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MEDIA FRAMING OF WAR REFUGEES IN CROATIAN ONLINE MEDIA: A CASE STUDY OF UKRAINE AND GAZA

Abstract: *The objective of this paper is to analyze how Croatian online media frame war-related displacement by comparing coverage of refugees linked to the escalation in Ukraine (2022) and the Gaza Strip (2023). The study uses media-framing theory and interprets the coverage through a security-science distinction between two representations: refugees as populations exposed to endangerment, and refugees as potential sources of societal endangerment. This analytic distinction clarifies whether displacement is recognized as a security problem of protection or of control. A comparative content analysis was conducted on N=370 articles from the Index.hr, Jutarnji.hr, Večernji.hr, and Dnevno.hr, collected in the first 30 days after each escalation. The results show a pronounced visibility asymmetry, with Ukraine receiving far more coverage (N=342) than Gaza (N=28). Ukraine-related reporting is overwhelmingly humanitarian, with an occasional security layer focused on governance and institutional capacity. Gaza-related reporting is sparse, still predominantly humanitarian, and more closely anchored in conflict updates. Across both cases, explicit portrayals that cast refugees as a source of societal endangerment are empirically marginal. When “security” appears, it most often refers to administrative risk management or to the broader conflict-security context, rather than to a sustained attribution of threat to refugees.*

Keywords: *media framing, Croatia, refugees, Ukraine, Gaza*



Refugees Between Security Policies and Human Rights in the European Context

In light of the increasing level of global interdependence, the contemporary world faces a series of complex challenges that directly shape security policies and the realization of human rights. Climate change, demographic imbalances, technological development, migration, and the ever-growing influence of the internet and digital media shape how security and individual rights are defined (European Commission, 2023a). In this context, security is increasingly viewed not solely as a matter of military or state stability, but rather as a social and political phenomenon linked to the rights and freedoms of citizens. Within the European context, irregular migration, terrorism, and organized crime further intensify tensions between national security and respect for human rights (European Commission, 2023a, 2023b). A particular challenge for European Union member states is maintaining the balance between security measures and international obligations toward refugees and asylum seekers (Düvell, 2006). Within this framework, migration is increasingly incorporated into security discourse, especially in the case of refugees from war-torn areas (Musladin, 2012). Concurrently, online news media play a vital role in shaping public perception of these processes, which, in turn, indirectly influences political decisions and the formulation of security policies. Security science draws a basic conceptual line between a state of security and a state of endangerment (insecurity): security denotes protection, whereas endangerment denotes conditions or phenomena that jeopardise protected values (e.g., individual integrity, social cohesion, and state institutions) (Bjelajac, 2018; Mijalković & Popović Mančević, 2018). In this vocabulary, a “security problem” is not simply any harmful phenomenon; it is an endangerment that becomes publicly recognized, interpreted, and placed on an agenda as requiring organized protective action (Mijalković & Popović Mančević, 2018). Crucially, what counts as the security problem depends on the referent object (who/what is to be secured) and the presumed direction of endangerment (Mijalković & Popović Mančević, 2018). In migration discourse, refugees can therefore be framed primarily as endangered populations (human security) or as endangering the „receiving society“ (societal/national security).

Human rights, although universally defined in international documents such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are often curtailed in crises under pressure from security interests. As noted by Roško (2018), the fight against terrorism and other emergency measures often result in the limitation of fundamental freedoms, including the

rights to privacy, freedom of movement, and expression. Donnelly (2013) argues that it is unacceptable to systematically marginalize the rights of vulnerable groups, such as refugees and migrants, in the name of security. This marginalization is not only enacted through policy but can also be reinforced through media representations that shape public perceptions of who deserves protection and under what conditions. In that regard, Popović, Kardov, and Župarić-Iljić (2022) show that Croatian media coverage often frames migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers through crisis and security lenses, relying on sensationalist and stigmatizing narratives that can legitimize restrictive approaches toward people seeking protection.

Migration in the context of refugees is often explained using the push-and-pull factors model. Push factors include armed conflicts, political persecution, serious human rights violations, economic hardship, demographic pressures, and climate change, while pull factors include perceptions of security, political stability, access to social services, and economic opportunities in destination countries (European Parliament, 2020; EUAA, 2024). According to the European Parliament (2020), the primary push factors for refugees are violence and persecution, while pull factors include the possibility of obtaining international protection and the issuance of temporary documents in European Union member states. The European Union Agency for Asylum further states that push factors, such as conflict, climate disasters, and weak legal protection systems, explain why individuals attempt to cross European Union borders, whereas pull factors stem from the possibility of obtaining asylum, family reunification, and more stable living conditions (EUAA, 2024).

