetic and fraternal terms. This representation has contributed to a relatively more welcoming public and political response (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024a). From this perspective, Ukrainians are not merely victims of Russian aggression but are discursively constructed as symbolic “mirror images” of Poles, the fellow sufferers of Eastern imperialism. Consequently, assisting Ukrainian refugees has been framed as consistent with Poland’s historical narrative of martyrdom and solidarity (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024b). Kabata and Jacobs (2023) offer a powerful conceptualisation of this distinction, contrasting the figure of “the Muslim Other” (ascribed to Middle East refugees) with “Our Other” (assigned to Ukrainians) in PiS-led discourse. These symbolic categories above capture the emotional and moral hierarchies embedded in PiS-led treatment of different refugee groups: while Muslim refugees are constructed as alien, threatening, culturally incompatible and unintegrable, Ukrainian refugees are embraced as familiar, deserving and part of a shared regional or similar religious identity.

In the discourse of this Polish right-wing-led government, particularly under the rule of the Law and Justice (PiS) party between 2015 and 2023, the differentiated treatment of refugee groups is not merely a matter of legal categorisation but a deeply ideological and identity-driven act. This thesis explores how national identity is discursively constructed through such differentiation and how refugee groups are positioned accordingly. Following Morgül’s (2024: 162-163) insight that the treatment of refugees depends on how a

nation defines itself (“Who are we?”) and others (“Who are they?”), I examine how representations of Middle Eastern and Ukrainian refugees have been shaped in relation to competing narratives of Polish identity, memory, and belonging.

While much of the existing literature highlights a binary framing, that is, Middle East refugees as culturally alien, threatening, and incompatible, and Ukrainian refugees as familiar, deserving, and civilisationally proximate (e.g., Kabata & Jacobs, 2023; Drewski & Gerhards, 2024a, 2024b). This thesis does not assume that this dichotomy is either universal or stable, but fluid and contextually constructed through discourse over time. Rather, I treat this binary as a discursive tendency that merits critical examination. My aim is not simply to reproduce this categorisation but to interrogate how it is constructed, under what conditions it is reproduced or destabilised, and what nuances may exist within and between representations of different groups.

To achieve this, the study applies Rumelili’s (2015a) concept of securitisation as having two dimensions, physical and ontological, in order to develop a twofold analytical framework. Through the lenses of ontological security and biopolitics, I conceptualise two dominant discursive constructions: the “Ontological Security Other,” who threatens or intensify the symbolic and historical narrative of the nation, and the “Biopolitical Other,” whose presence invokes logics of demographic control, risk, exclusion or inclusive governance. However, I remain attentive to variations within these categories, including the ways in which factors such as gender, age, religion, and nationality intersect to shape differentiated forms of Othering. Besides, I will focus on individuals who, based on international definitions, qualify as refugees, regardless of whether the PiS-led government refers to them as “refugees” or reclassifies them as “migrants.” While I adopt a unified analytical category of “refugees” to reflect the forced nature of their displacement, I also examine the rhetorical and political strategies through which the Polish government selectively labels certain groups, particularly those from the Middle East, as “migrants.” By doing so, I build on existing literature (e.g., Drewski & Gerhards, 2024a, 2024b; Kabata & Jacobs, 2023; Tomczak-Boczko et al., 2023; Crawley & Skleparis, 2018) while contributing an original perspective on how such terminological distinctions function as tools of exclusion and legitimacy within the broader PiS-led discourse. At the end,

this thesis seeks to move beyond simplistic binaries by highlighting both the discursive patterns and the internal contradictions in state narratives.

Importantly, my analysis does not seek to trace the full securitisation process, but rather focuses on the discursive production of the refugee Other: how threat is imagined, narrated, and symbolically attached to different groups through official and political language.

Therefore, this thesis investigates the following central research questions:

How has the Polish Law and Justice (PiS)-led government constructed narratives of Othering in response to Middle East and Ukrainian refugees, and to what extent do these narratives conform to, complicate, or destabilise the dominant binary of threat versus familiarity? Moreover, how do intersecting factors such as gender, age, religion, and nationality shape differentiated forms of Othering within and across these refugee groups? In addition, how is the national self-image constructed through these processes of refugee Othering, and what roles do “significant others” such as the European Union and Russia play in shaping and reflecting this discursive self-construction?

To answer this question, the study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design and employs discourse analysis as the primary research method with MaxQDA as analysis tool, viewing language as performative and constitutive of political meaning. The analysis draws on 38 texts from speeches, official statements, and interviews by PiS leaders to uncover how discursive representations of “the Other” of refugees were constructed, stabilised, and used to reproduce national identity. The study reveals that the boundaries between “Our Other” (Ukrainian refugees) and “Muslim Other” (Muslim refugees) are not fixed, but exist significant fluidity and ambiguity. Despite substantial cultural and religious differences, particularly in how the composition of these groups is described, in PiS-led government’s discourse, both the elderly, women, and children among Ukrainian and Middle Eastern refugees are consistently referred to as “refugees”. This reflects a general sympathy and humanitarian concern for vulnerable groups. However, the discourse around Ukrainian refugees as “brothers” has gradually faded as discussions about the excessive economic burden have intensified, particularly as the length of their stay increases and

domestic financial pressures rise. Moreover, during real conflicts, such as the agricultural trade tensions between Poland and Ukraine, the identity of Ukrainian refugees becomes more complex, as they may be perceived as a potential external threat and even used as political leverage.

The thesis is organised into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research question, its significance, and the methodology. Chapter 2 reviews existing literature, tracing a progression from general refugee studies to the specific Polish context, with attention to narrative framing, securitisation, and deservingness. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework, explaining the concepts of Othering, Others and its relations with ontological security and biopolitics. Chapter 4 elaborates on the methodological design, data selection, and analytical procedures. Chapter 5 and 6 presents the empirical findings, organised thematically to compare the discursive strategies used in each refugee case. Finally, Chapter 7 offers a discussion and conclusion, reflecting on the implications of the findings for understanding, Others, self-identity, and refugee governance in PiS-led Poland.

2. Literature Review

The existing literature on migration and refugee discourses in Poland is extensive and highly interdisciplinary, drawing from the fields of political science, sociology, discourse studies, and international relations. This body of work has grown considerably in response to evolving migration patterns in Poland, particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 European refugee crisis and the 2022 Ukrainian displacement, covering the period of Law and Justice party (PiS) rule. Broadly speaking, the literature can be categorised into three main strands below.

The first strand comprises historical and geopolitical analyses that trace Poland's transformation from a country of emigration to one increasingly implicated in the dynamics of immigration and border control (e.g., Krzyżanowska & Krzyżanowski, 2018; Paczeński & Winławska, 2024). These studies often contextualise Poland's migration policy within its shifting position between Eastern and Western Europe, shaped by the legacies of partition, communist rule, and post-accession EU integration. Early foundational works (e.g., Wendt, 1999; Iglicka, 2001) are now complemented by later investigations that emphasise the discursive and ideological shifts underpinning the politicisation of migration in Poland. Krzyżanowska and Krzyżanowski (2018) identify two major shifts: the association of immigration with “crisis” and the normalisation of exclusionary, anti-pluralist imaginaries. These developments are rooted in Poland's historically “weak civil society” (Ekiert & Kubik, 2014, cited in Krzyżanowska & Krzyżanowski, 2018: 614) characterised by the absence of robust civil organisations, limited public engagement, and a lack of political plurality, as well as the absence of a clear left–right political spectrum (Markowski, 1997; Zarycki, 2000, cited in Krzyżanowska & Krzyżanowski, 2018: 614). As a result, PiS articulates a hybrid ideology that blends conservative values, and anti-pluralist rhetoric (Azmanova, 2009 & Krzyżanowska, 2010, 2012b, cited in Krzyżanowska & Krzyżanowski, 2018: 614). This ideology frames national identity and moral order as being threatened by external “others.” In this context, Krzyżanowska and Krzyżanowski (2018) hold the view that migration and refugee policy become a key expression of Poland's geopolitical identity and ideological anxieties. Rather than reflecting conventional Western political binaries, PiS-led approach reflects a broader regional pattern in which historical legacies and geopolitical insecurities fuel exclusionary and anti-diversity narratives.

The second strand focuses on discursive constructions of migrants and refugees, with particular attention to how the Polish right-wing-led coalition government, especially the Law and Justice party (PiS), securitises migration and constructs racialised and culturalised “others” through political rhetoric and media representation (e.g., Cap, 2018; Krzyżanowski, 2020a, 2020b; Drozdzewski & Matusz, 2021; Drewski & Gerhards, 2024a, 2024b) during their time in power from 2015 to 2023. Especially in 2015 European refugee crisis, while Poland officially rejected the EU’s refugee relocation quotas, these exclusionary discourses nonetheless became normalised in the public sphere. As Krzyżanowski (2020b: 443) argues, the strategic introduction of radical, racialised rhetoric into political discourse has contributed to the legitimisation of xenophobic and exclusionary views toward immigrants and minorities in Polish society. These studies conducted by some scholars like Drozdzewski and Matusz (2021) frequently use critical discourse analysis to examine how metaphors, narrative framing, and affective registers contribute to the delegitimisation of certain refugee groups.

The third strand adopts a more comparative or normative lens, evaluating patterns of refugee reception based on notions of perceived “deservingness” and cultural proximity, then making a distinction between “good refugees” and “bad refugees.” Drawing from welfare state theory and migration ethics, these works interrogate how certain groups (particularly Ukrainian refugees) are constructed as more “deserving” of protection and inclusion, while others, such as Middle East asylum seekers, are systematically marginalised (e.g., Tomczak-Boczko et al., 2023; Kabata & Jacobs, 2023; Theiss, 2022). Together, these literatures employ a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, including media monitoring, policy analysis, and ethnographic approaches, to illustrate the link between discourse and politicisation of migration in contemporary Poland and its entanglement with national identity, security, and European integration.

Based on these observations, it becomes evident that academic discussions first unpack the PiS-led government’s rhetorical framework by distinguishing between the categories of “refugee” and “migrant,” which are far from neutral or merely legal classifications. Rather, these terms are politicised tools which are strategically deployed in discourse to mark inclusion and exclusion, as well as to mediate moral hierarchies. This distinction is then examined through the separate but related lenses of securitisation, deservingness, and otherisation. These analytical categories provide insight into how the PiS-led

government constructed and justified the differential treatment of various refugee groups, particularly along racial, religious, and geopolitical dimensions.

2.1 PiS-led Discourse Towards Refugees

The first and most foundational rhetorical move involves the definitional bifurcation of “refugees” and “migrants” between these different refugee groups (Kabata & Jacobs, 2023: 1227-1229), to distinguish who is the “true refugee” (Tomczak-Boczko et al., 2023: 815-816) in the PiS-led government’s discourse. While international legal norms distinguish refugees as those fleeing persecution or war and migrants as those moving for economic or personal reasons (UNHCR, 2015 & Boccardi, 2007: 208), some scholars (Tomczak-Boczko et al., 2023: 816-817; Kabata & Jacobs, 2023: 1227-1231) hold the view that PiS politicians reconfigured these terms to reflect cultural proximity and geopolitical utility. Scholars have pointed out that such categorisations are often state tools to differentiate between morally acceptable and unacceptable forms of mobility (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018: 55-59). In the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, for instance, the PiS-led government was quick to designate fleeing Ukrainians as “refugees” worthy of compassion and protection. Simultaneously, individuals arriving from Middle Eastern countries (such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan), many also escaping violence, were routinely framed as “economic migrants,” a label that delegitimises their claims to asylum and subtly shifts the discussion from rights to discretion (Kabata & Jacobs, 2023: 1227). This rhetorical strategy allows the Polish state to maintain a superficially humanitarian stance while enforcing exclusionary practices, thus avoiding any direct conflict with international legal norms. However, as Carling (2023: 399-400) critically observes, the seemingly innocuous phrase “refugees and migrants” reinforces a residualist perspective, that implicitly positions “migrants” as a general category and “refugees” as an exceptional subset. Each time this phrase is used, it reproduces a categorical division that undermines nuanced analysis and weakens both policy effectiveness and protection frameworks. Such terminological ambiguity hides the overlapping realities of forced and voluntary mobility, allowing states to apply humanitarian obligations selectively.

2.2 Securitisation of Refugees

The binary distinction between “true” and “untrue” refugees has not gone uncontested, some scholars made further exploration of it in the securitisation theories. Drawing on the theoretical insights of the Copenhagen School of security studies (Buzan et al., 1998: 27) with the special focus on five different areas of security, namely military, political, economic, environmental and social security, several scholars (Laurent & Thevenin, 2024; Kabata & Jacobs, 2023) argue that such distinctions are not merely the starting point of securitisation, but are themselves products of a prior securitised framing of migration. That is, the very emergence of categories that distinguish between “true” and “untrue” refugees (such as “economic migrant” and “asylum seeker” or “refugee”) reflects an underlying securitising logic: one that constructs migration as a threat to national identity, security, or social cohesion.

It is in this securitised framework that the PiS-led government has increasingly framed Middle East refugees as existential threats to national security (Kabata & Jacobs, 2023: 1227). Refugee is portrayed not merely as a social or economic issue, but as a danger that necessitates exceptional state action. The use of metaphors like “waves” or “floods” to describe migrants/refugees from the Middle East in PiS-led rhetoric emphasises the idea of uncontrollable and undifferentiated masses threatening the nation’s borders (Laurent & Thevenin, 2024: 78). These images contribute to the normalisation of militarised border policies. This securitised framing resonates with a broader trend across Europe, in which refugee is conflated with crime, terrorism, and threats to public order (Iancu & Necita, 2016). Migrants/refugees, especially those from Muslim-majority countries, are often portrayed as potential terrorists, criminals, or contributors to social disintegration. As Huysmans (2006: 64) argues, the “driving existential question” in such discourse is not the threat posed directly by refugees, but the perceived risk of enabling the movement of terrorists. These securitising narratives have made it politically expedient to implement restrictive refugee measures, often under the pretext of counterterrorism (Boswell, 2007). The frequent association of asylum seekers with criminality and terrorism contributes to what scholars have called the “criminalisation” of refugees (Karyotis & Skleparis, 2016: 275), reinforcing public fears and justifying exceptional state responses. In PiS-led case, some scholars point out that PiS politicians utilised this logic to support a selective approach in which Middle Eastern refugees are constructed as threats to security, cultural integrity, and public order,

while Ukrainian refugees, who are perceived as ethnically and culturally closer, are framed as victims of Russian aggression and deserving of protection (Laurent & Thevenin, 2024; Kabata & Jacobs, 2023; Klaus & Szulecka, 2023; Drewski & Gerhards, 2024b). Thus, the securitisation of refugees not only shapes national policy but also reinforces exclusionary narratives that differentiate between “acceptable” and “dangerous” refugee groups in both racialised and geopolitical terms.

This selective logic not only reflects broader European trends in racialised refugee reception, but also reinforces essentialist dichotomies that hide the complex and overlapping nature of forced displacement.

2.3 Deservingness of Refugees

While much of the scholarship on Poland’s refugee discourse under PiS has focused on securitisation, a growing body of research offers a different analytical lens: the deservingness framework. These scholars shift the focus away from national security and instead interrogate the moral hierarchies embedded in state responses to different refugee groups. Central to this approach is the binary construction of the “good refugee” and the “bad refugee”, a distinction that plays a crucial role in justifying selective humanitarianism under the PiS-led government.

Deservingness, as conceptualised by van Oorschot (2000: 35-36), is shaped by five key criteria: need, control over one’s condition, identity proximity, attitude, and reciprocity. These criteria are not neutral, in fact, they are socially constructed and politically mobilised. In PiS-led discourse, Ukrainian refugees are consistently portrayed as ticking all these boxes at the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war (Rosstalnyj, 2022: 41): they are fleeing war (need), are seen as victims rather than agents (lack of control), are Christian and Slavic (identity proximity), express gratitude (attitude), and are expected to return home or contribute economically (reciprocity). This discursive construction renders them morally deserving of compassion and support.

Conversely, refugees from the Global South, particularly Muslim men, are framed in starkly different terms in Europe. Rather than victims of violence, they are frequently portrayed as economic opportunists, cultural outsiders, or even security threats (Cap, 2018: 380). Their presumed agency, religious difference, and perceived failure to integrate mark them as morally undeserving. This dichotomy is not only simply rhetorical, but also informs actual state practice. While legal frameworks may nominally remain inclusive, in practice the PiS-led government constructs a two-tiered system that privileges certain refugee groups while marginalising others.

