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SILENCED VOICES AT THE BORDER: HOW CROATIAN ONLINE MEDIA REPORTED ON THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how leading Croatian online news outlets reported on Ukrainian refugees during the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. By conducting a quantitative content analysis of 491 articles, this paper contributes to the existing body of research on depictions of refugees (Dobrić Basanež & Ostojić, 2021; Matulić & Škokić, 2024), with a particular focus on the national media context. Findings confirm prior research (Čepo et al., 2020; Popović et al., 2022) suggesting that refugees are often marginalised as sources. Official government and political sources dominate media coverage, reinforcing a top-down narrative of refugee issues. Moreover, the study also shows that the analysed news outlets focused on refugees as victims fleeing occupied territories, as well as narratives of integration, resettlement, and gratitude. Additional findings revealed heavy reliance on agency reporting, raising questions about diversity in Croatian online journalism. This observation suggests a potential avenue for future research on content production strategies in the digital news environment.

KEYWORDS

Ukrainian Refugees • Croatia • Online Media • Quantitative Content Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Migration and refugee issues have become defining challenges of our time, shaping political, social, and cultural landscapes across the globe. With over 280 million displaced individuals worldwide (Migration Data Portal, n.d.), migration has significantly impacted the European Union and is closely tied to broader economic, social, political, and technological transformations (International Organisation for Migration, 2021). These intense shifts have amplified societal debates and fueled polarisation, with far-right political parties gaining parliamentary representation in seven EU member states in 2024 by capitalising on economic uncertainties, cultural insecurities, and nationalist rhetoric to gain influence across Europe.

Since the onset of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, over six million Ukrainian refugees have had to leave their homes and search for safety in Europe. The invasion caused civilian casualties, destruction of property and infrastructure, and obstructed lives in the whole country. Almost a million Ukrainians fled to Poland, followed by the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, and the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, Germany recorded more than a million Ukrainian refugees who applied for asylum or other national protection schemes. Croatia, a country with a population of fewer than four million, has accepted more than 26,000 refugees through various assistance and integration programs (UNHCR, 2025).

Furthermore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as one of the greatest security crises in Europe since the Second World War, has raised questions of European security. It challenged the EU's self-perception and pushed the Union towards the role of protector and security provider (Friedrichs & Sommer, 2025), while also prompting support for Ukraine's accession to the EU among Western European countries (Panchuk, 2024). NATO called the aggression the "gravest threat to Euro-Atlantic security in decades" (NATO, n.d.), urging the reinforcement of its collective defence, including doubling the number of multinational battlegroups, exercising land forces, additional combat-ready forces, approving a new model of air defence systems and plans, acquiring new equipment and integrating Finland and Sweden into the Alliance's plans (NATO, n.d.).

Amid this complex geopolitical backdrop, the media plays a key role in shaping public perceptions of migrants and refugees. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was extensively covered by European and worldwide media, reporting from multiple Ukrainian battlegrounds with a strong emphasis on Ukrainian refugees and their circumstances. Studies analysing Croatian media reveal that news outlets frequently rely on official sources, thereby reinforcing dominant government narratives and portraying refugees

in a negative light through sensationalist and discriminatory language (Dobrić Basanež & Ostojić, 2021; Popović et al., 2022). However, particular studies focusing on the reporting of the Croatian online media on the Ukrainian refugees are scarce, leaving a research gap that this study aims to fill. Building on previous research, this study aims to identify how the most-read Croatian online news outlets reported on Ukrainian refugees while reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

2. ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN THE CROATIAN SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Hutter & Kriesi (2021) argue that the disputes over immigration are part of a “new structuring divide in European societies and politics” (p. 341). This divide became more pronounced in 2024, a super-election year in which 3.7 billion voters participated across 72 countries (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). The European political landscape witnessed a conservative shift with far-right parties gaining parliamentary representation in seven EU member states, including Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, and Slovakia (Green, 2024).