Such migration dynamics involve diverse profiles of people, ranging from economic migrants to those forced to flee their homes due to persecution, conflict, or mass violence. This latter group, known as refugees, is subject to special legal and humanitarian protections within the international context. The concept of the refugee took shape after the Second World War, when the international community sought to institutionalize the protection of individuals forced to flee. The adoption of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees represents a key turning point in the definition of international legal standards of protection (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2010). This document established the definition of a refugee, guaranteed the right to asylum, introduced the principle of non-refoulement, and recognized states' responsibility for humanitarian protection. Petrović (2016) conceptualizes refugeehood as a liminal condition in which

cross-border displacement suspends one's political-legal identity and the rights attached to citizenship; consequently, refugee status is contingent on institutional and political determinations within the international protection regime. The refugee is, therefore, less of a legal-technical category and more of a political and symbolic one. It is important to distinguish refugees from internally displaced persons, who are forcibly displaced within the borders of their own state and are not subject to international protection under the 1951 Convention, as well as from irregular migrants who most often leave their country for economic or personal reasons. Damjanović and Tomičević (2004) further distinguish between refugees and asylum seekers: refugees are individuals whose status has already been recognized, while asylum seekers are those whose application for international protection is still pending.

Unlike other migrants, refugee status requires the cumulative fulfillment of several conditions: presence outside the country of nationality, the existence of a well-founded fear of persecution, the link between that persecution and specific characteristics (race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion), and the inability or unwillingness to seek the protection of one's own state (Damjanović & Tomičević, 2004). Rudolf and Kovačević (2017) warn that, even when these conditions are formally met, the actual recognition of refugee status is often hindered in practice by political pressures and the dominance of security discourse. Contemporary European Union policies are increasingly inclined to view refugees primarily through the lens of border management and migration control rather than as subjects of international protection, further narrowing the space for exercising the right to asylum. Luyten (2022) warns that security policies focused exclusively on border control can result in practices that undermine international standards, thereby calling into question the legal and humanitarian dimensions of security. In times of crisis, it is therefore crucial to maintain a balance between security measures and obligations under international law, particularly regarding the rights to asylum, dignity, and the protection of refugees. Experiences from the Croatian context further illustrate these processes. During the 2015/2016 refugee crisis, Croatia became a temporary refuge for tens of thousands of people from war-torn areas of the Middle East. Although most refugees perceived Croatia as a transit country, the Republic of Croatia provided basic humanitarian conditions and complied with international and European obligations, including the Geneva Convention and the Act on International and Temporary Protection (Bezić & Petrović, 2019). The new migration wave in 2022, triggered by the war in Ukraine, placed Croatia in

a different position, this time as a host country. Ukrainian citizens were granted temporary protection under European Union mechanisms, demonstrating varying institutional and political responses depending on migrants' geographical origin and legal status (Euractiv, 2022).

According to data from the Croatian Ministry of the Interior, temporary protection has been extended until March 4, 2026. As of February 23, 2025, there were 29,383 displaced persons from Ukraine residing in Croatia, 3,389 of whom were accommodated through housing rental agreements (Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia [MUP], 2025). All persons under temporary protection have been integrated into the system with the right to education, healthcare, and employment without an additional permit (Hina, 2025). Such an institutional response confirms the system's readiness and the implementation of European protection mechanisms; however, it also raises the question of varying standards in the treatment of different refugee groups. Perceptions of "acceptable" and „undesirable“ migrants, particularly within media discourse, are becoming a significant social and political issue that directly influences how the relationship between security, solidarity, and human rights is understood in contemporary European societies.

Media Framing of Refugees and the Shaping of Public Opinion

Mass media possess a powerful capacity to shape the perception of reality, particularly regarding topics with which most citizens have no direct experience, such as migration and refugeehood. Since the public receives information about migrants and refugees primarily through media mediation, the way these actors are portrayed in public discourse significantly influences the formation of social attitudes and value orientations (Eberl et al., 2018). Through editorial policies, topic selection, and narrative strategies, the media shape not only the information content but also the audience's emotional reactions. Dabo (2024) points out that in reporting on migrant issues, theories of media framing and cultivation are often applied to emphasize certain aspects of migration while suppressing others. In the media space, migration is often framed in ways that determine which information is highlighted and the emotional tone of the reporting.