Scholars such as Klaus and Szulecka (2023: 470-471) have termed this logic *Departheid*: a racialised, nationalist framework, in which access to protection and rights depends on alignment with dominant ethnic-religious norms and geopolitical utility. In this system, moral worth is unequally distributed based on race, religion, and perceived cultural compatibility. The deservingness discourse becomes an instrument not only of exclusion, but of instrumental inclusion, where certain refugees are accepted not out of universal humanitarianism, but because they serve Poland's domestic or foreign policy interests.

This binary between “good” and “bad” refugees has been further documented in interviews and policy analysis to test the effect of political discourse of securitisation. As Moise and Oana (2022) note, interviewees in Poland often describe refugees from culturally similar countries (such as Ukraine) as “deserving” of support, while those arriving spontaneously from Muslim-majority regions are seen as culturally incompatible, potentially dangerous, and therefore “undeserving.” This differentiation is further reinforced by racialised and gendered representations: Muslim men are often portrayed as aggressive or deviant, while Ukrainian women and children are cast as passive and deserving of care (Klaus & Szulecka, 2023: 467, 483; Fliethmann et al., 2024: 3, 13-14, Arda, 2022: 538). Yet, this framing also obscures groups that fall outside the binary, such as Middle Eastern women and Ukrainian men, whose experiences are marginalized in both political discourse and public debate. These narratives resonate strongly with public sentiment and media portrayals, reinforcing a stratified moral economy of asylum.

2.4 Otherisation of Refugees

Building upon the prior discussion of securitisation and deservingness, the process of Othering becomes an inevitable outcome. It deepens the symbolic and material boundaries between those deemed “deserving” and those cast as threats. This framework of inclusion and exclusion functions not only through policy or discourse, but through a more profound identity dynamic in which refugees are discursively constructed in opposition to a national Self. As Akbulut and el-Naggar (2023: 1110) point out, refugees are frequently framed as problems or disruptions to social cohesion, reinforcing their marginalisation and justifying their exclusion. This Othering process, therefore, is not simply about difference, it is about the hierarchical ordering of difference in ways that maintain dominant power structures (Douzinas, 2002: 385, 401). As Dervin (2015) emphasises, Othering is fundamentally a process of identity formation, where the Self is constituted by projecting alterity onto marginalised groups. “Otherness,” as Staszak (2009: 43-44) explains, is the result of a discursive mechanism by which a dominant in-group constructs an out-group by marking perceived differences (real or imagined) as deviations from the norm, thereby legitimising exclusion and discrimination.

In the case of Poland, some scholars hold the view that PiS-led government articulates national identity through contrastive binaries: the heterogeneous “Muslim Other” and fraternal “Our Other.” (Kabata & Jacobs, 2023; Laurent & Thevenin, 2024; Drewski & Gerhards, 2024a, 2024b). This dichotomy aligns with Poland’s self-image as a Christian and ethnically homogenous bulwark at Europe’s eastern frontier (Górak-Sosnowska, 2022). Refugees thus become symbolic instruments through which the Polish state reaffirms its identity by embracing those who reflect its imagined cultural continuity and rejecting those who disrupt it.

Drawing from the above literature and discussions, it is evident that scholars primarily focused on how PiS-led discourse constructs a dichotomous framework in which Middle Eastern refugees have always been in a state of exclusion, while Ukrainian refugees – accepted. However, this binary lens, while useful, tends to

oversimplify the dynamic and often contradictory ways in which refugees are represented in political discourse. Existing studies have primarily examined Othering through the civilisational or cultural opposition between “Muslim” and “Christian” refugees, but have paid less attention to the shifting boundaries, conditionalities, and symbolic hierarchies that emerge in different contexts. Moreover, while gender has been discussed in relation to refugee deservingness, it is often reduced to a simple inclusion/exclusion logic that reinforces the contrast between Middle Eastern men and Ukrainian women and children, thereby overlooking groups that fall outside this binary, such as Middle Eastern women and Ukrainian men. To address these gaps, the next chapter develops a dual conceptual framework of Othering, distinguishing between the “Ontological Security Other” and the “Biopolitical Other.” This framework provides a more nuanced analytical tool to capture the fluidity, contradictions, and layered processes through which PiS constructs refugees as “Others” in relation to Polish national identity.

3. Conceptual Framework

Othering can be directed in two directions, one threatening and the other benign, according to Rumelili (2015a, 2015b), on one hand, she pinpointed that identity formation in international relations often hinges upon the construction of a threatening Other, particularly through securitisation processes. Securitisation often frames an issue or group as an existential threat, enabling the Self to consolidate its identity and thereby produces both ontological and physical security. In this process of “defiling otherness” (Butler, 1990, cited in Campbell, 1992: 352), the Other is not only different, but also morally inferior and dangerous (Rumelili, 2015a). As Rumelili (2015a: 55) explains, ontological security is “the security of being,” derived from the continuity and stability of identity and often maintained in relation to an Other. Physical security, in contrast, involves the protection of material existence. These two forms of security are frequently intertwined: the construction of the Other as a material threat sustains ontological certainty by reinforcing the Self’s identity through difference and danger.

Crucially, on the other hand, Rumelili (2015a, 2015b) also notes that ontological security presupposes an Other, but not necessarily a hostile one: the Self requires relational stability, not perpetual conflict. This opens space for analysing non-threatening forms of Othering, whereby the Other is framed as familiar, moral, or even fraternal, thus contributing positively to the Self’s narrative without invoking physical danger.

Building on this insight, I adopt Rumelili’s two-layered concept of security as a lens to analyse the differentiated Othering of refugees in Polish PiS-led discourse combined with the theories of ontological security and biopolitics. Specifically, I distinguish between the ontological security Other, who is constructed in relation to the Self to ensure a sense of identity and continuity (whether threatening or not), and the biopolitical Other, which is produced through discourses of threat and exclusion to justify exceptional measures aimed at securing physical survival. This distinction allows me to unpack how identity-driven anxieties and survival-based imperatives operate in tandem or diverge in the construction of the refugee Other.

These frameworks are particularly instructive in the context of refugee governance. Ontological security theory suggests that *critical events*—“radical disjunctions of an unpredictable kind affecting substantial numbers of individuals” (Giddens, 1984: 61, cited in Steele, 2008: 12), such as the sudden influx of refugees, may disrupt the Self’s identity narratives, provoking existential anxiety (Steele, 2008: 12). Such disruptions do not always result in securitisation, but they may elicit a re-articulation of identity boundaries, either through inclusion or exclusion. In parallel, biopolitical theory, particularly Agamben’s (1998: 11; Agamben et al., 1996) concept of the *state of exception*, explains how refugees may be stripped of political personhood and reduced to *bare life*, governed through control rather than rights. While some refugee groups are excluded through such logic, others may be selectively included as lives worth saving, but still within a biopolitical regime of conditionality and containment.

Taken together, the ontological and biopolitical lenses help clarify how the refugee becomes a focal point at which existential and physical insecurities converge. Importantly, they also help account for the differentiated treatment of refugees and enable a more comprehensive analysis of refugee governance and its underlying exclusionary and inclusionary logics. It highlights how different dimensions of (in)security (existential and physical) are projected onto refugees and how these (in)securities drive both discursive and potential institutional practices of marginalisation and control.

3.1 Othering

The concept of Othering, referred to as otherising, originates from the existence of difference within society. It is closely tied to the notion of identity. Othering involves transforming someone perceived as different into a clearly defined “Other,” thereby drawing boundaries between what is considered the same and different, between insiders and outsiders. This process is shaped by both emotional and cognitive mechanisms, which are expressed through language and co-constructed through social interaction (Dervin, 2016: 48). The mechanism of Othering refers to the discursive and structural process by which certain individuals or groups are marked as fundamentally different from a dominant norm and consequently

marginalised. In the context of migration and forced displacement, migrants and refugees are frequently subjected to Othering, whereby they are socially constructed as “Others”: visible, essentialised subjects who lie outside the imagined boundaries of belonging. This process operates through both discursive practices that articulate difference and through power asymmetries that legitimise hierarchical classifications (Akbulut & el-Naggar, 2023: 1109). It is not merely the result of individual prejudice or discriminatory attitudes; rather, Othering emerges from historically entrenched systems of knowledge and belief that have been rendered credible through institutionalised power relations.

At its core, Othering is a form of epistemic violence, a means of producing knowledge about the Other that simultaneously legitimises their exclusion (Bunch, 2015: 11). As Akbulut and Razum (2022: 5-6) argue, Othering distinguishes itself from broader notions of inequality by incorporating an epistemological dimension: it not only defines who the Other is, but also constructs a discursive rationale for their unequal treatment. This is particularly prominent in the context of migration and population governance, where refugees are categorised not only by legal status but also through narratives of deviance, dependency, or cultural threat (Grove & Zwi, 2006; Staszak, 2009). Such narratives serve to reaffirm the identity of the dominant group while justifying the exclusion or control of Others through border regimes, surveillance, or humanitarian paternalism.

The theoretical underpinnings of Othering draw from a range of philosophical and postcolonial traditions. Although Gayatri Spivak (1985) is credited with systematising the term in her essay *The Rani of Sirmur*, its conceptual lineage can be traced back to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where identity is formed through the dialectical relationship between the Self and the Other, notably exemplified in the master-slave dialectic (Heartfield, 2005). This foundational premise was further developed by Simone de Beauvoir, who in *The Second Sex* (1997) argued that woman has historically been defined in opposition to man, as the inessential “Other,” and thus denied full subjectivity. Similarly, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1995) introduced the notion of “imagined geographies” to illustrate how Western identity was constructed through the representation of the Orient as exotic, inferior, and static, that is, a symbolic Other that exists primarily for the West’s self-definition and control.

While the concept of Othering is traditionally applied in colonial and postcolonial contexts to analyse how the Global North constructs the Global South as backward, deviant, or threatening, recent scholarship has begun to challenge this binary lens. Martin Müller (2020: 734-736) introduces the concept of the *Global East* to describe a liminal geopolitical and epistemic space, particularly post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, that defies the simplistic dichotomy of West versus non-West. According to Müller, the Global East is neither part of the affluent Global North nor aligned with the marginalised Global South. Instead, it occupies an ambiguous “in-between” position, shaped by both aspirations to Western modernity and persistent exclusion from it. This “entangled sameness and difference” captures the paradox of Central and Eastern Europe, which often seeks to emulate Western institutions and cultural forms (e.g., EU accession), yet is repeatedly portrayed as “not quite” European by the West (Müller, 2020: 738). As Müller (2020: 738-739) notes, this non-typical postcolonial condition requires analytical attention to processes of mimicry, self-Orientalisation, and hybrid forms of Othering.

Moreover, psychoanalytic theory contributes significantly to the understanding of Othering. Jacques Lacan (1978) emphasised that identity is constituted through language and the gaze of the powerful, an insight derived from Althusser (1971: 86) into the notion of *interpellation*, the process by which individuals are “hailed” into specific subject positions within ideological systems. In this view, the production of the Other is not only structural but also psychological: the subject is made to recognise itself through a framework imposed by dominant discourse.

In contemporary analyses of migration, Othering functions as a mechanism through which states and societies manage difference. It categorises refugees not only as outsiders but also as subjects in need of control, assistance, or exclusion. This process is intimately linked to identity formation: the dominant group constructs its own coherence, security, and moral superiority through the marginalisation of Others. As Dervin (2015) notes, individuals and groups are often Othered precisely because of who they are, that is, their identities become the grounds for exclusion from the normative social order.

Although refugee studies often highlight binary patterns of inclusion and exclusion (eg., Morgül, 2024: 162-163), Othering does not necessarily equate to portraying refugees as threats. As Lebow (2008: 473)

notes, identity formation frequently occurs through positive, though not always equal, interactions with “others.” Building on this, Gulati (2024: 751-754) argues, Othering can also be seen as a process of “enabling” rather than solely denying, a conceptual act that shapes how refugees are positioned within society. While negative forms of Othering contribute to discrimination and the denial of rights, Gulati emphasises that the concept also holds the potential for more constructive applications. In this view, Othering is not inherently oppressive, rather, it becomes problematic when it is deployed to dilute the status of refugees and justify exclusionary practices. Recognising this nuance opens up space for understanding how difference can be acknowledged without resorting to marginalisation.

In sum, Othering is a multidimensional process that encompasses discursive, structural, and epistemic elements. It is historically rooted in colonial and patriarchal knowledge systems and continues to shape contemporary responses to migration. In the case of refugees, Othering often legitimise restrictive border practices, emergency legal frameworks, and the dehumanisation of mobile populations. Yet, as Gulati (2024: 774-775) reminds, not all acts of Othering are reductive or hostile. By defining refugees as inherently different, states may seek to justify exceptional measures of control, but they may also articulate moral or humanitarian responsibilities, depending on how the difference is framed. Thus, Othering both reflects and reproduces state narratives of identity, sovereignty, and security, but it is not a monolithic or unidirectional process.

3.2 Ontological Security and Others

Ontological security, often described as the “security of the self” (Mitzen, 2006a: 341), originates from the work of psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1960: 39-45), who emphasised the human need for a coherent and continuous sense of self, alongside a stable and predictable environment that affirms the permanence of objects and the reality of others. Building on this, sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991: 35) expanded the concept into a social context, defining ontological security as an individual’s ability to sustain a stable self-identity and basic trust in their social environment through routine and interaction. This foundational

understanding has been adapted within International Relations scholarship to analyse not only individuals but also states as actors seeking ontological security. Beyond mere physical survival, these actors aim to maintain a coherent collective identity amid changing and uncertain environments (Mitzen, 2006a; Kinnvall, 2004; Steele, 2008). Ontological security is sustained through two interlinked mechanisms: the internal construction of continuous biographical narratives (endogenous processes) and the external institutionalisation of routinised social interactions with significant Others (exogenous processes) (Berenskoetter, 2010; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017). These mechanisms work jointly to anchor the self, ensuring predictability and continuity that mitigate existential anxiety. These practices are inseparable and share the same ultimate goal: to create, anchor, and maintain a stable biographical continuity of the self, ensuring the predictability of social order (Prozorov, 2011: 1275-1277).

When states experience disruptions to these stabilising processes due to trauma, societal upheaval, or external shocks, they can encounter ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991). This state of insecurity often triggers regressive or defensive behaviors aimed at restoring a coherent identity and predictable social order (Mitzen, 2006a). This perspective therefore enriches traditional security studies by emphasising the role of non-material factors, such as cognition and emotion, in shaping state behavior (Mitzen, 2006a, Steele, 2008). Importantly, ontological security and physical security are not mutually exclusive but are deeply intertwined: threats to physical security can exacerbate ontological insecurity, while a stable sense of self can enhance a state's ability to navigate physical threats.

At its core, ontological security represents a liberal notion of "security of being," contrasting with the realist focus on security as survival—"the basic need to survive" (Mitzen, 2006a: 356). For an in-depth discussion of ontological security's implications in IR, particularly its connection to identity construction and the politics of the Other, the work of Rumelili (2015a: 52-54) provides two-layered concept of security, a comprehensive framework mentioned in previous sections. She argues that securitisation processes, whereby an issue or group is framed as an existential threat, serve both to manage physical dangers and to sustain ontological certainty. In this dual process, the Other is often constructed not only as different but also as morally inferior and threatening, facilitating the consolidation of Self-identity and the alleviation of ontological insecurity. Rumelili's approach underscores the centrality of Othering in international identity

politics and how identity anxieties intertwine with survivalist imperatives. Many scholars agree that securitisation plays a central role in coping with ontological insecurity. It does so by constructing exclusionary narratives that marginalise the “Other” and reinforce a coherent Self. These narratives typically rely on a binary logic of “us versus them”, where identity is stabilised by externalising anxiety onto a perceived threat (Mitzen, 2006a; Steele, 2008; Abdullah, 2019). In this process, plural and fluid identities are often suppressed in favor of a singular, dominant national identity constructed and legitimised by political elites.