For Croatia, a pro-European country standing at the crossroads of Central and Southeast Europe, the turbulence experienced over the past three decades has strongly influenced its current political and media landscape. Since the 1990s, Croatia has undergone a process of independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, war, and transformation from a socialist to a democratic political system with a market-focused economy (Peruško, 2013). Kumpes (2018) identifies three historical factors that have profoundly influenced Croatia’s complex relationship with migration: the legacy of diverse multiethnic and multicultural states on its territory, the war and national homogenisation of the 1990s, and its accession to the European Union in 2013, which made Croatia more susceptible towards emigration and immigration waves. Moreover, in 2015 and 2016, Croatia became a prominent transit country on the so-called Balkan route, which impacted and pushed the public discourse towards political parties that emphasised stronger border security. In their research, Bell et al. (2021) noted intensified anti-Muslim and anti-migrant sentiments between 2008 and 2017, with a third of Eastern European respondents expressing negative attitudes toward these groups (Bell et al., 2021). In Croatia, a study on X and Facebook users found that respondents with more positive attitudes towards refugees were more likely to help them, and that a stronger national identity correlated with a lower willingness to assist refugees (Medlobi & Čepo, 2018). A strong national identity and anti-immigration attitudes were key components of the Homeland Movement’s political program. This

right-wing political party gained a seat in the Croatian Parliament following the 2024 elections. In Croatia, this conservative shift has been intensified by multiple uncertainties in the COVID-19 aftermath, such as market changes, a series of earthquakes that caused severe damage to the capital and surrounding areas, geopolitical insecurities because of the war in Ukraine, rising inflation, and the transition to the Euro currency at the beginning of 2024, which caused significant economic changes. Right-wing parties have capitalised on rising socio-economic anxieties in recent years, offering narratives centred on traditional values and national interests as solutions to voters' concerns. In May 2024, Croatia's centre-right ruling party, the Croatian Democratic Union, agreed to form a coalition with a right-wing Homeland Movement, which won 14 seats, to form a majority in the Croatian parliament. According to their political program (Domovinski pokret, 2024), the Homeland Movement claims that secret transports are being organised to deport migrants to Zagreb and that mass migrations are a "risk to European and Croatian security" (p. 24). According to them, some of those security threats include smuggling, violent border crossings, and terrorism, despite a lack of supporting evidence. Their discourse specifically targets non-European migrants, reflecting broader European trends favouring intra-European migration over immigration from other regions.

While the Homeland Movement aligns with right-wing ideology, it has adopted strategies commonly associated with far-right parties, such as politicising migration and refugee issues and spreading xenophobic nationalism. By redirecting intolerance from biological differences to issues such as job competition and welfare access (Vochocová, 2020), anti-migrant attitudes often use perceived threats to economic, cultural, and social stability to fuel intolerance towards others (Czaika & Di Lillo, 2018). The "perceived notion of threat" (Bell et al., 2021, p. 3) observes migrants and refugees through the lenses of symbolic and realistic threats. While the symbolic threat is usually associated with the "in-group's religion, beliefs, values or ideologies" (Bell et al., 2021, p. 3), the realistic threat is connected to "economic and security concerns" (*ibid*). Bloom et al. (2015) argue that symbolic and realistic threats coexist and vary from person to person. According to their research, materially threatened individuals prefer migrants who are different from them and who will not "compete for the same resources" (p. 1760), whereas individuals who feel that immigration threatens their culture prefer migrants akin to themselves. Survey experiments reveal that Europeans feel less threatened by migrants from European countries than from non-European countries (Czaika & Di Lillo, 2018; De Coninck, 2020) because migrants from European countries possess

similar “beliefs, traditions, religious roots, language, and a shared history” (De Coninck, 2020, p. 1680; Iordache & Blanchard, 2024).

Research in the Croatian context shows that migrants are more often perceived as a cultural threat by highly religious people, and that those whose identity intertwines religious and nationalist beliefs will express social distance towards migrants (Kumpes, 2018). A correlation between religious attitudes and negative views on migration was confirmed on a sample of 603 Croatian students (Stipšić, 2022), where religiosity had the most significant influence on negative attitudes toward migrants. It is worth noting that Croatia is a predominantly Roman Catholic country, with more than 78% of its citizens declaring their affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church during the last population census. Religious affiliation, together with lower educational attainment, rural background, right-wing political orientation, lower socio-economic status, and nationalistic sentiments, was identified as a predictor of attitudes towards migrants (Čačić-Kumpes et al., 2024). The same authors have also found that attitudes towards immigration become more negative after an increase in the number of migrants, especially pronounced in the indicator of immigration as a cultural threat. The most recent research on attitudes toward migrants, refugees, and minorities in Croatia, conducted by the Centre for Peace Studies in Zagreb, situates growing prejudice, xenophobia, perceived threats, and negative evaluations of immigration within the context of an influx of foreign workers. Compared to data from 2013 and 2017, these attitudes have intensified by 2024, particularly towards specific groups such as Arabs and Muslims (Župarić-Iljić & Lalić, 2024).