Ontological security, while often associated with the construction of the Other as a threat, does not always view the Other as inherently malign. In some contexts, the Other may also serve as a positive relational counterpart, helping to affirm and stabilise the Self. Beyond this, states may even rely on practices of *vicarious identification* (Browning et al., 2021: 44) when their own self-identity is unsettled or under critique. As Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele (2021: 44-45) argue, such practices become particularly attractive in moments of internal contestation or external challenge, since they allow states to uphold established self-narratives and ward off ontological anxieties by reasserting a sense of biographical continuity, while also reinforcing or enhancing their positional status and self-esteem on the international stage. Some recent research has highlighted that the Other is not always constructed as a threat, but can be seen as benign one. Chernobrov (2016: 581) argues that encounters with unsettling or unfamiliar Others, especially in times of crisis, do not necessarily produce fear or hostility. Instead, they often function as relational moments through which states reaffirm a positive self-image. The process of ontological security-seeking, in this view, is not driven solely by threat management, but also by the desire to maintain a consistent and morally coherent self-narrative. The Other, in such contexts, serves as a mirror that enables the Self to recognize its own values, norms, and historical continuity through contrast, not necessarily conflict. Similarly, Mitzen (2006b: 270-271) notes that actors achieve ontological security by routinising interactions with significant Others, whether enemies, rivals, or friends. These stable patterns of relationality, even with hostile Others, provide continuity and structure that help anchor identity. In this sense, the Other is essential not merely as a danger, but as a reference point for identity formation. Building on this, Bachleitner (2021: 25-26) develops the notion of *significant historical Others*, expanding the concept of the significant Other beyond external actors. By introducing the idea of “temporal security”, she

shifts the focus from spatial to temporal anchoring of identity, suggesting that states also seek ontological continuity through a routinised relationship with their own collective past. In this view, decisive historical events become anchor points in national narratives, shaping how states understand themselves in relation to a “historical Other”, often a past version of themselves. This form of *temporal othering* allows states to engage in self-directed atonement, not just in response to external others but in response to their own historical memory. While such behaviour may not always align with the logic of physical or ontological security narrowly defined, grounding memory in ontological terms can help scholars better explain why seemingly similar identities produce divergent patterns of state behaviour.

Thus, the role of the Other in ontological security is more complex than the binary of friend versus enemy suggests. While exclusionary Othering often underpins securitisation and identity closure, relational interactions with the Other can also reflect a need for self-confirmation, moral positioning, and biographical stability. The construction of the Other may, therefore, involve not only fear and marginalisation, but also recognition and interdependence. This more nuanced understanding opens up analytical space to examine how refugee figures, though often Othered, are not uniformly depicted as threats, but may also be symbolically mobilised to reinforce narratives of humanitarianism, national benevolence, or historical victimhood.

3.3 Biopolitics and Biopolitical Others

Since Michel Foucault introduced the concept of biopolitics in the 1970s, this theory has been widely accepted and utilised in Western academia. Due to its profound understanding of populations and power, along with its innovative interpretations of various mechanisms involving individual and group power, biopolitical theory has promoted discussions of “biopower” within Western political science, philosophy, and sociology, leading to what some call a “biopolitical turn” in the last twenty years (Campbell & Sitze, 2013: 4; Esposito, 2019: 319, cited in Yatsyk, 2023: 186). Biopolitics, as an analytical framework that examines the relationship between life and power, has also been extensively applied in international relations. This is partly due to its unique perspective on power-population/life in the neoliberal context and its theoretical support for topics such as counter-terrorism, war, borders, refugees, and immigration in the

context of global anti-terrorism and refugee crises (Minca, 2015: 165).

Foucault first introduced the concept of biopolitics in 1976, although some studies suggest that he had already presented the idea of biopower in his 1971 lectures (Foucault, 1971 & 1999). Biopower is “power exerted over life” (Johnston et al., 2009: 48). He applied the biopolitical perspective to discuss a series of social and power issues, including Nazism and racism. After Foucault, scholars continued developing biopolitical theory. Agamben’s reinterpretation of biopolitics, focusing on *state of exception* and *bare life*, pushed the “biopolitical turn” (Lemke et al., 2011: 2-8). In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben uses the Roman legal term *homo sacer*, depicting a person excluded from secular law and not eligible for sacrifice, as a typical bare life in the state of exception (Agamben, 1998: 122). He views Jews during the Nazi era as modern “bare life,” whose killings could be justified without punishment. Stateless people, historically disenfranchised groups, and modern immigrants and refugees could be also considered such groups. Agamben’s critique of biopolitics introduces the idea that the sovereign state determines not just who can live but who must die, offering a darker view of biopolitics than Foucault’s original conception. “It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power” (Agamben, 1998: 6). The sovereign and the homo sacer are intimately connected since the production of the latter lays the foundation of the power of the former. This view is particularly relevant in the context of refugee camps and detention centers, spaces where life and death are inextricably linked, and where individuals are subject to the state’s sovereign power (Diken, 2004: 83-84; Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

When we turn our attention to the discussion of biopolitical theory in the field of refugees, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000) further elaborated on biopolitics, focusing on the ways in which neoliberalism and global capitalism influence the governance of populations. They argued that biopolitical power today operates globally, not just within national borders. In their work, *Empire*, they highlight how global institutions, such as multinational corporations and international governance bodies, use biopower to regulate labor, migration, and economic activity on a global scale, to shape the lives of individuals, particularly migrants and refugees.

One significant development in biopolitical theory comes from the work of Roberto Esposito and Thomas

Campbell (2006: 23), who conceptualise biopolitics through the lens of immunisation. Esposito's theory of immunisation offers an explanation for how biopolitical governance works through the paradoxical coexistence of both productive and destructive powers. In his framework, immunisation serves to protect society from internal and external threats, but it does so by isolating and potentially exterminating those deemed threats (Esposito & Campbell, 2006). Vaughan-Williams (2015) applies Esposito's immunisation theory to the study of borders, arguing that the European Union's approach to border security functions as an immune system, where refugees and migrants are viewed as viruses that must be contained. This view presents biopolitical borders not just as zones of exclusion but as active spaces where life is managed, controlled, and, in many cases, sacrificed for the security of the state (Vaughan-Williams, 2015). The application of biopolitics to immigration and border security focuses on how states regulate the flow of people across borders, determining who is allowed to enter, who is denied, and who is subjected to forms of exclusion, violence, and abandonment. Vaughan-Williams (2009) focused biopolitical security, referring to the mechanisms through which states use security measures to manage the lives of individuals at borders. He argues that biopolitical practices at borders are not just about preventing migration but about categorising refugees and migrants as either acceptable or unacceptable based on their perceived risk to national security (Vaughan-Williams, 2009: 746-747). This biometric borders and surveillance can be seen as a new form of "Othering."

Importantly, biopolitical power today merges classical sovereign logic "the right to take life or let live" with modern biopolitical techniques that shift this into "the power to make live and let die" (Foucault, 1999: 144). This combination, sometimes conceptualised as *biopolitical sovereignty* (Vardoulakis, 2020, cited in Yatsyk, 2023: 185), manifests through sovereign decision-making exercised via biopolitical tools such as categorisation, surveillance, humanitarian aid, and border regimes. States and affiliated institutions thus determine not only who belongs and who is excluded, but also who is allowed to live under protective conditions and who is abandoned to precarious, "bare life" (Agamben, 1998: 4). Refugees become subjects of this dual logic, then are managed as biological lives while simultaneously excluded from full political rights. This biopolitical sovereignty is not merely repressive but productive and differentiating, structuring political subjectivities, legitimising exclusions, and reaffirming national and racial hierarchies under the guise of humanitarianism and security (Vaughan-Williams, 2015: 37-42). Such dynamics are visible in the

often unequal treatment of refugee groups, where humanitarian discourse masks the state's strategic biopolitical calculations regarding who is worthy of protection and who is rendered disposable.

The discussion of biopolitical othering (Vaughan-Williams, 2015, cited in Yatsyk, 2023: 186) is central to this discussion. Migrants, refugees, and other marginalised groups are often categorised as the “other,” and as such, they are excluded from the full protections of the law. This process of exclusion, based on racial, national, or economic lines, transforms these individuals into potential threats to the state's social order, justifying their detention, deportation, or even death in some cases. Scholars have highlighted how such practices generate exception spaces through biopolitical techniques. In the European Union, biometric borders exemplify what Walters (2002: 571) refers to as the “biopolitical border,” extending the governance of mobility into domains that regulate multiple aspects of daily life. The crossing of a territorial boundary thus becomes only one instance within a broader series of borderings that inscribe distinctions between safe/ dangerous and legitimate traveller/ illegal migrant. Governance technologies are often presented as scientific, neutral, and “smart” solutions to problems of control and security (Valverde & Mopas, 2004). Biometric systems, as a prominent example, are similarly framed as objective tools for establishing identity, yet critical scholarship highlights how they in fact reproduce hierarchies of belonging and exclusion. As Amoore (2006: 339-340) shows, biometric technologies such as fingerprinting and facial recognition produce biometric identities that classify migrants and refugees as either potential threats or subjects of humanitarian protection. Such classifications are essential to the biopolitical governance of migration, as they determine who is permitted entry and who is excluded.

However, biopolitical logic is not solely concerned with the exclusion, abandonment, or elimination of life perceived as threatening. As Duško Petrović (2011: 2) argues, while political communities have historically relied on a symbolic differentiation between “Us” and “Them” to stabilise their sovereign identity, contemporary forms of governance have also evolved to accommodate a new biopolitical logic: one that embraces the inclusion and governability of the Other, rather than their pure negation. In this framework, refugees are not always framed as carriers of disease, terrorism, disorder, or ungovernability. Instead, some refugees, particularly those who are culturally or politically aligned with the host society's values, are portrayed as governable, productive, and even desirable lives. These individuals embody what Foucault

(1999) called *positive* or *productive biopolitics*, wherein the power to “make live” is not only exercised through exclusion but also through strategic inclusion and the management of life.

This form of inclusion does not negate the Otherness of refugees but symbolically neutralises it by making the Other intelligible and non-antagonistic, “stripped of all antagonism”, as Badiou and Zupančič suggest (cited in Petrović, 2011: 3). This “included” Other is tolerated insofar as they resemble the Self and do not threaten the symbolic order and shows the “centrality (biopolitical care) of biological life” (Petrović, 2011: 6). Thus, inclusion itself becomes a form of biopolitical control: the refugee becomes a subject of care, humanitarianism, and integration programs, not only because of their vulnerability but also because they can be rendered legible, useful, and non-threatening.

Petrović’s interpretation of symbolic identity also sheds light on this process. He argues that every political identity is constituted in relation to a symbolic Other, defined through differential logic. However, in the postmodern or post-sovereign condition where classical state boundaries are deterritorialised (Hardt & Negri, 2000), this symbolic relation is undergoing transformation. Inclusion of the Other becomes part of a new political imaginary that replaces antagonistic exclusion with governable differentiation. Biopolitical governance in this sense does not abolish the boundary between Self and Other, but rearticulates it in ways that allow for selective inclusion, symbolic tolerance, and stratified humanitarianism. In effect, biopolitical sovereignty today governs through both immunisation and incorporation, managing life through flexible categories of belonging, worth, and governability.

Therefore, this thesis draws on Bahar Rumelili’s two-layered framework of security to analyse the construction of refugee Others in PiS-led discourse towards refugees, and to explore how the self represents itself, accompanied by this process of othering – “who are we” and “who are they” (Morgül, 2024). Rumelili distinguishes between ontological security, the stability of identity in relation to Others, as well as physical security, concerned with material survival. While securitisation often involves portraying Others as existential threats to both forms of security, scholars like Mitzen (2006b) argues that not all Others are

inherently threatening; stable, non-hostile relationships with Others can also support ontological continuity.

Building on this, the thesis differentiates between two modes of Othering: 1) Ontological security Other, who plays a role in disrupting or stabilising national identity narratives. 2) Biopolitical Other, who is excluded or inclusively governed through (in)securitised discourses emphasising danger or stratified humanitarianism.

By combining ontological security theory with biopolitical insights, this framework allows for an analysis of how refugees are variously constructed as symbolic and material threats, or at times, as normalised extensions of the Self. It also enables a nuanced investigation into how such representations shift over time in response to geopolitical, historical, and cultural contexts.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design with the focus on how the Polish government under the Law and Justice Party (PiS) constructed seemingly contrasting narratives in response to two refugee groups, Middle East refugees (2015–2017) and Ukrainian refugees (2022–2023). Both groups were displaced due to war, arrived during periods of heightened geopolitical tension, and involved Poland as an EU member state subject to broader European refugee governance. Although both groups fled violent conflict and arrived during moments of heightened geopolitical tension, the social, political, and institutional contexts surrounding each wave differed substantially to shape how each group was discursively framed.

At the same time, important differences exist between the two contexts. In 2015, Poland received very few actual forced migrants, and the EU relied on ad hoc emergency mechanisms. By contrast, the Ukrainian refugee influx in 2022 triggered the first application of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), creating a more coordinated policy response. While Poland rejected the relocation mechanism in 2015, this position was shared by several EU member states and did not reflect a unique policy divergence. Therefore, this study does not focus on policy differences as such, but rather examines how refugee narratives were discursively framed by the PiS-led government in each case. The core of this research lies in analysing the specific terminology, discursive metaphor and moral positioning used to construct each refugee group.

To explore it, this research employs discourse analysis as its primary methodological tool. Discourse analysis, broadly defined as the study of language in use (Brown & Yule, 1983: 1-2; Cook, 1989: 3), allows for the examination of how political actors construct meaning, mobilise emotions, and establish identity boundaries through language. Specifically, the analysis draws from the functionalist paradigm, which views discourse as a socially and culturally organised way of speaking that realises particular functions (Schiffrin, 1994, cited in Kamalu & Osisanwo, 2015: 173-174). At its core, discourse analysis is theoretically rooted in an interpretivist view of language, which sees language not as a neutral medium for the communication of information, but as a performative and functional tool through which individuals actively construct meanings and representations of the social world (Elliot, 1996: 65-66). As Hardy (2001: 25) pointed out,

discourse constitutes a structured system of texts that renders social objects intelligible and meaningful. The task of the discourse analyst is therefore to examine how language shapes and reflects social reality by uncovering implicit meanings and tracing connections between past and present understandings. Discourses, therefore, are seen as repositories of complex and often contested meanings, produced within specific historical contexts that involve both individual actors and broader socio-political structures. As van Dijk (1985) emphasised, discourse cannot be fully understood without attending to the context of its production, including the situational, institutional, and ideological conditions under which it emerges.

Discourse, understood as the production of meaning through language, shapes how political actors define the Self and the Other. As Dervin (2016: 46) notes, Othering refers to the differentiating discourses that sustain moral and political hierarchies between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ producing narratives of superiority and inferiority. In this study, discourse analysis is used to trace how such processes of Othering are embedded in official speeches, policy documents, and media statements issued by the PiS-led government.

This methodological approach enables a critical investigation into how identity and security are co-constructed through discourse. Drawing on ontological security and biopolitics theories, this study emphasises that state narratives, especially those that construct a national Self in contrast to a perceived Other (the process of Othering), are not neutral reflections of reality, but active processes that sustain identity continuity and mitigate existential anxieties. Rather than focusing on the policy outcomes of such narratives, this research pays attention to the narratives themselves: how they are constructed, what symbolic oppositions they rely on, and how they function to stabilise national identity in times of perceived crisis.

4.1 Data Selection

This thesis adopts an agent-centered analytical perspective with a special focus on political elites. Specifically, key figures within Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS) are treated as legitimate

representatives of the state, whose public discourses shape and reflect national policy and identity. A long-standing debate in political theory and international relations concerns whether concepts derived from individual-level analysis can be meaningfully applied to the state. Scholars have raised concerns about whether states can truly possess human-like attributes such as trust or emotion (Krolikowski, 2008: 109-111). One way to resolve this conceptual challenge is to concentrate on individuals among state elites who act and speak in the name of the state. As Vieira (2018: 143-144) argues, these actors not only articulate national interests but also perform the state's identity in public arenas, thereby serving as medium by which the state becomes socially intelligible. Therefore, analysing the official statements, speeches, and interviews of PiS leaders during key political moments is not merely a study of personal opinion, but a methodologically valid approach to understanding how state-level policies and narratives are discursively produced.

The dataset comprises public speeches, official statements, and selected interviews given by key members of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) during the periods 2015–2017 and 2022–2023. Most texts were mainly retrieved from official and publicly accessible sources, including the websites of the President of Poland (<https://www.president.pl>), the Polish government (<https://www.gov.pl>), the Law and Justice Party (PiS) (<https://pis.org.pl>), and the official website of the Sejm (Polish parliament) (<https://oide.sejm.gov.pl/oide/>) where parliamentary speeches concerning refugee and migration issues were also reviewed. The initial dataset was generated through systematic keyword searches in both English and Polish. These keywords included “refugees,” “Ukraine,” “Syria/Afghanistan/Iraq/Middle East,” “asylum,” “illegal immigrants,” “economic migrants,” “relocation mechanism,” and “war” (and their Polish equivalents: „uchodźcy”, „Ukraina”, „Syria/Afganistan/Irak/Bliski Wschód”, „azyl”, „nielegalni imigranci”, „migranci ekonomiczni”, „mechanizm relokacji”, and „wojna”). The selection of these terms was guided by their frequent appearance in existing literature on European refugee politics, their salient features in public and political discourse, and their relevance to contrasting representations of Ukrainian and Middle Eastern refugees in Poland. For instance, the inclusion of the term “illegal immigrants” was intended to avoid excluding texts related to Middle Eastern refugees, as early political discourse in Poland often mixed up these categories.

In addition to fully published transcripts available on official websites, the dataset also includes texts of speeches, interviews and statements that were not fully transcribed online but were found through alternative sources. This includes transcripts retrieved from third-party websites and those reconstructed from video recordings linked in official news sections, particularly YouTube links to the Polish government's official channel (Kancelaria Premiera @premierRP <https://www.youtube.com/@premierRP/featured>). In such cases, the videos were manually transcribed and then translated using AI-assisted translation tools. The translated texts were subsequently reviewed and refined by a researcher of Polish with seven years of formal study in the language (at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels) and a certified proficiency at B2 level or above. Besides, where only isolated quotations were accessible (e.g., from press releases or official news reports), they were also included when they reflected significant rhetorical or discursive patterns.

The search yielded a large number of documents, which were subsequently filtered based on relevance and genre. I retained only materials that (1) directly addressed topics related to refugees, migration, or national security, and (2) were authored or delivered by high-ranking PiS representatives, including the Prime Minister, President, party chairman, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Minister for Internal Affairs and Administration, Minister of the Interior as well as Sejm statement. In this study, government discourse is thus broadly defined as public discourse made by leading PiS officials in state institutions whose positions closely reflect the ruling party's stance. After this selection process, the final corpus comprises 38 texts (Middle Eastern: 18; Ukrainian: 20) including 13 official statements (Middle Eastern: 6; Ukrainian: 7), 19 speeches (Middle Eastern: 8; Ukrainian: 11), and 6 interviews (Middle Eastern: 4; Ukrainian: 2) released in the above official websites. These interviews were publicly published and were not conducted by me.

A complete list of sources, along with metadata (date, speaker, venue, and type of document), is provided at the end of this file for transparency and reproducibility.

4.2 Time Frame

This study focuses on two distinct time periods which were roughly equivalent in duration, that is, 2015–2017 for Syrian refugees and 2022–2023 for Ukrainian refugees. They together provide a balanced comparative framework to analyse the PiS-led government’s discursive responses to two major war-induced refugee movements. These timeframes are selected deliberately to fall within the rule of the Law and Justice (PiS)-led coalition government (2015–2023), ensuring a consistent political context in which the party held executive power and shaped national discourse. Notably, October 2023 marked the end of PiS’s uninterrupted governance following its electoral loss. By limiting the analysis to periods within its time in office, the study captures the narratives formulated under stable ideological and institutional leadership. This consistency strengthens the comparative analysis of how PiS-led government constructed the Other in different geopolitical contexts.

These periods also represent critical discursive junctures: the 2015–2017 interval coincides with the so-called European “migration crisis” and the EU’s refugee relocation scheme, while 2022–2023 captures Poland’s unprecedented reception of Ukrainian refugees following Russia’s full-scale invasion. Despite the similarities in being war-driven humanitarian crises, the government’s narratives diverged seemingly, which offered fertile ground for discourse analysis. As Dervin (2016: 48) notes, Othering is a complex and evolving phenomenon, contingent on intersubjectively constructed ideologies that shift over time within specific political and cultural contexts. Therefore, focusing on multi-year periods allows this study to observe how such narratives are produced.

4.3 Research Methods

This study adopts discourse analysis as a qualitative method to uncover the socio-political narratives embedded in government responses to different refugee groups. By investigating both spoken and written political texts including speeches, official statements, and few interviews, the study explores how the Law and Justice Party (PiS) deployed discourse to represent Middle East and Ukrainian refugees when it took in power. This method highlights not only the formal linguistic elements but also the socio-political

contexts that imbue these texts with meaning, recognising that discourse both reflects and constructs social reality (Kamalu & Osisanwo, 2015: 173).

This study adopts and adapts the methodological framework developed by Baker-Beall (2011) in his analysis of the European Union's counter-terrorism discourse. Baker-Beall saw discourse analysis not merely as a technical method but as a Foucauldian-inspired methodology for examining the interplay of knowledge, identity, and power. His framework conceptualises discourse as both productive and restrictive: it generates meaning, defines legitimate knowledge, and constrains what can be said within a given political context. Central to this approach are three interrelated processes: "delimitation of a field of objects" about issues or actors become visible and problematised; "definition of legitimate perspectives" on actors are authorised to speak as credible sources; and "fixing of norms and categories" on the linguistic and conceptual boundaries that frame how phenomena are understood (Baker-Beall, 2011: 54). Then, a three-stage process was followed, involving the selection of thematically relevant institutional texts, the mapping of key discursive elements into broader strands, and the intertextual analysis of these strands within their wider socio-political context.

4.4 Data Analysis

This study not only draws on Baker-Beall's three-stage analytical process in technical terms, but more importantly, adopts the Foucauldian discourse perspective underlying it to view the PiS-led government discourse as a constructive practice by defining visible objects, establishing legitimate perspectives, and determining acceptable categories. These principles were applied directly to the analysis of PiS-led discourse on refugees, treating official speeches, press releases, and interviews as institutional texts that perform precisely these delimiting, authorising, and categorising functions.

Following Baker-Beall's three-stage procedure, the first step involved the selection of texts from official PiS and government sources within the defined timeframes. Each text was tagged with metadata (e.g., date,

author, audience, format) to aid in chronological and contextual comparison. The second step involved close textual reading and inductive coding. These codes were then refined through iterative analysis to capture the nuances of PiS's narratives. This step employed thematic coding as outlined by Saldaña (2016) in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. During this phase, each text was carefully read and coded for recurring discursive elements such as metaphors (e.g., “flood,” “threat”), labels (e.g., “illegal immigrants,” “our brothers,” “security,” and “terrorism”), and references to identity, security, or cultural values (“Polish identity,” “sovereignty,” “values,” “us/our – they/ them”). These codes were not predetermined but rather emerged organically from the data through iterative reading. Special attention was given to gendered and age-specific framings, such as depictions of refugee men as security risks and women or children as humanitarian subjects, which were coded as analytical sub-categories (e.g., “young men as threat,” “women as victims,” “children as innocent”). The third step involved the thematic grouping of codes into broader discourse strands. For example, codes referring to danger, invasion, and national sovereignty were grouped under a “securitisation” theme, while codes referencing Christian brotherhood or Slavic kinship were grouped under a “cultural proximity” or “civilisational affinity” theme.

MaxQDA's visualisation tools, such as code frequency charts and code co-occurrence models, were used to identify patterns and relationships between narrative themes across different time periods and refugee groups. This allowed the study to trace how specific representational strategies were employed by PiS to construct differentiated Others. Finally, these discourse strands were interpreted within their broader historical, ideological, and political contexts, to elaborate how language was used to articulate national identity, manage insecurity, and reproduce symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them.”

4.5 Limitations

While this study adopts a discourse analytical approach that offers several strengths, such as maintaining genre consistency through a corpus dominated by official rhetoric and supplementing it with interviews that reveal more ideologically explicit or unscripted elements, it has several limitations. First, the archival

data from official government websites is incomplete for 2015-2017, as some key documents from earlier periods are no longer accessible on official government websites, which may limit the comprehensiveness of the analysis. However, the inclusion of materials archived on the PiS party and Sejm websites and from PiS fingers is essential. These texts help preserve and reconstruct key moments in the PiS-led government's positioning, offering access to curated yet revealing statements of its migration-related narratives. Second, although the translations were carefully conducted and reviewed by a translator who has studied Polish for seven years and possesses near-native proficiency, there remains an inherent loss of semantic nuance during translation. This is, indeed, a natural limitation that even native speakers cannot fully avoid and may affect the subtlety and accuracy of discourse interpretation. Third, as a researcher from a non-European, Asian background, this study focuses mainly on elite-level discourse analysis due to the complexity and scale of analysing top-down dynamic processes and policy implementation. Such comprehensive policy analysis is particularly challenging for researchers outside the EU context, as it requires deep contextual knowledge and access to nuanced institutional information. Therefore, these aspects remain underexplored here and call for further investigation by scholars with closer regional expertise.

5. Empirical Findings – Middle Eastern Refugees

The following Chapter examines how Middle Eastern refugees were discursively constructed in PiS-led narratives between 2015 and 2017 during the European refugee crisis. Rather than being portrayed merely as individuals seeking protection, they were framed through layered processes of Othering that intersected with questions of sovereignty, civilisation, and Poland's self-image. The analysis is organised into three dimensions: first, the construction of refugees as cultural and security "Others" with biopolitical exclusion governance; second, the positioning of the European Union as a significant Other associated with liberal coercion and top-down redistribution; and third, the projection of Poland as a moral Self, claiming civilisational leadership in contrast to both the EU and the Middle East.

5.1 The Middle Eastern Refugees as the Other

The Polish Law and Justice (PiS)-led government's discourse on Middle Eastern refugees between 2015 and 2017 was dominated by a securitised and exclusionary framing, in which the figure of the refugee was consistently constructed as an external threat to Poland's safety, cultural identity, and political autonomy. While humanitarian language occasionally surfaced, it was often circumscribed by narratives that prioritised national security, reinforced cultural boundaries, and distinguished "true" refugees from those deemed opportunistic or dangerous. The following subheadings unpack the key dimensions of this discourse, from security-first arguments and the economic migrant distinction, to gendered exceptions, civilisational threat narratives, terrorism-related fears, and the strategy of offering aid only beyond Poland's borders.

5.1.1 “Our Security Comes First”

In the discourse of the PiS-led government, as what other literature mentioned in the introduction chapter, Middle Eastern refugees were framed as a potential threat to national security rather than as vulnerable populations in need of protection. This construction, recurrent across official speeches and statements as well as interviews, sets the groundwork for a broader narrative of exclusion and control.

From the early stages of the refugee crisis, PiS leaders underscored the inseparability of national development and internal security, framing the state’s protective role as fundamental and non-negotiable. In her first address as Prime Minister, Beata Szydło declared: “*For the government of the Republic of Poland, the most important thing is the safety of Polish women and men*” (Text 2, 2015). This emphasis on security remained a consistent thread in later statements. In 2016, then Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski stressed the need for “broadly understood security” that went beyond military concerns to include border protection and economic stability (Text 5, 2016), while in 2017 Szydło reiterated that “*security is the foundation of a state’s functioning,*” without which “*there is no development, no prospects, no growth—neither in the economy, nor in society, nor in politics*” (Text 16, 2017). This broadened concept of security enabled PiS fignuers to link migration directly to multiple forms of vulnerability like military, social, and economic ones, while insisting that the safety of Polish citizens must take precedence over international humanitarian obligations. In an interview with Polskie Radio in 2015, then Interior Minister Mariusz Błaszczak argued the government must avoid “*doing anything that would cause any risk to security,*” asserting that no compromises would be made “*on the basis of our safety*” (Text 3, 2015). The frequent repetition of such declarations revealed how the refugee issue was fully integrated into a logic of national protectionism.

Within this context, refugees were repeatedly associated with anonymity, danger, and unpredictability. In 2016, during a media appearance at the Thomson Reuters headquarters in Manhattan, then President Andrzej Duda warned that “*many have arrived anonymously,*” cautioning that “*we do not know how many are potential terrorists among them*” (Text 10, 2016). Such statements conflated humanitarian need with national risk, implying that refugees, particularly those from Islamic backgrounds, are inherently suspect.

Duda also invoked the threat of the Islamic State, warning of “*an influx of extremists*” entering under the guise of asylum seekers. This rhetoric positioned Muslim refugees not only as a social or logistical concern, but as agents of potential violence, reinforcing an enduring association between Islam and terrorism.

Ultimately, this discourse did not depict refugees as individuals with legitimate claims to protection, but rather as potential risks to be assessed, managed, and if necessary, excluded. The insistence on “*full verification of the identity of the persons concerned*” (Text 5, 2016) in a speech related to government information presented by the MFA reflects a securitised approach to migration, where individuals are presumed threatening until proven otherwise. Even conditional openness was framed restrictively: admission would only be considered if identity could be verified and the choice of Poland was “fully voluntary (Text 5, 2016).” Through this language, the state was positioned not as a provider of refuge but as a vigilant gatekeeper, emphasising control, conditionality, and distance.

5.1.2 Blurring and Differentiating: Refugees versus Economic Migrants

Another key discursive strategy in the PiS-led government’s response to the Middle Eastern refugee inflow was the recurrent differentiation (yet frequent conflation) of refugees and economic migrants. This distinction allowed political actors to rhetorically distance themselves from the moral and legal obligations associated with protecting refugees, while reinforcing a narrative of selective humanitarianism.

President Andrzej Duda, in a speech at a UN summit from September 2016, explicitly highlighted what he perceived as a critical flaw in public and political discussions around the crisis:

“I come to the conclusion that the element that is often missing in debate on the subject is the differentiation between economic migration and war refugees. These different phenomena require entirely different reactions as a matter of fact. If we tend to merge the tragedy of refugees with the needs of economic migrants, we are not in a position to give effective aid to any of those groups. This

is because their aspirations are entirely different. While what causes economic migrations is generally people's striving to improve their financial situation and to obtain entitlements to social policies, the source of war and political refugee flows is always desire to save one's life or protect one's health."
(Text 11, 2016)

This discourse performed a dual rhetorical function. On the one hand, it established a normative hierarchy that privileges so-called "genuine" war refugees over economic migrants. On the other hand, it stressed the practical difficulty of making such distinctions, thereby justifying a generalised atmosphere of suspicion. By portraying economic migrants as primarily driven by material gain and welfare access, PiS-led discourse framed them as undeserving of protection, while implicitly elevating "true" refugees as rare and exceptional cases.

At the same time, PiS-led discourse often blurred these categories through the use of vague or interchangeable terms such as "migration crisis," "immigration wave," or "emigrant problem." For example, PiS members such as Witold Waszczykowski, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, referred to "*a growing problem [being] the powerful wave of labor migration and refugees*" (Text 5, 2016), and elsewhere the situation was described as a "huge immigration crisis" (Text 14, 2017) or a "migration crisis" (Text 13, 2017) in the statements of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister for Internal Affairs and Administration separately. The rhetorical preference for the term "migration crisis" over "refugee crisis" also carried important ideological weight. While "refugee crisis" may evoke empathy and legal obligations under international law, the phrase "migration crisis" suggests chaos, border pressure, and lack of control, shifting the emphasis from humanitarian duty to the management of state vulnerability. Even when the word "refugees" appeared, it was frequently paired with "migrants" in undifferentiated constructions, as in Stanisław Pięta's remark that "*Western European countries are not coping either with the terrorist threat or with solving the problems of emigrants and refugees*" (Text 17, 2017). Such grammatical pairings flattened the legal and moral distinctions between the two groups, reinforcing a homogenised and securitised image of the Other.

Moreover, policy conditions introduced by PiS leaders institutionalised this atmosphere of suspicion. Waszczykowski declared that:

“A necessary condition for admitting refugees in Poland will be full verification of the identity of the persons concerned, as well as compliance with the principle of full voluntariness in choosing Poland as the destination country of settlement” (Text 5, 2016)

This emphasis on voluntariness can also be read in the broader political context, where many forced migrants had no desire to remain in Poland but saw it as a transit country, and the EU relocation mechanism represented a top-down imposition on member states. By framing the choice of Poland as a matter of voluntariness, the government underscored the perceived “forced” nature of EU-level policies while simultaneously instituting exclusionary thresholds. Refugees were thus redefined not as bearers of rights but as conditional subjects whose legitimacy had to be proven before admission could even be considered.

5.1.3 Women and Children as the Unquestioned Exception

An important discursive exception in the PiS-led refugee rhetoric between 2015 and 2017 concerns women and children, whose claims to refugee status were portrayed as self-evidently legitimate. This selective humanitarianism framed women, particularly single women, and children as especially vulnerable, thus positioning them as deserving of protection, in contrast to the often delegitimised, dominantly male “economic migrants”.