3. SPECIFICITIES OF THE CROATIAN MEDIA MARKET AND REPORTING ON SENSITIVE GROUPS

Like other Central and Eastern European countries, Croatia has a relatively recent history of governance under a non-democratic political system, and it continues to deal with its legacy to this day (Ravbar, 2026). For countries with a recent non-democratic past, media trust poses a special challenge, as trust in the media as a social institution is closely linked to trust in the political system, politicians, and journalists. As a partial sentiment from the previous regime, the belief that journalists cannot be trusted because they only write what their owners tell them to (Urbániková, 2023) fuels scepticism towards journalists and their profession. A comparison of Reuters data on trust in the news before and after the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that times of insecurity amplified the spread of disinformation, which had already been present in some media spaces (Ravbar, 2026). The so-called ‘alternative’ media, which had begun

building audiences through disinformation prior to the pandemic, expanded their content primarily through social media accounts and channels (Birchall & Knight, 2022). SEE Check, a network of fact-checking organisations from South-Eastern Europe, analysed social media posts and media texts posted in the first 150 days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They have flagged over 1,396 social media posts and media texts as manipulative or false, published in various media outlets in Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, and Croatia. Most of the narratives present in the media space were pro-Russian disinformation discourse, which spread the narrative of Ukraine as a pro-Nazi country, blamed NATO and the United States of America for the war in Ukraine, and accused some European countries of developing biochemical weapons in laboratories in Ukraine (Murić et al., 2022). Furthermore, a study focused on the use of disinformation by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation about the invasion of Ukraine in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro showed that, while Russia tried to inflict the narrative that foreign mercenaries are fighting in Ukraine, it did not achieve its goals - polarisation and change in attitudes among targeted countries (Mandić & Klarić, 2023).

The spread of disinformation and misinformation during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with socio-historical circumstances that make people more susceptible to mistrusting the media, is clearly reflected in the overall low trust in news in Croatia, at 32% (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.). Low trust is further exacerbated by some Croatian officials who deliberately evade media questions while accusing journalists of bias, harming the reputation of professionals and newsrooms. In combination with an attack on journalistic credibility, defamation lawsuits, which are used to put “pressure on journalists and their freedom to report on sensitive topics” (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024, p. 30), are on the rise. Furthermore, the so-called “Anti-Leaks” legislation proposed in 2023 dealt another blow to the journalistic profession. While the Croatian government praised the legislation, stating that it will “criminalise unauthorised disclosure of the content of investigative or evidentiary action” (Prtoric, 2023), the Croatian Journalistic Association asserted that it will undermine journalistic freedoms and access to information. The overall climate, including SLAPP procedures initiated by politicians and business figures to intimidate investigative journalists, as well as threats, harassment, online violence, and declining salaries since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.), resulted in Croatia dropping to 48th place on the 2024 World Press Freedom Index.

However, the Croatian media market is still diverse. When reporting

on the “phenomena, actors, and processes that people do not have direct experience of” (Popović et al., 2022, p. 6), the media has an irreplaceable role. The sources given a platform are especially important when reporting on refugee issues because they can influence public opinion either positively or negatively (Čepo et al., 2020). Multiple studies developed in the aftermath of the large influx of migrants and refugees to Europe in 2015 show “the predominance of stereotyped interpretations of refugee and asylum issues” (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017, p. 1749). Refugees were often depicted as “silent actors and victims” (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 17), with their voices overshadowed by those of politicians and experts (Sumuvuori et al., 2017). Such portrayals risk further victimisation and reinforce perceptions of refugees as passive and voiceless rather than as individuals with agency.

Contrastingly, media coverage of Ukrainian refugees during the early stages of the Russian invasion reflects a more inclusive approach. Matulić and Škokić’s findings (2024) show that BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera employed respectful language, avoided stereotyping, and highlighted the educational achievements and humanitarian needs of Ukrainians, while English-language media outlets emphasised forced displacement and vulnerability of Ukrainians (Sambaraju & Shrikant, 2023). Finnish media also presented Ukrainian refugees in a positive light, portraying them as vulnerable individuals eager to integrate into society, while simultaneously capturing the complexity of their experiences through diverse emotional narratives (Martikainen & Sakki, 2023).

There are still significant research gaps in media coverage of Ukrainian refugees in Croatia. The most comprehensive study to date, conducted by Popović et al. (2022), analysed 3,044 articles on migration and found that Croatian media predominantly relied on official sources, often uncritically reflecting government policies. The study also uncovered that refugees were predominantly reported negatively, which is mainly attributed to sensationalism, excessive dramatisation, and gender stereotyping. Furthermore, Dobrić Basanež and Ostojić (2021) studied Croatian migration discourse through corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Their findings revealed discriminatory language in news pieces, portraying refugees as threats and degrading them with inaccurate terminology. The authors emphasised that, in that way, refugees are “discriminated against not only when they are physically pushed back at the borders but also in the words the media use” (p. 22).