The Polish Sejm officially called on the government to adopt a refugee policy that explicitly recognises the need for heightened care and protection for these groups:

“The Sejm of the Republic of Poland calls on the Government of the Republic of Poland to apply the national refugee policy criteria with particular precision. This policy should grant special protection to single women, children, large families and religious minorities.” (Text 9, 2016)

This statement institutionalise a gender- and age-sensitive approach, emphasising vulnerability as a key criterion for granting refuge. The inclusion of “single women” and “children” foregrounds their suffering as especially grave and calls for a differentiated policy response. Besides, in this context, the category of “religious minorities” held particular significance, referring primarily to Christian minorities in the Middle East (not Islam in Europe), who were depicted as especially persecuted and therefore more deserving of protection. This implicit religious exclusion would be deeply clarified in the next section.

The PiS figure, then-president Andrzej Duda further personalised this compassionate framing in a speech of UN General Assembly:

“Whom I have in mind is women: mothers, wives and daughters in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, in Ukraine. They require our particular solicitude since they suffer twice as much. First, when they lose their sense of security, knowing that warfare is raging around. And then, when they lose their husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, and sometimes cannot even bury them. The tears of women distressed with war is the greatest charge against humanity in the 21st century.” (Text 1, 2015)

By explicitly mentioning the Middle East alongside Ukraine, Duda placed these geographically distinct regions within a single category of conflict-affected zones, highlighting the shared experiences of women suffering from war. This emotional description of suffering women supports the image of “double victimhood”: women are shown both as people directly affected by war and as those who grieve the loss of family members. Duda’s words appeal to shared human emotions, but at the same time, they place women in traditional family roles such as mothers, wives, and daughters. This image encourages a sense of duty to protect that is based on conventional views of gender. It also presents Polish humanitarian action as morally good, but only for certain groups.

Through this type of language, PiS politicians created a gender-based line between those seen as truly needing help and those who are not. Women and children who fled away from wars were portrayed as passive victims who deserve protection, no matter they were from. In contrast, male refugees and migrants with violent purpose and economic motivation were more often treated with suspicion, as shown in the previous discussion. This difference was not only about showing care. It also served a political purpose: to limit who could be accepted as a refugee, while justifying stricter immigration policies under the appearance of focused protection.

5.1.4 Refugees as Civilisational Others: Threats to Ontological Security

In PiS-led discourse during European migration crisis, Middle Eastern refugees are not only consistently constructed as a physical danger but as an existential threat to the Polish nation's ontological security. The rhetoric employed by leading PiS figures portrays refugees as endangering religious and cultural identity, and the deeper civilisational foundations upon which Polish and European selfhood are imagined. Through this framing, Middle Eastern refugees are positioned as civilisational Others, figures that disrupt both the material stability of society and the symbolic coherence of national identity.

The construction of refugees as threats intensifies as PiS-led discourse shifted into the civilisational register. Then President Andrzej Duda warned that terrorism from the Global South “*undermines the foundations of our civilisation*” (Text 8, 2016). Meanwhile, then Minister of MFA Witold Waszczykowski, in the speech of 2017 Government Information, linked the weakness of state institutions in parts of North Africa and the Middle East to a vacuum filled by non-state actors, including terrorist organisations, whose aim was “*to destroy the Western world*” when he talked about migration crisis (Text 13, 2017). These statements map refugees onto broader geopolitical anxieties, framing them as agents of global disorder and as antagonists in a clash of civilisations.

Crucially, this civilisational rhetoric must be situated within Poland's ambivalent position in the *Global East*. As Müller (2020) argue, the Global East occupies a liminal space between the “civilised” West and the “non-European” South. By portraying refugees as external threats to “Western civilisation,” PiS not only invokes the logic of physical security but also symbolically repositions Poland within the West, distancing it from its own historical association with Eastern “backwardness.” In this sense, exclusionary Othering functions simultaneously to reaffirm a coherent national identity and to negotiate Poland's place in the broader global hierarchy, a central mechanism of ontological security-seeking (Mitzen, 2006a; Steele, 2008).

The moral and cultural dimensions of this discourse further reinforced civilisational boundaries. In a speech in March 2016, Duda explicitly linked the refugee presence to the erosion of Christian Europe: “*In today's Europe where there is an undeniable crisis of the values on which European civilisation was built... I mean the civilisation that has Latin roots and is based on the stem of Christianity*” (Text 6, 2016). Similarly, PiS MP Stanisław Pięta echoed this concern by declaring the need to “*reject the ideas of neo-Marxism, protect tradition, our Christian roots and take care of building a strong national and state community*” (Text 17, 2017). Through this language, PiS leaders constructed a binary between the Self—Christian, orderly, and rational, and the Other—Islamic, chaotic, and alien. This dichotomy creates ontological security by defining what Poland is through the rejection of what it is not.

The religious framing of incompatibility was further clarified by Pięta, who asserted that “*any integration of radical Islam is impossible*” and that “*Muslims living in Europe despise Europeans, reject liberal value systems and are increasingly confrontational*” (Text 17, 2017). In a particularly extreme articulation, Pięta labelled Islam as a “*totalitarian system of managing society*” and claimed that “*Islamists came here to kill Europeans and subjugate those they do not have time to kill*” (Text 17, 2017). These expressions eliminate any ambiguity about the Other's identity, turning Islam into an existential threat incompatible with Polish and European life.

Yet the Other is not universally demonised. PiS discourse constructs a space for selective solidarity, in which certain groups, particularly Christians, are deemed “genuine victims” worthy of asylum. Then

President Duda emphasised that “*members of religious minorities, and especially Christians*”, are “*exposed to persecution*”, particularly in the Middle East (Text 1, 2015). Similarly, then MFA Spokesman Waszczykowski stressed “*the defense belongs to religious minorities, especially to Christians*” (Text 5, 2016). This narrative suggests that shared religious identity is not only a criterion for compassion, but also a safeguard for moral recognition and political inclusion. In contrast to the threatening figure of the Muslim refugee, the persecuted Christian Other is framed as culturally proximate and ontologically familiar, an extension of the Self rather than its negation.

Importantly, this framing implies that religious difference is not merely symbolic but existential. The PiS-led narrative constructs a civilisational struggle in which Christian identity is physically imperiled by Islamic extremism. Compassion is thus not only withheld from the Muslim Other, but redirected toward those whose faith and, by implication, whose bodies are seen as vulnerable to annihilation by that very Other. This reinforces a moral hierarchy where being Christian is associated with suffering and victimhood, while being Muslim is associated with aggression and threat. The persecuted Christian becomes a mirror through which Poland reaffirms its moral superiority, historical righteousness, and civilisational rootedness in Christianity. Meanwhile, the Muslim Other is externalised as both an ontological and potentially physical danger, undermining the security of being as well as the safety of life.

5.1.5 Refugees as Trojan Horses of Terrorism

Middle Eastern refugees were framed in PiS-led discourse not only as cultural outsiders due to the differences in religious beliefs mentioned in the previous section, but also as direct physical threats to Poland and Europe. In this narrative, cultural insecurity and material insecurity are deeply interlinked, as refugees are repeatedly associated with terrorism, violence, and warfare. The portrayal of these threats is not limited to isolated incidents but is instead framed as systemic, inherent to the refugees’ origins, trajectories, and presumed identities.

A central trope in this narrative is the conflation of refugees with potential terrorists, rooted in the claim that extremist groups exploit migratory flows. In an interview in 2015, then Minister of the Interior Mariusz Błaszczak (Text 3, 2015) explicitly stated that European citizens trained in Syria and Iraq return as part of “*terrorist groups that threaten security*.” This framing constructs refugee mobility as inherently suspicious and dangerous. Similarly, then President Duda (Text 10, 2016) warned of the risks posed by anonymous arrivals and “*potential terrorists among them*,” reinforcing the image of a hidden enemy who infiltrates under humanitarian pretenses.

Such rhetoric systematically erodes the civilian status of refugees. In an earlier speech, Duda (Text 1, 2015) suggested that “it is difficult to make out a soldier from a civilian,” blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator and legitimising extraordinary security responses. This discursive move not only strips refugees of their innocence but positions them as ambitious and devious figures whose presence serves as a pretext for suspicion.

Another recurring strategy is the invocation of high-profile terrorist attacks in Western Europe, such as those in Paris (2015), Brussels (2016), and Stockholm, as cautionary examples. Then Prime Minister Beata Szydło (Text 2, 2015; Text 7, 2016) drew a direct correlation between immigration, EU policy failures, and civilian deaths. She moved rhetorically from expressions of sympathy for “*the tragedy of innocent people*” to urgent calls for securitisation, insisting that “*our children and our countries are under threat*.” Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski (Text 14, 2017) reinforced this narrative by linking multiculturalism and liberal immigration policies to a “*bloody harvest*” of terrorism. Islamic radicalism was portrayed as the inevitable consequence of failed integration and surveillance. In this framework, the failures of Western counterterrorism are not only policy missteps but also serve as existential warnings for Poland’s own national trajectory.

The refugees’ region of origin, particularly the Middle East, is depicted as a space of collapsed states, religious extremism, and ungovernable violence. Both Duda (Text 18, 2017) and Waszczykowski (Text 5, 2016; Text 13, 2017) referred to failed state institutions, armed militias, and persecution in these areas, often highlighting Christians as victims. This spatial framing recasts the refugee not as a civilian fleeing

danger, but as a potential carrier of foreign chaos into European order. The threat is further globalised through references to non-state actors aiming to “*destroy the western world*” (Text 13, 2017), with returning jihadists framed as ticking time bombs (Text 17, 2017). Calls for increased NATO cooperation and regional defense coordination (Text 8, 2016) situated refugee flows within a broader geostrategic conflict between Western civilisation and transnational extremism.

This narrative reaches its rhetorical extreme in the statements of MP Stanisław Pięta (Text 17, 2017), who depicted Islamists as enemies who “*came here to kill Europeans and subjugate those they do not have time to kill.*” Such apocalyptic language eliminates any possibility for humanitarian engagement, framing Middle Eastern refugee not as an individual in need but as a dehumanised, weaponised ideological agent. Within this binary of civilisation versus barbarism, refugees are denied political agency and reduced to instruments of existential threat.

5.1.6 Financial Help but Outside Borders: Biopolitical Exclusion

The PiS-led discourse increasingly framed Middle Eastern refugees as both cultural outsiders and as carriers of direct physical threats to Poland and Europe. A central trope was the conflation of refugee movements with potential terrorist infiltration. Minister of the Interior Mariusz Błaszczak stressed that European citizens trained in Syria and Iraq “*come back, and it is from them that these terrorist groups that threaten security are created*” (Text 3, 2015). He explicitly described the threat in contagion-like terms, implying that such individuals could “infect” Europe, much like a virus, with extremist violence. This rhetorical pattern can be understood through the concept of immunisation developed by Esposito and Campbell (2006). By framing Middle Eastern refugees as potential “infectors”, it recodes the refugee body as a vector of danger, collapsing the boundary between humanitarian recipient and hostile agent. In biopolitical terms, this amounts to a pre-emptive rejection of certain bodies from the sovereign space, not only for actions already committed, but for the latent risks they are imagined to carry, whether ideological, violent, or epidemiological.

This securitised reading of mobility underpinned the PiS-led insistence that refugees could be “financially helped” but only at a distance. President Andrzej Duda reaffirmed Poland’s readiness to contribute to European refugee policy “*so long as it did not involve accepting refugees within Polish territory*”, preferring instead to support countries hosting refugee camps such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (Text 10, 2016). Humanitarianism was thus displaced spatially, aligning with the EU’s broader strategy of externalising migration governance. Appeals to address “root causes” of displacement (conflict, persecution, and poverty) served to legitimise this approach. As Duda argued, it was “*incumbent on the international community to eliminate the real root causes behind refugee flows*” and ensure “*the right to live in his or her home country*” (Text 11, 2016).

The Sejm reinforced this position, underscoring the country’s financial commitments to third countries “*to prevent the causes of the migration crisis, and to protect the European Union’s external borders*” (Text 12, 2016). Prime Minister Beata Szydło echoed this and insisted: “*We help where help is truly needed—on the ground, at the source of the conflict*” (Text 16, 2017). These statements construct a model of selective humanitarianism, where care is exercised at a distance and designed not to welcome the displaced, but to contain them to stay away from the territory.

This distancing strategy operates not only through the redirection of humanitarian resources but also through technological mechanisms. Minister of the Interior Mariusz Błaszczak highlighted the strengthening of external EU borders via “*mechanisms... related to computerisation, for example Smart Borders, so as to capture as quickly as possible those people who function in the registers as people whose presence may be risky*” (Text 3, 2015). These measures created a cyber-border with biopolitical governance methods, where biometric profiling, risk-based data analysis, and predictive security logics worked to exclude suspect individuals before physical entry was possible.

This dual strategy, which fortifies physical and digital borders while externalising humanitarian care, reflects biopolitical governance. Drawing on Foucault’s insight that modern power increasingly operates by “making live and letting die” (Foucault, 1999), the PiS-led government constructs a discursive system in which the refugee is protected insofar as they remain governable outside national territory. In this

framework, the figure of the refugee becomes a biopolitical subject, who was managed as life in need of saving, yet denied access to the sovereign space where rights and political recognition reside. Therefore, PiS-led discourse constructed a clear dichotomy between physical border protection, enhanced by cyber surveillance tools and financial humanitarian aid provided externally. This policy framework reflects an effort to balance international responsibility with domestic security concerns. The notion of “financial help outside borders” embodies a dual strategy: first, securing the physical and cyber borders of the EU, including Poland’s national borders, to prevent uncontrolled migration; and second, providing targeted financial aid at the source of conflicts or third countries outside the EU to reduce migration pressures. The cyber dimension of border management thus emerges not only as a tool of surveillance but as an integral element of the broader securitised humanitarian response to the Middle Eastern refugee crisis.

5.2 EU as Significant Other: Sovereignty, Liberalism, and External Coercion

In the discourse surrounding the Middle Eastern refugee crisis, the European Union (EU) frequently appears as a contested third party, not merely criticised but actively othered. Within PiS-led narratives, the EU is framed as an external actor that imposes liberal norms and policy obligations which undermine Polish sovereignty, cultural integrity, and security. This construction of the EU as an intrusive and hegemonic force forms a crucial component of the PiS-led broader identity discourse, in which resistance to external domination becomes central to the national self-image.

President Andrzej Duda encapsulated this skepticism by rejecting the EU’s existing model of integration. Rather than fostering liberty and cooperation, the EU was portrayed as an oppressive, bureaucratic apparatus in a speech related to the refugee quote mechanism: “*The EU requires significant changes to become more friendly to citizens; instead of bringing freedom – it brings oppression*” (Text 10, 2016). This characterisation presented the EU not as a community of shared values, but as a distant and coercive institution divorced from the needs of its member states, particularly those in Central and Eastern Europe. A key site of contention is the EU’s proposed corrective relocation mechanism for redistributing refugees,

which PiS leaders rejected as a violation of national sovereignty. As the discussion in 5.1.2 about insistence on voluntariness of refugees' relocation (Text 5, 2016), the EU relocation mechanism epitomised a top-down imposition that disregarded both refugees' preferences and member states' autonomy. The Polish Sejm also warned that such mechanisms "*could result in intensifying the illegal immigration flows towards the territory of the European Union*" (Text 12, 2016), situating the policy not only as ineffective but as actively harmful. Prime Minister Beata Szydło made this opposition explicit: "*We do not agree to the forced relocation of migrants*" (Text 16, 2017). Here, sovereignty is constructed not only as a legal principle but as a moral imperative, that is, defense against an external imposition that threatens the social structure of the nation.

This logic of resistance is further reinforced through the portrayal of the EU as dominated by the interests of powerful Western European states, especially Germany and France as what Bachleitner (2021: 25-26) termed "significant historical Other". Duda warned that the Union risks degenerating into "*a concert of European powers*", recalling 19th- and early 20th-century power politics which, in his view, "*led to two world wars*" (Text 10, 2016). Such historical analogies framed the EU as a neo-imperial structure in which smaller states like Poland are subordinated to the geopolitical ambitions of larger actors.

Beyond power asymmetries, PiS-led discourse depicted the EU as ideologically compromised by liberal multiculturalism, which is linked to the failure of Western states to manage migration and terrorism. PiS MP Stanisław Pięta declared that Western Europe is "*not coping either with the terrorist threat or with solving the problems of emigrants and refugees*" (Text 17, 2017). He attributed this failure to "*false tolerance and political correctness*", which he claimed had eroded Europe's Christian foundations and cultural coherence (Text 17, 2017). Through this lens, the EU's insistence on refugee relocation becomes not a humanitarian imperative but an ideological imposition at odds with Poland's national values.

This criticism begins with a civilisational lament that situates the European Union within a broader narrative of moral and cultural decline. President Andrzej Duda warned that "*all these ideals in today's Europe are being lost, are being forgotten and trampled on by other ideologies that in fact distort the essence of humankind and humanity*" (Text 6, 2016). Within this framing, the EU appeared not as a guarantor of

shared values but as a space where foundational ideals are eroded under the influence of alien ideologies. Pięta extended this critique, accusing the Union of forming “*a disgusting political alliance*” between “*left-wing political circles of Western Europe and Muslim groups*” (Text 17, 2017). This narrative constructed, in my opinion, a double process of Othering: both Muslim refugees and Western liberal elites are cast as existential threats to European, and by implication Polish, civilisation. Pięta continued: “*Muslims living in Europe despise Europeans, reject liberal value systems and are increasingly confrontational*”, further claiming that “*Western Europe lost its identity in the fight against Christianity*” (Text 17, 2017). The EU is thus depicted not only as incapable of resisting radical Islam but also as actively undermining Europe’s Christian identity, positioning Poland as a last bastion of cultural and religious continuity.

In sum, the EU’s role in PiS-led refugee discourse among Middle Eastern refugees is characterised by deep ambivalence. On the one hand, it remains a necessary institutional framework for cooperation; on the other hand, it is consistently portrayed as a source of bureaucratic coercion, ideological decay, and cultural erosion. Through these discursive strategies, the EU is constructed as an external Other, a supranational entity whose policies and values are fundamentally misaligned with Poland’s interests. This portrayal legitimises PiS-led rejection of EU refugee policies and reinforces a nationalist narrative that emphasises sovereignty, ontological security, and the preservation of Christian-European identity. As such, the othering of the EU functions as a discursive tool through which the PiS government articulates its broader vision of Polish national identity in opposition to both liberal cosmopolitanism and historical geopolitical subjugation.

5.3 Poland as a Moral Self: National Identity and Civilisational Leadership in PiS Discourse

In the PiS-led discourse during the European migration crisis, the construction of Poland’s national self-image served as a central discursive strategy to legitimise its restrictive refugee policy. This self-image was multilayered, encompassing Poland’s historical moral purity, its role as a guardian of Christian and

civilisational values, and its unique geopolitical position between East and West. Together, these elements position Poland not as a subordinate EU member, but as a sovereign moral actor resisting external threats and internal decline.

President Andrzej Duda frequently mobilised Poland's historical experience with totalitarian regimes to frame the country as a freedom-loving nation with a consistent commitment to sovereignty. In a 2015 speech, when the migration crisis intensified, he proclaimed: "*the Poles are [a] proud nation and they did not give up. Because what they love above all is freedom and that is why they fought until the end on the side of the free world*" (Text 1, 2015). This reference to the past is not only a source of national pride but also a claim to moral authority in contemporary policy debates. Resistance to refugee quotas is thus presented as a continuation of Poland's historic defense of liberty.

Poland's geographical identity as a borderland is also instrumentalised to justify its security-centric refugee stance. As Minister of the Interior Mariusz Błaszczak stated, "*Yes, we are a border country... The safety of Poles is most important to us, we will not do anything that would cause any risk to security*" (Text 3, 2015). The notion of Poland as a frontier state imbues its refugee policy with a heightened sense of urgency and legitimacy, reinforcing the idea that national security is inseparable from territorial responsibility.

At the same time, PiS-led discourse emphasised Poland's contributions to collective international security. President Duda highlighted Poland's involvement in EU efforts to secure external borders during the 2016 refugee crisis, portraying these efforts as instrumental in mitigating the situation (Text 10, 2016). This view constructs Poland as an active and responsible participant in global governance, reinforcing its moral and strategic credibility. Moreover, PiS leaders frequently depicted the European Union as ideologically compromised, accusing it of forming a dangerous political and cultural alliance with Muslim communities, suggesting Poland is imagined as a final stronghold of cultural and religious continuity as what is discussed in the 5.2 section.

This moral exceptionalism was reinforced by President Duda's assertion that "*Poles and Hungarians had preserved those good values,*" and that it was "*our great duty and great mission to bring these values to*

Western Europe” (Text 6, 2016). This inversion of traditional East–West hierarchies, casting Eastern Europe as the moral compass of the continent, functions as a source of ontological security. It allows Poland to see itself not as peripheral but as a civilisational leader, capable of redefining Europe’s future. Such claims can also be understood through the lens of *vicarious identification*. As Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele (2021) argue, states often turn to vicarious identity practices when their self-conceptions are unsettled by internal struggles or external critique. By positioning itself as the custodian of “true” European values on behalf of the West, Poland both reaffirms a sense of biographical continuity and seeks to elevate its positional status within Europe. In this way, moral leadership becomes a substitute identity practice that shores up ontological security by presenting Poland as not merely defending its own values but carrying the mission of preserving Europe’s civilisational integrity.

Within this discursive framework, PiS politicians constructed a triangular opposition: the Muslim refugee as the radical Other; Western Europe, including the EU, as the failed and complicit Other; and Poland as the embattled yet morally superior Self. Thus, in PiS-led discourse, the refugee crisis is framed not simply as a humanitarian or security issue, but as a civilisational confrontation. Poland’s refusal to accept refugee quotas is represented as a form of existential self-defense and a cultural mission to rescue Europe from moral collapse. By positioning itself as the guardian of true European values, Poland asserts agency in defining the continent’s future and affirms its own ontological security through exclusionary identity politics.

6. Empirical Findings – Ukrainian Refugees

This Chapter turns to the case of Ukrainian refugees, whose reception contrasted sharply with that of Middle Eastern groups. While initially framed as “Our Others” and integrated into narratives of regional solidarity, their representation became more ambivalent over time. The analysis highlights three dimensions: first, the shifting construction of Ukrainians as the Other with biopolitical inclusion governance; second, the roles of Russia and the European Union as significant Others shaping Polish self-perceptions; and third, the ways PiS sought to recast Poland’s self-image from a historically marginalised state into a guardian of European civilisation.

6.1 The Ukrainian Refugees as the Other

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered the largest refugee movement in Europe since World War II, displacing millions and forcing them to seek safety in neighbouring states, including Poland. Unlike the Middle Eastern refugee crisis, whose origins and dynamics were often less well understood by the general public, the Ukrainian displacement was widely perceived as the direct result of a clear act of aggression against a sovereign state. This clarity of cause shaped both public sentiment and political discourse, contributing to a humanitarian framing that initially distinguished Ukrainian refugees from other displaced groups. Within this context, the PiS-led government’s portrayal of Ukrainian refugees combined narratives of solidarity, manageability, and shared cultural proximity, while also revealing gradual shifts toward more ambivalent or exclusionary framings over time. The following subsections examine how these narratives evolved, tracing the progression from immediate humanitarian reception to more complex forms of Othering.

6.1.1 Refugee Influx Caused by Humanitarian Crisis

Building on the perception of the Ukrainian displacement as a clear-cut consequence of Russian aggression, PiS-led discourse between 2022 and 2023 is strikingly free from disputes over the legal or political status of these arrivals. Ukrainian refugees were not initially positioned as potential security threats or economic burdens but rather as victims of an unequivocal humanitarian catastrophe.

The war in Ukraine was consistently portrayed by PiS-led authorities as an unparalleled humanitarian disaster, marked by deliberate Russian targeting of civilian populations and infrastructure. The Legal Advisory Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that “*military attacks are also increasingly being carried out against the population and civilian structures, bringing death, suffering and destruction*” (Text 21, 2022). Such descriptions construct Ukrainian displacement as a forced flight under extreme and unlawful conditions, constituting a direct violation of international humanitarian law.

President Andrzej Duda repeatedly invoked emotionally charged imagery to underscore the brutality of the conflict. In a speech given a few days after the war started, he referenced “*bombing maternity hospitals*”, “*ordinary people being killed*”, and “*children being shot at*”, describing these events as “*acts of barbarity*” and even suggesting that they “*bear the features of a genocide*” (Text 22, 2022). He consistently labelled the conflict a “*humanitarian catastrophe*” (Text 31, 2022), reinforcing the perception of Ukrainian refugees as innocent victims rather than politicised Others as threat.

Duda’s visits to war-affected regions provided further narrative credibility. He recalled witnessing “*the anguish of the civilian population*” and the destruction of essential infrastructure, including “*houses, energy and communications systems, hospitals, kindergartens, and schools*” (Text 27, 2022; Text 34, 2023). These firsthand accounts lend personal and moral weight to the narrative, depicting Poland’s acceptance of Ukrainian refugees as both an ethical imperative and an act of solidarity in response to European tragedy.

The terminology used by PiS representatives, such as “*massive refugee surge*” (Text 21, 2022, Legal Advisory Committee of MFA), “*refugee crisis*”, and “*humanitarian disaster*” (Text 22, 2022, Andrzej Duda,

President), reflects an explicit acknowledgment of the scale and gravity of the crisis. This contrasts sharply with the securitised language applied to other refugee groups from Middle East, where emphasis is often placed on border protection, risk containment, and national security. In this way, the PiS-led government's rhetoric constructs Ukrainian refugees as fellow victims of aggression, whose protection is not only justified but demanded by the moral imperatives of wartime solidarity.

6.1.2 Gendered and Temporalised Narratives: Manageable “Harmless Other”

The discourse surrounding Ukrainian refugees under PiS is distinctly gendered and temporally bounded. Through repeated official statements, Ukrainian refugees are consistently portrayed as a population consisted predominantly of women and children, thereby constructing them as vulnerable, non-threatening, and manageable. This portrayal aligns with a humanitarian ideal of passive and dependent victims, thereby minimising public concern over integration, security, or social cohesion. It also frames refugee reception as a temporary moral duty rather than a long-term demographic change.

Official statistics confirm that this emphasis on gendered composition accurately reflects the situation in the first months of the war. As of mid-May 2022, among approximately 1.10 million Ukrainian war refugees registered in Poland's PESEL system, 45.7 percent were children aged 0–18, 3.6 percent were elderly over 65, and 50.7 percent were working-age adults, almost all of them women. Only 4.95 percent were working-age men (Duszczuk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022: 37). While this data validates the demographic portrayal, it is not a complete picture: not all men returned to Ukraine and some did arrive in Poland. The persistence of the women-and-children narrative reflected a deliberate discursive strategy that combined humanitarian sympathy with the temporariness of their stay.

President Andrzej Duda frequently emphasised the demographic composition of the refugee population, underscoring that men remain in Ukraine to fight while only women and children seek refuge in Poland. As he stated: “*The refugees who are fleeing from Ukraine to our country are women and children. We have*

two and a half million refugees who crossed the border. Almost two million remain in Poland. But the men, who worked here before, went back to Ukraine to fight in defense of their homeland” (Text 25, 2022). He also referred to Ukrainian border policy, noting that: *“The Ukrainian border guards themselves stopped men, ordered them to return. Only women and children were allowed to cross the Polish border”* (Text 25, 2022). Such remarks serve to naturalise the gendered division of those fleeing, suggesting both the necessity and legitimacy of their flight while implicitly marking their stay in Poland as provisional.

This framing of temporariness recurs throughout official discourse. Duda observed that *“many of them... say: ‘We are waiting for the war to end, we want to go back to our homes.’ These are women who want to return to their husbands; these are children who want to return to their schools and their environment”* (Text 25, 2022). Ukrainian refugees are thus portrayed not as future citizens or permanent residents, but as temporary guests bound by familial ties and loyalty to Ukraine, reassuring the Polish public that the demographic impact of the crisis will be short-lived.

PiS politicians repeatedly stressed this demographic profile because it served multiple discursive functions. It neutralised potential public fears about crime, terrorism, or competition for resources, that is, concerns that had been central to earlier debates over Middle Eastern refugees, by underscoring the absence of military-aged men. At the same time, it reinforced the idea of temporariness, portraying refugees as morally deserving and unlikely to disrupt the host society.

Through this selective emphasis, PiS constructed Ukrainian refugees as a “harmless other,” legitimising the state’s humanitarian response while containing anxieties over long-term integration. This framing positions Poland not as a host society undergoing transformation, but as a temporary sanctuary responding to exceptional circumstances.

6.1.3 Biopolitical Inclusive Governance through Legal Rights and Embedded Accommodation

PiS-led discourse on the Ukrainian refugee crisis presents Poland's reception model as a deliberate, humane, and inclusive alternative to exclusionary containment practices such as refugee camps. Official rhetoric stresses legal equality, access to services, and embedded living arrangements, framing refugees not as marginal outsiders but as quasi-members of the national community.

This framing was anchored in the EU-level Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), which was rapidly transposed into Polish law. President Andrzej Duda emphasised this legislative framework as a key tool of inclusion: *"We have created a special legal regulation in Poland, a special act... that gives Ukrainians de facto the same rights as Poles: health care, education, work, insurance – what is needed. For now, we have set this for a period of 18 months"* (Text 25, 2022). Such provisions positioned Ukrainian refugees as socially integrated actors, at least temporarily. Duda reinforced this image by highlighting everyday coexistence: *"Our children go to schools together with the children of Ukrainian citizens who came to us to save their own lives"* (Text 27, 2022). Similarly, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Łukasz Jasina linked the legal guarantees to a narrative of national solidarity in action: *"Poles consider 'Solidarity with Ukraine' not only as a slogan, but as a call for real action. Poland has accommodated the most refugees from Ukraine, with the number of people granted refugee status exceeding 1.55 million. Ukrainian citizens have access to healthcare, education and public benefits to the same extent as Poles and 450,000 of them have been legally employed in our country"* (Text 32, 2023). This statement casted Poland's approach as a coordinated and generous national undertaking.

However, this appearance of a thought-out integration policy buried the more fragmented and decentralised reality on the ground. While legal rights were established at the national level, there was no comprehensive, centrally planned integration strategy. Much of the practical reception was driven by municipalities, NGOs, and grassroots networks, rather than by a coherent PiS-led governance framework. Refugee camps were not avoided through deliberate top-down planning but because the majority of refugees were absorbed into private homes, municipal facilities, hotels, and other temporary spaces offered by local authorities, religious organisations, and private actors. As Duda put it: *"We do not have any refugee camps in Poland... All people have been accepted in private homes, student dormitories, hotels, guesthouses, sanatoriums, in various places provided by local authorities"* (Text 25, 2022).

While this embedded accommodation model did foster everyday interaction between refugees and host communities, helping to uphold dignity, prevent segregation, and project an image of biopolitical inclusion and governance, it in fact emerged organically from Poland's housing landscape, civil society mobilisation, and the immediate urgency of the crisis. PiS-led discourse subsequently wove this into its political narrative, presenting a decentralised and ad hoc arrangement as evidence of a consciously humane, solidarity-driven national policy. In doing so, the PiS politicians could claim both moral leadership and practical competence, even if the operational reality was far less coordinated than the rhetoric suggested.

6.1.4 The Construction of a Dual Image: Innocent Victims vs. Heroic Resisters Who Fight for Us

The PiS-led government's discourse surrounding Ukrainian refugees constructed a dual image that serves both humanitarian and geopolitical functions. On one hand, Ukrainians were portrayed as innocent victims of Russian atrocities; on the other, they were depicted as heroic defenders of European values. This double framing facilitated domestic moral mobilization and international solidarity, while simultaneously reinforcing Poland's national identity and sense of ontological security in the face of perceived existential threats from Russia. Importantly, this dynamic was not merely a matter of narrative choice but also of circumstance. Unlike the case of Middle Eastern refugees, where cultural distance, religious difference, and securitised framings predominated, Ukrainian displacement unfolded within a shared cultural and historical space, against the backdrop of a common enemy in Russia. This convergence of identity and threat perception formed the structural basis for the moral-political narratives analysed here, and its geopolitical implications would be examined more closely in the next part on the "Othering" of Russia.