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to understand how the most-read Croatian online news outlets reported on Ukrainian refugees while reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Based on a literature review showing that news media primarily use official statements as sources when reporting on refugee issues (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Popović et al., 2022; Sumuvuori et al., 2017), it is anticipated that Croatian online media will focus on official sources when reporting on refugee issues (H1). Accordingly, the first research question is:

- *RQ1: What sources did journalists use when reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine?*

In times where pressure on media production is exacerbated by the demands of a 24/7 news cycle and competition with other online news outlets, online media utilise search engine optimisation (SEO) strategies to boost their content and increase their digital visibility. In the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when the topic garnered significant engagement, news outlets attempted to optimise their content by using hashtags that would draw the most traction. Because this study focuses on analysing articles marked with the hashtags “Ukraine” and “refugees,” it can be assumed that all the published articles will tackle only the chosen topic. However, due to the optimisation of journalistic content with multiple hashtags, it is anticipated that a significant number of articles will not write about refugees at all (H2), despite the use of the hashtag. The second research question tries to answer that.

- *RQ2: What is the main topic of the article?*

The last research question builds on the previous one and attempts to identify which aspect of the refugee experiences was showcased in the stories. This research question aims to explore:

- *RQ3: If the article mentioned Ukrainian refugees, what part of the refugee experience did the article talk about?*

4.2. DATA SELECTION AND SAMPLING

This study aims to identify how the most-read Croatian online news outlets reported on Ukrainian refugees during the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For more than five years, online media has been the primary source of news for the majority of the Croatian population, with the weekly reach of the most popular online news website (Index.hr) outgrowing the weekly reach of the most popular television channel in Croatia (Nova TV) (Peruško, 2024). Index.hr and 24sata.hr were chosen for this analysis primarily due to their popularity and audience reach, as well as their distinct approaches to reporting. Index.hr has been active on the Croatian media scene since 2002. It is a commercial, privately owned news media outlet established by Croatian journalist Matija Babić. It is a tabloid-style outlet with independent reporting and a liberal leaning (Grbeša & Volarević, 2021). They are often critical of the Croatian government, and their investigative journalists have a history of uncovering corruption stories. However, the audiences are divided. While 46% of Croatian citizens trust Index as a brand, almost 30% distrust it, which shows a significant discrepancy in overall trust in this media brand. The second online news outlet in this analysis, 24sata.hr, has the same level of trust as Index, at 46%, but the level of distrust among the population is lower, at 26% (Peruško, 2024). 24sata.hr is an online version of the first Croatian tabloid newspaper, 24sata, a centrist media outlet. They gained popularity with their paper format, its smaller size, and affordability. They first entered the Croatian media market in 2005 and became the most-read daily newspaper in Croatia within a year. In the early 2010s, they launched the phone app for their news outlet and adjusted their news platform to be compatible with mobile browsers, setting a trend in the Croatian media scene. Today, they are the second most-read online news outlet, trailing only Index.hr, and the two often compete for readers. However, 24sata is owned by the Austrian Styria Media Group, which also owns other prominent media outlets in Croatia.

The timeframe for this research was the first month of the invasion of Ukraine. This research considered all articles published on the two news outlets from February 24th to March 24th, 2022. Since the full-scale invasion is an unprecedented attack on another European country in recent European history, this timeframe was purposefully chosen to see how the Croatian media reported on the Russian invasion of Ukraine as soon as the invasion started. However, this timeframe has its limitations. The first month of the invasion was marked by a peculiar informational chaos characteristic of a new, unprecedented war situation. Social media has become an important source of information, but that also means that more

misinformation and disinformation are present online. There was a need to establish quality communication channels in the new situation, so Croatian media outlets focused on news agencies as credible sources of information. After the initial informational shock, some newsrooms sent their journalists to Ukraine, credible communication channels were established, and the flow of information stabilised. However, the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine remains an important and interesting analytical timeframe.

As the unit of analysis in this research, a journalistic piece was taken, which includes the text and associated equipment. Analysed articles were filtered by the hashtags under which they were published. Due to the sheer volume of articles published about the invasion of Ukraine and the particular interest in reporting on refugees, this research included all articles tagged with hashtags #Ukraine (Croatian: #Ukrajina) and #refugees (Croatian: #izbjeglice). The search was conducted using the news outlets' website search engines. Under these hashtags and in the chosen timeframe, Index.hr published 272 articles in total and 24sata.hr 235. It is essential to acknowledge that 24sata.hr has a subscription on their website for more 'exclusive' content, so some articles were not available for analysis because they were behind a paywall. This research focused solely on publicly available, free online news articles, as only 9% of the Croatian population pays for online news, and therefore, this content would not be accessible to the general public. When excluding these articles, the total number of analysed articles from 24sata.hr was 219. The total number of articles analysed from both online news outlets was 491.

4.3. METHOD

A quantitative content analysis of the two most-read Croatian online news outlets was conducted to answer the research questions. Quantitative content analysis was employed as a well-established research method that systematically analyses media texts (Blumell et al., 2019), having been previously used in researching similar and relevant topics (Blumell et al., 2019; Rehejeh, 2020; Rothenberger & Schmitt, 2024). The main advantages of this method are the ability to generalise and process a large number of units and "systematic observation and quantification of patterns in texts" (Coe & Scacco, 2017, p. 1).

4.4. CODE DEVELOPMENT

The data were analysed manually in Excel using quantitative content analysis. Before the coding process began, a codebook was developed, defining variables and their corresponding coding. An extensive set of codes was used to observe

larger patterns on a larger scale. The codebook consisted of 18 different parameters of analysis separated into three main parts: article structure, topics of the articles and sources used, and a part concerning reporting on refugees.

The first category consisted of naming the online news outlet, the type of published article, the placement of the article in its respective section on the website, the author's signature, the article's length, the content of the photograph, and the type of headline. The second category focused on the article's main topic, the prevalence of different sources in the story and identifying them. While it would be expected that all articles under the hashtag 'refugees' would have them as the main topic of the reporting, other reporting topics were considered when coding. Other proposed coding categories included international relations between various European countries, the political and economic consequences for Ukraine, Russia, Croatia, and Europe in general, the chronological events of the invasion, the destruction and loss suffered by the Russians, and the destruction and loss suffered by the Ukrainians. The category 'other' was also included. This category was used as a code in all other stories that did not fit this category, such as volunteering at the border, saving animals and pets from destroyed parts of Ukrainian territory, and Croatians organising the transport of non-perishable goods to Ukraine. The last category examined whether Ukrainian refugees were mentioned in the article and what their story was about.

5. RESULTS

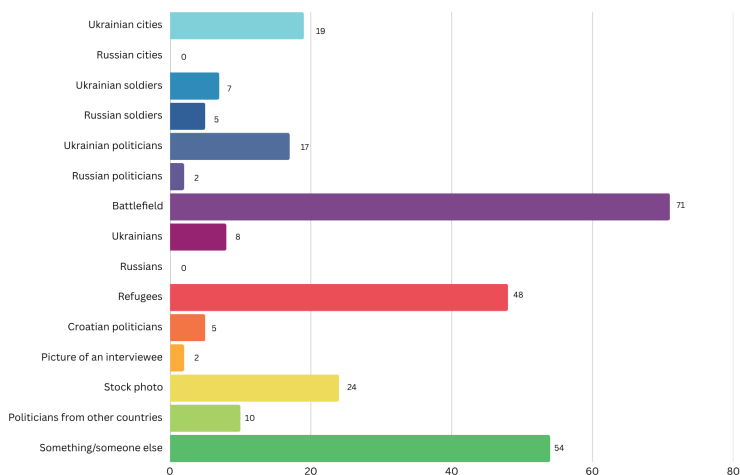
5.1. INDEX.HR

When reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine from February 24th to March 24th 2022, Index.hr published 272 online articles, of which 94% (N=257) were news articles. Other published articles concerning refugees were commentaries and reports, and were placed in their respective online columns accordingly. All published articles disclosed authorship, but the most significant number of articles (60%, N=163) was signed only by the newsroom signature. The analysis notes that 39% (N=105) of articles were signed by the news agency Hina, meaning that the entire content of the article was sourced from the news agency. Only the commentary articles were signed by the journalist's full name and last name. Over half of all published articles (64%, N=173) were short news articles. This study defined a short article as a text up to 1500 characters, including spaces. A significantly smaller percentage of articles, 31% (N=83), were medium length, defined as a text between 1,500 and 3,000 characters, including spaces. Almost 6% (N=15) of articles exceeded 3000 characters and were therefore

considered long articles according to this analysis. Most of the headlines (74%, N=200) published by Index.hr when reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine were informative. Only a few headlines, 26% (N=71), were sensationalist. A sensationalist headline, for the purpose of this study, was defined as a headline that presents information in a shocking or exciting way, triggering recipients' reactions, such as attention and emotions (Otto, Glogger, & Boukes, 2016).