Ukrainians were consistently framed as innocent civilians subjected to genocidal violence. President Andrzej Duda described Russia's actions as "*an act of barbarity bearing the features of a genocide*", citing the bombing of hospitals, civilian areas, and schools as evidence of mass atrocity (Text 22, 2022). He further condemned Russia's rationale of "*denazification*" as "*black Russian propaganda*" and a "*pretext to*

carry out a massacre”, ultimately aimed at *“the liquidation of the Ukrainian nation”* (Text 25, 2022). In linking Ukrainian suffering to Poland’s own historical trauma, particularly the Holocaust, Duda created an affective bridge that personalised the conflict: *“We, the Polish people, understand what war, death, and suffering mean”* (Text 33, 2023). This analogy facilitated an empathetic identification with Ukrainian victims, who were not only geopolitical neighbours but also symbolic extensions of Poland’s historical experience.

On the other hand, the PiS-led narrative elevated Ukrainians to the status of collective heroes. President Duda emphasised their *“huge heroism and incredible determination,”* highlighting how *“men and women fight shoulder-to-shoulder”* (Text 22, 2022) to defend their homeland and *“the freedom of us all”* (Text 19, 2022). In this framing, Ukraine’s war was not merely a national struggle but a European one: *“Ukraine defends the freedom of Europe and also defends our freedom, our security”* (Text 28, 2022). Duda further warned that acquiescence to Russian territorial gains would constitute *“a ticking bomb planted under the European security system”* (Text 31, 2022). Thus, Ukrainian heroism was transformed into a symbol of democratic resilience, with direct implications for Poland’s own geopolitical stability and normative alignment with the “civilisational West”. As MFA Spokesperson Łukasz Jasina stated: *“The civilisational world order was shaken by Russia’s using the armed forces against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine as well as by its war crimes and atrocities targeting civilians. The heroism of Ukrainians, bolstered by the solidarity and assistance of their allies, not only reflects their fight for national freedom, but is also key to maintaining the international order and constitutes a defence of the universal values”* (Text 32, 2023).

This dual narrative accomplishes a complex moral and political positioning. It constructs Ukrainians as deserving recipients of humanitarian aid and refuge due to their victimhood, while simultaneously legitimising Poland’s active support by framing Ukrainians as allies in a heroic struggle against Russian aggression. Such a portrayal invokes a “moral obligation” to assist a just cause, and at the same time, enables Poland to present itself as a defender of freedom and democracy in the region. Moreover, as Chernobrov (2016) and Mitzen (2006b) suggest, the Other does not always destabilise ontological security; it may also be instrumentalised to reinforce a coherent moral identity. Ukraine, as a historically significant

Other and contemporary ally, functions in precisely this way. The Polish Self is stabilised not through exclusion or fear of Ukraine, but through solidarity, affective proximity, and symbolic mirroring. This temporal and spatial alignment between Poland and Ukraine provides a sense of purpose and predictability in an otherwise volatile geopolitical landscape.

6.1.5 “Brother” Metaphor Silenced: Emotional Deactivation and the Subtle Turn Toward Othering

In the early stages of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, PiS-led discourse adopted an emotionally charged framework of solidarity grounded in civilisational sameness and shared historical experience. Ukrainian refugees were not merely defined by legal status or geographic proximity; they were hailed as “brothers,” “neighbors,” and “guests” in the same breath, evoking a familial and moral imperative to act. As President Andrzej Duda put it: *“support [...] is provided to us Poles who are receiving guests — because this is the name we want to apply to them. We do not call them ‘refugees.’ They are our guests, our brothers, our neighbors from Ukraine”* (Text 24, 2022). Interior Minister Mariusz Kamiński likewise affirmed: *“We will show solidarity and support to all our Ukrainian brothers”* (Text 20, 2022). Such affective metaphors positioned Ukrainians within an imagined moral community, collapsing the symbolic distance between host and guest. This rhetorical strategy shows “the Other” is incorporated within a national memory scape through narratives of proximity rather than alterity.

However, this familial framing persisted through the early days of the war, but began to erode as the humanitarian crisis deepened and the number of arrivals surpassed “2 million” (Text 23, 2022). Logistical exhaustion and infrastructural strain prompted Polish leaders to call for international assistance. Duda noted: *“Given further influx of refugees to Poland on this scale, this will end up in a refugee disaster. And I asked for help — both material assistance, financial assistance — so that we are able to solve this in Poland”* (Text 22, 2022). Notably, in this same period, when the word “brothers” appeared in the discourse, it was still used alongside “guests” and “neighbors,” but soon disappears entirely from official rhetoric.

Later, references to Ukrainians as “brothers” completely vanished in subsequent speeches. Instead, the language shifted towards more neutral and spatially distant terms such as “neighbors” or “guests.” Although these terms are still relatively hospitable, they represent a subtle withdrawal from the intimate emotional register that characterised the initial response. For example, Duda repeatedly referred to Ukrainians simply as “*our neighbors*” in later addresses (e.g., Text 33, 2023; Text 27, 2022). The metaphor of familial proximity was therefore replaced by a relational ambiguity: neighbors are close, but separate; guests are welcome, but not permanent.

This discursive shift suggested an early stage of othering, not through overt hostility or exclusion, but through a process of emotional distancing. The refusal to continue calling Ukrainians “brothers” was not merely rhetorical; it reconfigured the moral geography of belonging. As Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017: 620-621) argue, a decline in affective language toward refugees often accompanies a move from humanitarian to securitised framings, marked by reduced expressions of solidarity and heightened emphasis on potential risks. In the PiS-led case, the silencing of the “brother” metaphor in PiS-led rhetoric may be read as an early indicator of such a discursive reorientation, foreshadowing a broader shift in how the Ukrainian Other is positioned within Poland’s national imaginary.

6.1.6 The “Drowning Person” Metaphor: Imagining the Ambivalent Threat of Aid Recipients and the Politics of Betrayal

The metaphor of the “drowning person” (“tonący”) deployed by PiS political elites, especially President Andrzej Duda, encapsulated a profound ambivalence inherent in the discourse surrounding Ukrainian refugees and Poland’s aid policies. This metaphor conveyed not only a moral imperative to help, but simultaneously constructed those receiving aid as potential sources of danger. In doing so, it destabilised the seemingly altruistic dynamic of assistance and reveals latent anxieties about vulnerability and national interest.

Duda explicitly stated, *“We are dealing with a drowning person. Anyone who has ever participated in rescuing a drowning person knows that a drowning person is incredibly dangerous; that they can drag you to the depths”* (Text 38, 2023). This metaphorical figure, fueled by “personal fear” and “adrenaline,” was portrayed as exerting a violent, involuntary force that threatens the rescuer, here symbolic of Poland as the host nation. The imagery of “grabbing at straws” captured the desperation of Ukraine’s position under Russian attack, yet simultaneously implied a recklessness or threat that obliges Poland to “protect ourselves” from being “drowned” (Text 38, 2023): *“we have to act in such a way as to protect ourselves from the drowning person causing damage to us, because if the drowning person causes damage and drowns us, he will not get help. So it is we who have to look after our interests and we will do it effectively and decisively”*. This ambivalence is key: while the drowning person requires rescue, their desperation paradoxically endangers the rescuer, creating a fragile boundary between security and insecurity.

Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki’s statements further reinforced this tension within aid discourse. While affirming humanitarian acceptance, *“We said ‘yes’ to every woman and every child who entered us from Ukraine”*, he decisively excluded certain groups, notably *“all Ukrainian oligarchs who want to destabilize the Polish agricultural market”* (Text 37, 2023). The division between “innocent” refugees and “dangerous” actors within the Ukrainian population echoed the metaphor’s implication: not all aid recipients are benign, and some may betray or harm host society interests. Morawiecki’s declaration that *“Poland was the first country to secure its borders against excessive inflow of Ukrainian grain”* (Text 37, 2023) concretised the perception of external threats disguised within the aid relationship, extending the metaphor from individual to economic and political realms.

Such statements suggest that the Ukrainian refugee figure, even when embedded in narratives of cultural proximity and alliance, also functions as a strategic asset that can be recalibrated or even sacrificed when national interests are perceived to be at stake. The “familiar Other,” once framed as a neighbor or kin, becomes re-problematised through the lens of risk and betrayal. In this sense, the drowning person metaphor encapsulates a pivotal threshold from security to insecurity, where solidarity is contingent and can be withdrawn under conditions of economic strain or geopolitical friction. It reflects a broader pattern in

refugee politics in which even trusted allies may be discursively reclassified as sources of instability, depending on shifting calculations of strategic utility.

6.2 Russia and EU as Significant Others

6.2.1 Russia – Historical Continuity and Imperial Antagonism

In the refugee discourse of the PiS-led government, Russia is consistently constructed as a “significant historical Other” (Bachleitner, 2021: 25-26) through the lens of historical memory and contemporary geopolitics. This construction draws upon what Bachleitner (2021: 28-29) terms “temporal othering,” whereby past experiences of Soviet domination are mobilised to frame Russia as a continuous and existential threat to Polish sovereignty and regional security.

Poland’s perception of Russia is deeply rooted in the legacy of Soviet oppression. This enduring narrative shapes Russia not only as a current adversary but as a re-emergent imperial power. President Andrzej Duda underscored this continuity by recalling the prophetic warning of former President Lech Kaczyński: “*Today Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, the Baltic States the day after tomorrow, and then perhaps the time will come for my country, Poland*” (Text 19, 2022). Such statements re-inscribed a collective memory in which Poland positions itself as a frontline defender against recurring imperial aggression.

This historicised image of Russia enables Poland to construct a counter-narrative of itself as a bastion of liberty and sovereignty in Eastern Europe. The “significant historical Other” can stabilise the self-identity (Bachleitner, 2021), therefore, the reverse mirror of Russia’s imperialism serves to legitimise and reinforce Poland’s self-image as a defender of European security and democratic values. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki’s declaration that “*Imperial Russia can be defeated – thanks to Ukraine and our support for it*” (Text 26, 2022) positioned Poland not merely as a regional actor, but as a moral and strategic counterweight to neo-imperialism.

This framing is further reinforced by repeated assertions from PiS leaders regarding Russia's long-term geopolitical ambitions. President Duda claimed that Russia seeks "*to be a great Russian empire... to occupy half of Europe and sizable parts of the world*" (Text 28, 2022), presenting Russian aggression as an intentional project of territorial expansion. Similarly, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Legal Advisory Committee emphasised Russia's violations of international norms, stating that "*Russia has breached the peremptory norms of international law. In particular, it has defied the prohibition on the use of military force and the obligation to resolve international disputes peacefully.*" (Text 21, 2022). These pronouncements collectively cast Russia as a neo-colonial power operating outside the legal and ethical framework of the international order.

The portrayal of Russia as a present-day security threat was particularly salient in the context of the war in Ukraine. Polish political elites view Russia's aggression not as a localised conflict, but as a precursor to possible future attacks on Poland itself. President Duda warned that "*no one has any doubts that Poland is potentially threatened by a Russian attack at some point in the future*" (Text 25, 2022). This perceived threat not only justified Poland's extensive support for Ukraine, but also its calls for enhanced NATO and EU defense strategies aimed at deterring further Russian expansion.

Beyond territorial concerns, Russian aggression was framed as a direct assault on the normative foundations of the European order. In a 2023 speech, President Duda contrasted Russia's actions with the values of the Council of Europe, stating that Putin's plan envisions "*the construction of a different order... where democracy becomes an empty notion...human rights are only a facade*" (Text 35, 2023). Here, Russia is constructed not just as a geopolitical adversary, but as the antithesis of the democratic and legal norms to which Poland aligns itself.

From the perspective of ontological security, the consistent depiction of Russia as a hostile and morally inferior Other plays a central role in stabilising Poland's national identity amid regional volatility. As articulated by Mitzen (2006a) and Giddens (1991), ontological security entails the maintenance of a coherent and continuous sense of self, sustained through stable narratives and relationships with significant Others. In this discourse, Russia functions as a familiar and recurring threat that activates collective

memories of occupation and trauma, thereby reinforcing Poland's self-image as resilient and morally upright.

6.2.2 EU as a “Neglectful Civilised Other”: Negative Externalities

In PiS-led discourse in 2022-2023, the European Union (EU), with particular emphasis on Germany and France, was often portrayed as a neglectful civilised other, a familiar yet flawed entity whose actions or inactions contribute to the destabilisation of European security and values. This discourse reflected a complex identity tension between Poland and the EU's so-called “core” countries, framing the EU not only as a political partner but also as a negative important other, whose failures carry significant externalities for Poland and the broader region.

Polish leaders critiqued the EU for a perceived moral and political weakness in confronting Russia's aggression. President Andrzej Duda starkly dismissed dialogue with Russia as “making no sense” given Russia's “brutal” and “unprovoked” attacks on Ukraine and Georgia, highlighting EU's misplaced attempts at engagement (Text 25, 2022): “*Dialogue with Russia makes no sense*”. This rejection underscored a fundamental Polish narrative that the EU's strategy of diplomatic engagement has repeatedly failed to defend European security and uphold the “European community” values.

Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki further elaborated this critique by portraying the EU's decision-making process as dominated by Germany and France, which he characterises as a “*formal democracy*” but “*de facto oligarchy*” where “*the strongest hold power*” and are “*unable to accept criticism from outside*” (Text 26, 2022). This depiction situated the EU as a hierarchical power structure that marginalises smaller states like Poland, imposing decisions detrimental to collective European interests and disproportionately benefiting the powerful core.

Energy policy emerges as a key site of contention. Morawiecki condemned the EU's deference to German interests, particularly the endorsement of Nord Stream 2, which he described as "*a tool to blackmail the entire continent*" by increasing dependency on Russian gas (Text 26, 2022). He also referenced the failed 2021 proposal to convene an EU-Russia summit, a move Poland strongly opposed, arguing that it would have legitimised President Putin and jeopardised sanctions. Here, Poland is cast as a principled actor defending European integrity, in contrast to what it perceives as the EU core's appeasement and strategic blindness.

The discourse further criticised the EU's internal dynamics, portraying them as structurally imbalanced and morally compromised. According to Morawiecki, European solidarity had become "*an empty concept*," reduced to "forcing consent to the actual dictate of the stronger" and transforming the Union into a space of "*unequal game between the weak and the strong*" (Text 26, 2022). This rhetorical framing positions Poland as both a victim of internal EU hierarchies and a critic of the Union's departure from its foundational ideals.

President Duda reinforced this critique by pointing to Western Europe's strategy of deepening energy dependence on Russia, which he argued Poland had long opposed (Text 28, 2022). The implication is clear: the EU core not only ignored Eastern European warnings but actively contributed to the continent's vulnerability. In doing so, Poland's leadership constructs a narrative of prescient resistance, contrasting its strategic foresight with Western Europe's failed pragmatism.

Collectively, these statements construct the EU, particularly Germany and France, as a hegemonic and complacent Other whose failures had tangible security and normative consequences. This framing legitimised Poland's increasingly assertive and at times oppositional posture within the Union. By casting itself as a moral and strategic counterweight to a "civilised yet neglectful" core, Poland seeks to redefine its role from peripheral member to guardian of European values and security.

6.3 Constructing Self-Image: From Marginalized State to Guardian of Civilisation

6.3.1 Poland as the “Guardian of Civilisation” and Defender of the Moral Frontline

In PiS-led discourse, Poland was portrayed not merely as a vulnerable state on Europe’s periphery, but as a crucial “security barrier” on the continent’s eastern flank and a moral guardian of European civilisation. This discursive construction reframed Poland’s geopolitical position as one of active responsibility rather than passive marginality.

President Andrzej Duda articulated this narrative by linking Poland’s support for Ukraine to a broader civilizational and moral imperative: *“It is our moral duty to continue helping them”* (Text 36, 2023). This framing situates Poland’s assistance within a larger struggle to defend shared European values. Duda emphasised the region’s historical consciousness of oppression: *“We know what Russian terror and Russian occupation mean... This is our reality, the reality of Central Europe.”* (Text 27, 2022). Through this lens, Poland’s contemporary actions were rooted in a collective historical memory of subjugation, giving moral legitimacy to its present-day role.

Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki reinforced this perspective, asserting that Poland’s support for Ukraine arises from a deep commitment to shared values: *“I can be so proud with my countrymen how all the country behaved in the context of the recent refugee waves and also in the context of supporting Ukraine in their fight for freedom, sovereignty, and independence.”* (Text 30, 2022). Here, Poland was depicted not only as a security actor but as a moral exemplar at the frontline of defending the West’s normative order against external threats.

6.3.2 From Victimhood to Responsibility: Moral Elevation in Discourse

The PiS-led self-representation also involved a strategic reframing of Poland's historical suffering from a passive victim of geopolitical aggression to an active moral agent responsible for safeguarding regional stability and freedom. This transformation exemplified what scholars (Browning, Joenniemi, & Steele, 2021) describes as vicarious identity in ontological security practice, whereby the Self enhances its own sense of purpose and status by identifying with and symbolically embodying the experiences of another. Here, a positive self-image of Poland as both morally righteous and geopolitically indispensable. Historical trauma is not only remembered, but repurposed as a resource to justify contemporary ethical and political action.

The memory of Poland's partitions, brutal occupation during World War II, and Soviet domination is mobilised not simply as a narrative of suffering but as a foundation for the current "responsibility" to protect Ukraine and uphold freedom. President Duda poignantly recalled Poland's brutal history: "*Warsaw lay in ruins, destroyed by the Germans with Stalin's consent... We know what death means. We know what the Holocaust means*" (Text 25, 2022). This historical suffering became a template for understanding Ukrainian victimhood and legitimising Polish assistance by Duda: "*Nobody is as familiar with such predicament as we, Poles, so heavily tried by warfare and aggression*" (Text 19, 2022).

Moreover, Duda explicitly articulated the transition from passive victimhood to proactive guardianship: "*Now and forever... we, as a neighbouring country, will act as a guardian*" (Text 35, 2023). In ontological security terms, this moral elevation from "we were victims" to "we now bear responsibility" reflects a strategy of identity maintenance that draws strength from shared historical experience while projecting a renewed agency in the present. The narrative thus simultaneously anchors Poland's self-image in a history of resilience and affirms its contemporary role as a defender of freedom for itself, for Ukraine, and for Europe.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has examined how the PiS-led Polish government's discourse constructs different categories of "Others" and, in doing so, articulates a particular vision of the national Self. Four central findings stand out.

First, the binary distinction often drawn between the "Muslim Other" represented by Middle Eastern refugees and the "Our Other" represented by Ukrainians is far less clear-cut than official PiS-led discourse suggests. While government narratives initially framed these groups in sharply opposing ways, the boundaries between them have proven fluid, contingent, and open to redefinition. Middle Eastern Muslim refugees, particularly young men, were consistently portrayed as culturally incompatible and as potential security threats. These associations were reinforced through repeated references to terrorism that legitimised a securitised response. Ukrainian refugees, by contrast, were introduced as "Christian brothers" bound to Poland by shared religion, cultural proximity, and historical solidarity, and were thus positioned as deserving of compassion and integration. Yet, a closer reading of PiS-led official discourse reveals that these narratives are not fixed. The initial warmth toward Ukrainian refugees has shown signs of erosion. Over time, official discourse increasingly linked the continued presence of Ukrainians to the strain on public resources, framing them less as kin and more as an economic burden. In moments of heightened geopolitical tension, they were even invoked as potential bargaining chips in Poland's foreign policy. This demonstrates how even those initially embraced as part of "our own" may be redefined as "others" when political or security imperatives shift.

Second, gender and age play a decisive role in shaping these discursive boundaries. Across both influxes, women and children were consistently exempted from the category of the "threatening other". This indicates that concerns about ontological security are filtered through gender and age, rather than being determined solely by cultural or religious identity. PiS-led discourse emphasised the feminised and infantilised profile of Ukrainian refugees, while the presence of Ukrainian men, though limited, was almost entirely erased. This omission sustained the narrative of "men as fighters, women as dependents," aligning Poland's humanitarian response with images of moral duty and safety while avoiding portrayals of

Ukrainian men as competitors or potential threats. This asymmetry highlights a selective allocation of vulnerability that both erases inconvenient figures and denies recognition as potentially threatening other.

Third, these shifting boundaries are operationalised through contrasting biopolitical strategies in official discourse. Middle Eastern refugees are constructed as ungovernable and inherently risky to national stability. This constructed risk is used to justify policies that keep them in their current locations outside Poland, effectively containing them in third countries. Such an approach reflects the logic of immunisation described in biopolitical theory, where the state seeks to protect itself by isolating and managing perceived threats at a distance. In this framework, these refugees are treated as lives that are acknowledged but excluded from the political community, subject only to minimal humanitarian oversight, as the form of “bare life” in biopolitics. Ukrainian refugees, by contrast, are placed within a discourse of productive biopolitics. They are integrated into homes and communities without the intermediary of refugee camps, which in official narratives is presented as a sign of state-led organisational success. However, in practice, this process has been largely driven by spontaneous acts of solidarity among Polish citizens rather than the result of a carefully managed government programme. The PiS-led government’s discourse retrospectively claims credit for this social mobilisation, portraying it as a coordinated policy achievement. This gap between discourse and practice underscores how political narratives can appropriate grassroots actions to strengthen a government’s image as an effective and benevolent manager of the national community.

Beyond these primary findings related to refugee othering and governance, the PiS-led government’s othering practices toward the European Union and Russia as significant historical others reinforce its nationalist self-positioning. The EU is framed as a civilisational peer turned coercive hegemon, undermining Polish sovereignty through supranational mandates, while Russia is depicted as an existential Eastern enemy rooted in historical trauma and contemporary security threats. Together, these refugee Others and external Others help consolidate the government’s portrayal of Poland as a sovereign, morally elevated, and security-conscious nation, which resists domination from both Western liberal institutions and Eastern authoritarian aggression.

In sum, the discursive construction of the national Self in PiS-led rhetoric is a dynamic process in which inclusion and exclusion are contingent, fluid, and closely tied to shifting calculations of identity, security, and political legitimacy. The boundaries of “us” and “them” are neither immutable nor purely determined by cultural lines, but are strategically mobilised to serve the state’s immediate objectives in both domestic and foreign policy contexts.

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Text of Resources

For Middle Eastern Refugees:

Year	Nr.	Position/ Category/ Audience/ Date	Sources
2015	1	President Speech (President website) To Intl Society (Intl.) 28.10.2015	Duda, A. (2015) 'Address by President of the Republic of Poland at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly', https://www.president.pl/news/address-by-president-of-the-republic-of-poland-at-the-70th-session-of-the-un-general-assembly-,36006 , consulted on 11. 06. 2024
	2	Prime Minister Statement (Gov website) To Domestic 18.11.2015	Szydło, B. (2015) 'Premier.gov.pl. 2015. Stenogram exposé premier Beaty Szydło/ Policy statement by Prime Minister Beata Szydło - stenographic record', https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/stenogram-expos-premier-beaty-szydlo , consulted on 11. 06. 2024
	3	Minister of the Interior Interview (PiS website) To Domestic 23.11.2015	Błaszczak, M. (2015) 'Najważniejsze jest bezpieczeństwo/ The most important thing is safety', https://pis.org.pl/aktualnosci/najwazniejsze-jest-bezpieczenstwo , Full transcript: https://www.polskieradio.pl/13/11465/Artykul/1547929,signaly-dnia-23-listopada-2015-zapis-rozmowy-z-mariuszem-blaszczakiem , consulted on 12. 06. 2024
	4	Prime Minister Statement (Official Youtube) To Intl. 30.11.2015	Szydło, B. (2015) 'Premier Beata Szydło w Brukseli: sprawa migrantów zostanie rozwiązana poza granicami UE/ Prime Minister Beata Szydło in Brussels: the migrant issue will be resolved outside the EU borders' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XT_owrNSS4w , consulted on 12. 05. 2025 [Self-transcript]
2016	5	Minister of Foreign Affairs Statement/ Report (gov web) To Domestic 29.01.2016	Waszczykowski, W. (2016) 'Government Information on the Polish Foreign Policy in 2016 (presented by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland Witold Waszczykowski at a sitting of the Sejm on 29 January 2016) p.11 YEARBOOK OF POLISH FOREIGN POLICY 2016', https://pism.pl/upload/images/artykuly/18b4b66c-79ea-46e3-b777-04c0ef55b8c8/1612356136646.pdf , consulted on 11. 10. 2024 Polish edition is available at <i>MSZ: informacja Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2016 r. (komunikat)</i> : https://pap-mediaroom.pl/polityka-i-spoleczenstwo/msz-informacja-ministra-spraw-zagranicznych-o-zadaniach-polskiej-polityki , consulted on 11. 10. 2024

	6	President Speech (President website) To Intl Society (Intl.) 19.03.2016	Duda, A. (2016) 'Poles and Hungarians have preserved good values', https://www.president.pl/news/poles-and-hungarians-have-preserved-good-values,36098 , consulted on 11. 05. 2025
	7	Prime Minister Speech (Official Youtube) To Domestic 23.03.2016	Szydło, B. (2016) 'Beata Szydło: Europa nie panuje nad atakami terrorystycznymi/ Beata Szydło: Europe has no control over terrorist attacks, 23 March 2016, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pd3U3kKtm2k , consulted on 21. 05. 2025 [Self-transcript]
	8	President Speech (President website) To Domestic and Intl. 30.03.2016	Duda, A. (2016) 'Poland is a proud and responsible member of NATO', https://www.president.pl/news/poland-is-a-proud-and-responsible-member-of-nato,36107 , consulted on 12. 05. 2025
	9	Sejm (Sjem website) Resolution/ Statement 01.04.2016	Sejm. (2016) 'Resolution of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland of 1 April 2016 on Poland's immigration policy', https://oide.sejm.gov.pl/oide/en/images/files/uchwaly8/uchwala_EN_1_04_2016.pdf , consulted on 11. 06. 2024
	10	President Interview (President website) To Domestic and Intl. 19.09.2016	Duda, A. (2016) 'Prezydent Duda podkreśla potrzebę zmian w UE/ President Duda emphasises the need for change in the EU', https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wizyty-zagraniczne/prezydent-duda-podkreśla-potrzebę-zmian-w-unii-europejskiej,2921 , consulted on 20. 05. 2025 [Self-transcript] Full video available at: https://youtu.be/HqDObAplJAY , consulted on 20. 03. 2025
	11	President Speech (President website) To Domestic and Intl. 19.09.2016	Duda, A. (2016) 'Economic migration should not be linked to war exile - Polish President Andrzej Duda at a UN summit in New York', https://www.president.pl/news/economic-migration-should-not-be-linked-to-war-exile,36229 , consulted on 20. 03. 2025
	12	Sejm Resolution/ Statement (PiS web) To Sejm deputies (Domestic) 02.12.2016	Sejm. (2016) 'Resolution of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland of 2 December 2016 on the proposal to establish the European Union corrective allocation mechanism for refugees and financial solidarity mechanism', https://oide.sejm.gov.pl/oide/en/images/files/uchwaly8/uchwala_en_2.12.2016.pdf , consulted on 11. 06. 2024
2017	13	Minister of Foreign Affairs Statement/ Report (gov web) To Domestic and Intl. 09.02.2017	Waszczykowski, W. (2017) 'Government Information on Polish Foreign Policy in 2017 (presented by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland Witold Waszczykowski at a sitting of the Sejm on 9 February 2017) p.13 YEARBOOK OF POLISH

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14	Minister for Internal Affairs and Administration Interview (PiS website) To Domestic 18.04.2017	Błaszczak, M. & Polskie Radio (2017) 'Sygnały Dnia: Rozmowa z Mariuszem Błaszczakiem/The Daily Signal: An Interview with Marius Blazak', https://www.polskieradio.pl/13/53/Artykul/1753903%2CSygnały-Dnia-18-kwietnia-2017-roku-rozmowa-z-Mariuszem-Blaszczakiem , consulted on 13. 06. 2024 [Self-transcript]	
15	Prime Minister Speech (Official Youtube) To Domestic 01.05.2017	Szydło, B. (2017) 'Beata Szydło: Bezpieczeństwo Polski jest priorytetem/ Beata Szydło: Poland's security is a priority' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrGqqNxNwRA consulted on 13. 06. 2024 [Self-transcript]	
16	Prime Minister Speech (Official Youtube) To Domestic 24.05.2017	Szydło, B. (2017) 'Beata Szydło: Nie ma nic cenniejszego niż bezpieczeństwo ojczyzny i naszych obywateli/ Beata Szydło: There is nothing more valuable than the security of our homeland and our citizens', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZsaIJGcy8k , consulted on 13. 06. 2024 [Self-transcript]	
17	Party member and Parliament member Interview (PiS website) To Domestic 05.06.2017	Pięta, S. (2017) 'Stanisław Pięta dla Frondy: Obrzydliwy sojusz lewicy z islamistami źródłem problemów Europy/ Stanisław Pięta for Fronda: The disgusting alliance between the left and Islamists is the source of Europe's problems', https://www.fronda.pl/a/stanislaw-pieta-dla-frondy-obrzydliwy-sojusz-lewicy-z-islamistami-zrodlem-problemow-europy%2C94186.html , consulted on 02. 08. 2024 [Self-transcript]	
18	President Speech (President website) To Intl Society (Intl.) 19.09.2017	Duda, A. (2017) 'Address by President of the Republic of Poland at the 71 st Session of the UN General Assembly' https://www.president.pl/news/address-of-the-president-of-the-republic-of-poland-at-the-general-debate-of-the-72nd-session-of-un-general-assembly--36526 , consulted on 11. 05. 2024 [Self-transcript]	

For Ukrainian Refugees:

Year	Nr.	Position/ Category/ Audience/ Date	Sources
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2022	19	President Speech (President website) To Domestic 24.02.2022	Duda, A. (2022) ‘Message from the President of the Republic of Poland’ https://www.president.pl/news/message-from-the-president-of-the-republic-of-poland,49387 , consulted on 26. 10. 2024
	20	Minister of Interior and Administration Statement (Gov website) To Domestic 24.02.2022	Kamiński, M. ‘Minister Kamiński: We will show solidarity and support to all our Ukrainian brothers’ https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia-en/minister-kaminski-we-will-show-solidarity-and-support-to-all-our-ukrainian-brothers , consulted on 20. 07. 2024
	21	Legal Advisory Committee of MFA Statement (Gov website) To Domestic and Intl. 04.03.2022	Mik, C. ‘Statement by the Legal Advisory Committee to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, Warsaw’, https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/statement-by-the-legal-advisory-committee-to-the-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-poland-warsaw-4-march-2022 , consulted on 11. 05. 2024
	22	President Statement (US Gov website) To Intl. 10.03.2022	Duda, A. (2022) ‘Remarks by Vice President Harris and President Andrzej Duda of Poland in Joint Press Conference’, https://pl.usembassy.gov/vpotus_duda/ , consulted on 20. 03. 2025
	23	President Statement (President website) To Domestic 23.03.2022	Duda, A. (2022) ‘Wypowiedź Prezydenta RP po naradzie w BBN/ Statement by the President of the Republic of Poland after the meeting at the National Security Bureau’, https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wystapienia/wypowiedz-prezydenta-rp-po-naradzie-w-bbn,50989 , consulted on 26. 11. 2024 [Self-transcript]
	24	President Speech (US Gov website) To Intl. 25.03.2022	Duda, A. (2022) ‘Remarks by President Biden and President Andrzej Duda of Poland in Briefing on the Humanitarian Efforts for Ukraine’, https://pl.usembassy.gov/biden_duda_rzeszow/ , consulted on 26. 11. 2024
	25	President Interview (President website) To Intl. 07.04.2022	Duda, A. (2022) ‘Wywiad dla telewizji CNN/ Interview for CNN’, https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wypowiedzi-prezydenta-rp/wywiady/wywiad-dla-telewizji-cnn,51800 , consulted on 20. 03. 2025 [Self-transcript]
26	Prime Minister Statement (Government website)	Morawiecki, M. (2022) ‘Artykuł Prezesa Rady Ministrów RP Mateusza Morawieckiego pt. „Historyczne wyzwania i fałszywe recepty - Europa na rozdrożu” y, 2022./ Article by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki, entitled “Historical	

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	27	President Speech (President website) To Domestic and Intl. 20.09.2022	Duda, A. (2022) ‘Speech by the President of Poland at the 77th session of the UN General Assembly’, https://www.president.pl/news/speech-by-the-president-of-poland-at-the-77th-session-of-the-un-general-assembly,58871 , consulted on 26. 11. 2024
	28	President Speech (President website) To Intl. 20.09.2022	Duda, A. (2022) ‘Andrzej Duda’s interview with BBC Africa’, https://www.president.pl/news/andrzej-duda-interview-bbc-africa,58945 , consulted on 20. 03. 2025
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