All published articles featured a large headline photograph, which was used to capture the reader's attention. Most often, in 26% (N=71) of published articles, the Index.hr used cover photos that showed wartime scenes, such as photographs from the frontlines depicting battles, arms, tanks, or combat aircraft.

Graph 1: What was on the cover photograph of Index.hr when reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (N=272)

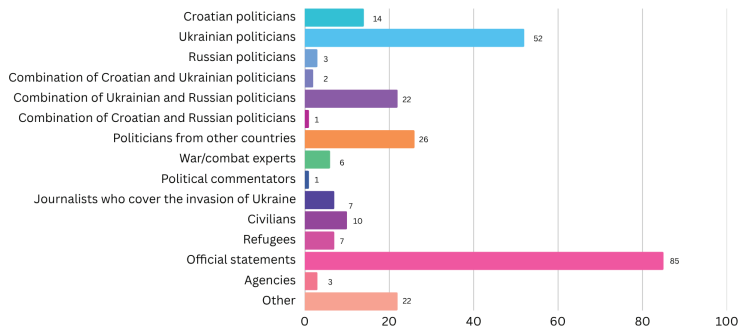


The second largest category in the photo analysis is “Something/someone else”. This category contained all the other potential cover photographs not part of the initial coding list. The photographs coded as “Something/someone else” were predominantly depicting volunteers, refugee centres, animals saved from the war zone and photographs from the Ukrainian borders. While the articles were purposefully filtered with the hashtag refugees, refugees made the headline photographs in almost 18% (N=48) of cases. One reason might be that journalists from this online news outlet did not go to Ukraine to build their pictures and/or video database, so their access to photographs was limited.

During reporting on the invasion of Ukraine, Index.hr also produced the montaged logo titled 'War in Ukraine.' The logo consisted of Vladimir Putin's head in black and white on a red background, with Hitler's moustache edited onto his face, which is still on their news site. This logo was often included in the corner of headline photos of stories that covered the Russian invasion of Ukraine and showed the newsroom's support towards Ukrainians with a caricature of the Russian president.

In the analysed timeframe, Index.hr dedicated the most extensive number of articles to Ukrainian refugees (22%, N=59), which was to be expected due to the purposeful filtering. The stories covering refugees as their main topic mainly focused on their struggles to run from the occupied territories and on refugees as victims of the war. However, because of boosting their content and increasing their digital visibility, Index.hr used various hashtags per story. Categories that follow reporting on refugees include the chronological happenings of the invasion (14%, N=37), the destruction of Ukraine (13%, N=36), international relations between Ukraine and Russia (13%, N=36), and the destruction and losses on the Russian side (11%, N=31). The least represented topic concerns Croatian international relations with Russia.

Graph 2: Main sources used in the articles published by Index.hr. (N=261)



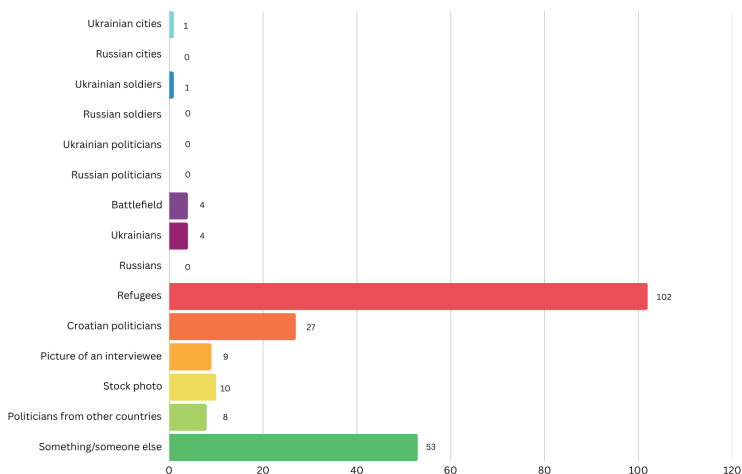
96% (N=261) of Index.hr's articles had sources, which show the journalists' extensive coverage and research abilities. Although they had plenty of sources, 33% (N=85) of all sources were official statements, often from political parties, politicians, or organisations coordinating refugees' needs when arriving in the European Union. The second most cited sources were Ukrainian politicians or governmental representatives. Citing Ukrainian governmental sources is mainly connected with regular video briefings by the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyj. For comparison, although 22% (N=59) of published texts focused on Ukrainian refugees as their main topic, refugees themselves were cited as sources in less than 3% (N=7) of articles. That in-

icates that they were mostly talked about but did not get the chance to be creators of their own stories and discourses surrounding them.

5.2. 24SATA.HR

In the analysed timeframe, 24sata.hr published in a total of 235 articles. Because some were published behind a closed paywall, they were unavailable for analysis. After excluding these articles from the total number, this study comprised 219 online articles. Regarding the type of article, 24sata showed more diversity than Index.hr. While 79% (N=173) of their articles were news pieces, they published more reports (5%, N=12), interviews (4%, N=8), and commentary articles (1%, N=3). As Index.hr, 24sata.hr also signed all of their authors, but mainly using their full names and surnames, which is the policy of their newsroom. However, 24sata also published a significantly higher number of agency texts - 58% (N=126). This shows that news agencies played a crucial role in the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, providing information, stories, and photographs to the Croatian online news outlets. Most of the articles published at 24sata.hr are medium length (65%, N=143), and less than 29% (N=63) are short news articles. It is interesting to acknowledge that 24sata.hr had almost the same percentage of long articles as its competitor. The main headline was informative in 80% (N=176) of articles. Sensationalist titles occupy 19% (N=42) of articles, fewer than their counterpart's, and were primarily used when citing refugees in stories focused on the sufferings caused by Russian aggression.

Graph 3: What was on the cover photographs of 24sata.hr when reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. (N=219)



Analysis of headline photographs showed that 24sata.hr put greater emphasis on showing the invasion of Ukraine through the experiences of refugees, showcasing them in their headline photos (47%, N=102), followed by the category 'Something/someone else' (24%, N=53). Photographs in this category mostly showed volunteers from the Polish-Ukrainian border and 24sata.hr's journalists who covered the refugees' stories. The third most common category was one in which Croatian politicians or governmental representatives commented on the refugees' issues and how Croatia copes with the influx of people. Similar to the previously analysed Index.hr, 24sata.hr used no photographs from Russia - their politicians, cities, or soldiers.

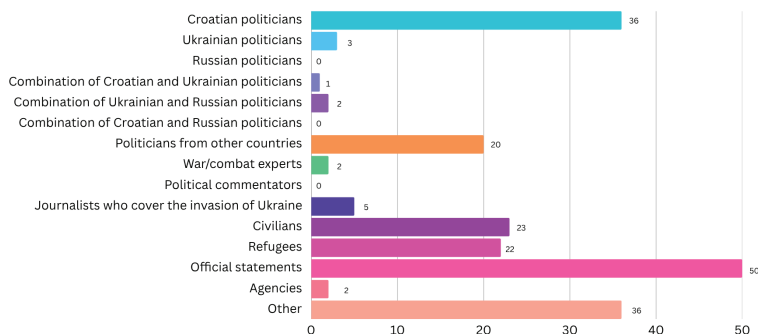
In the analysed timeframe, the topic of 66% (N=144) of 24sata.hr's articles were Ukrainian refugees, significantly more than the Index.hr. The stories covering refugees as their main topic focused on the experience of refugees finding a home in another country (40%, N=89), including stories about their integration, locating their families in European Union countries, and accounts of refugees expressing gratitude to their hosts for taking them in. 41% (N=83) of the stories centred on their experience as a victim of war and Russian occupation. When the articles addressed European or Croatian policies towards refugees, refugees were often referred to as 'others'.

The second most-coded topic of 24sata.hr's articles were categorised as 'Other' (11%, N=24), with stories from volunteers, NGOs, and humanitarian organisations helping refugees, distributing food and medicine, and helping with finding accommodation after escaping the war. This category also included articles about Russian troops taking the nuclear power plant Chornobyl and the potential dangers that could come afterwards. 5% (N=11) of published articles addressed the destruction in Ukraine, and almost 3% (N=6) reported on the chronological events of the invasion. Other topics proposed in the codebook were not found in 24sata.hr's reporting indicated that their use of hashtags under the stories was more connected to the topic they were focusing on in the article.

The great majority of articles were published on 24sata.hr (92%, N=202) had sources. Articles without sources were typically commentary articles or brief pieces that tracked the progress of the Ukrainian army using online maps. The most frequently used sources (25%, N=50) were official statements, which included statements from political parties, army leaders, and the highest levels of the state, followed by Croatian politicians or governmental representatives (18%, N=36). Because 24sata.hr newsroom sent their journalists to report from the Ukrainian border, they had more access to civilians, volunteers, and refugees, who were represented with

11% (N=22) respectively. Highly represented sources also included politicians and governmental representatives from other countries, primarily quoted in the stories about international politics and repercussions towards Russia. Russian politicians and war experts were not quoted when reporting these issues.

Graph 4: Main sources used in the articles published by 24sata.hr. (N=202)



6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study analysed how the most-read Croatian online news outlets reported on Ukrainian refugees during the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It contributes to the existing literature on refugees in the media (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Dobrić Basanež & Ostojić, 2021; Matulić & Škokić, 2024; Martikainen & Sakki, 2023), focusing specifically on Croatian online news outlets.

Firstly, while there have been some studies on refugees in Croatian media (Popović et al., 2022; Čepo et al., 2020), there has been limited research addressing Ukrainian refugees, particularly using quantitative content analysis. What is particularly pertinent in these findings is confirmation of previous findings (Popović et al., 2022; Sumuvuori et al., 2017), claiming that “refugees were given limited opportunities to speak of their experiences and suffering” (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 17). Although the group of refugees in this study differs (this study focused on Ukrainians), and there is a time lapse since previous studies, the trends in media reporting on refugees persist. Croatian media also used official statements as their primary news sources, confirming the first hypothesis and answering RQ1. Ukrainian refugees were sources in 6% (N=29) of all analysed articles, indicating that they were mostly talked about but did not get the chance to be creators of their own stories and discourses surrounding them. It is important to note 24sata.hr newsroom sent their journalists to report from

the Ukrainian border, so they had more access to civilians, volunteers, and refugees (10%, N=22, respectively), in comparison to Index.hr, whose journalists were not in the field, and had refugees as sources in less than 3% (N=7) of articles.

Secondly, although it could be expected that, due to purposive sampling, all articles would focus on refugees as their main topic, this has been proven untrue. There is an indication that, because the unprecedented invasion of Ukraine captured significant online engagement, media outlets utilised search engine optimisation strategies to position their content online. This means that the study anticipated a significant number of articles not writing about refugees at all (H2), despite the hashtag under the article. To address the second hypothesis, the study aimed to answer Research Question 2: What is the main topic of the article? The analysis showed that Index.hr and 24sata.hr both dedicated the most extensive number of their articles to the topic of Ukrainian refugees (22%, N=59 and 66%, N=144, respectively). In the case of Index.hr, the second hypothesis was confirmed. A significant number of articles published on their website did not feature Ukrainian refugees as the main topic, despite being marked with the hashtag #refugees. Other topics prevalent in the Index.hr's reporting on refugees is reporting on chronological happenings of invasion, destruction of Ukraine, international relations between Ukraine and Russia, and destruction and losses on the Russian side.

The last research question (RQ3), "If the article mentioned Ukrainian refugees, what part of the refugee experience did the article talk about?" was successfully answered through this analysis. The stories on refugees by Index.hr primarily focused on their struggles to flee the occupied territories and refugees as victims of the war. 24sata.hr, having more access to the refugees due to their field reporting, focused on the experiences of refugees regarding integration, resettlement, and gratitude toward host countries. When the articles addressed the topics of European or Croatian policies towards refugees, they were mentioned as 'others,' people who are talked about but do not speak for themselves. The policies and actions were brought up for them, but not in collaboration with them, without giving their input on the broader political or economic impact on their lives.

Lastly, an interesting finding emerged from this analysis. Correlating with the research conducted by Popović et al. (2022), who discovered frequent repetition of articles from other media and recycling of media content, this study discovered an intense use of agency texts. Croatian news agency Hina's news articles were published in their entirety by Index in 39% (N=105) of cases, and more than 58% (N=126) by 24sata. In the online news space, media outlets face immense pressure regarding rapid content

production, as “economic constraints are higher for online newspapers” (Welbers et al., 2016, p. 317). News agencies present a good opportunity to cut costs and time, and making commercially-driven decisions in a media business (Johnston & Forde, 2011) is justifiable. However, because both analysed online news outlets significantly relied on the same news agency (Hina) when reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a question of diversity of their content is raised. Although this is outside the scope of this study, it could serve as a basis for another study on Croatian online news outlets.

7. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, a notable limitation is the study’s timeframe. The analysed content represented the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, likely influencing the coverage and the identified patterns. Secondly, though quantitative content analysis systematically analyses articles published on the chosen topic, it can lack the nuances that a qualitative study would provide. Furthermore, addressing some of the research questions with an additional qualitative approach would provide a deeper insight into the current situation of the Croatian online media news market. This will be addressed by an additional study that the researcher is currently conducting.

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Conflict of interest

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