In many cases, migrants are portrayed through negative stereotypes, for instance, as a security threat, a source of social tension, or an economic burden (Tatalović & Malnar, 2015). Such narratives are more common in tabloid and right-wing media, where a sensationalist approach prevails. Conversely, left-leaning media are more inclined toward

humanitarian and empathetic frames, with an emphasis on human rights, refugee status, and the circumstances that led to forced displacement. Journalistic practice in reporting on migrants often oscillates between two dominant discourses: crisis and humanitarian (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). The crisis discourse portrays migration as a security threat and a social burden, while the humanitarian approach prioritizes individual stories, suffering, and the need for protection. This dichotomy is further deepened in politically polarized societies, where migration is instrumentalized to mobilize the electorate and reinforce ideological positions. The theoretical framework of media framing helps us understand how the audience interprets migration processes. The classic definition of framing was provided by Entman (1993), according to whom media framing involves a process in which specific elements of reality are selected and emphasized to guide the understanding of an issue, including how the problem is defined, how its causes are explained, how it is evaluated from a normative standpoint, and which reactions or solutions are considered appropriate. In other words, frames direct the audience toward a specific way of understanding the subject being reported. De Vreese (2005) defines framing as a process in which the media assign meaning to political issues through specific patterns of presentation, distinguishing between thematic and interpretive frames. Chong & Druckman (2007) emphasize that frames not only influence how problems are understood, but also which political assessments and attitudes appear reasonable and legitimate, as the manner of presenting information can shape the opinions and priorities of the audience. Matthes (2012) points out that media frames do not function merely as temporary elements in individual news stories, but as relatively stable patterns of meaning that recur and thus structure public discourse over time, including the process of selection, interpretation, and evaluation of information in political communication.

Entman's (1993) four framing functions, defining the problem, interpreting causes, making moral judgements, and suggesting remedies, fit well with this security science perspective. Media frames do not just report displacement. They guide audiences toward what should be treated as endangerment, who or what is positioned as the threatened referent object, and which responses are presented as reasonable and legitimate. Put differently, framing is one mechanism through which endangerment is translated into a "security problem", whether the emphasis is on protection or on control (Mijalković & Popović Mančević, 2018). In the digital age, online news media play an increasingly important role in shaping public discourse on migration. In the context of migration,

European media frequently employ the frames of „victim“ and „threat,“ thereby creating a simplified, binary image of migrant experiences (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). Within the Croatian context, Dabo (2024) confirms that media, through language, visual material, the selection of interviewees, and the tone of reporting, actively participate in constructing the meaning of migration, underscoring their non-neutral and socially relevant role. The speed of information dissemination and broad audience reach increase visibility of migrant themes, but they also encourage superficial, unverified, and sensationalist reporting. Clickbait headlines and emotionally charged content often contribute to moral panic and the stereotyping of migrants, whereby complex social processes are simplified and reduced to a threat (Rony et al., 2017). Within this context, narratives that create a division between „us“ and „them“ are frequently repeated, portraying migrants as a homogeneous, foreign group that does not belong to the society they are entering. In reporting, individual stories, experiences, and reasons for migration are frequently neglected, while the emphasis is placed on figures, "waves," and security aspects. The use of terms such as "illegal migrant" further reinforces negative perceptions and contributes to stigmatization, thereby obscuring the broader picture of the causes of migration and the human dimension of the refugee experience (Bezić & Petrović, 2019). Episodic, simplified reporting on migration, often amplified by sensationalism and media hyperbole, reduces a complex phenomenon to a series of isolated “dramas.” Such dramaturgical framing can generate a sense of urgency, and even a sense of emergency (Popović, Kardov & Župarić-Iljić, 2022, pp. 18, 29). A particular problem is presented by the comments sections below media posts, where anonymous users frequently express xenophobic and discriminatory views. Although this content does not originate directly from journalists, the media bear responsibility for its publication and moderation. Research shows that comments are often a space for hate speech, dehumanization, and calls for violence, which further normalizes intolerance toward migrants (Šori & Vehovar, 2022). In this way, online news media help shape the broader discursive framework within which the audience perceives migrants and refugees.

The ethics of media reporting on migrants, therefore, carry crucial significance. These are vulnerable groups who are frequently exposed to stereotypes and exclusion, and the way they are reported can have long-term social and political consequences. Responsible journalism implies the careful selection of language, visual representations, and sources, alongside respect for human dignity and the contextualization of information (Dabo, 2024). It is not merely a matter of accuracy, but also of awareness regarding the

impact of media content on public opinion, social cohesion, and the protection of human rights. Political actors further shape the media discourse on migration, especially during crisis periods. Statements by politicians, which the media relay and interpret, often oscillate between humanitarian rhetoric and security alarmism, thereby transforming migration into a tool for political mobilization. Such narratives are frequently based on emotions and interests rather than verified facts, which directly influences public perception and the shaping of migration policies (Bezić & Petrović, 2019). Different audiences interpret media messages in various ways, depending on their ideological leanings and media habits (Vozab & Peruško, 2018). Ultimately, the way the media frames migration and refugee issues cannot be observed outside of the broader social and political context. The media play a dual role: they can contribute to the spread of fear, stereotypes, and dehumanization, but they can simultaneously foster empathy, understanding, and social solidarity. Responsible and ethically grounded reporting, therefore, represents not only a professional obligation but also a key element in protecting human rights during contemporary migration crises.

The Context of Armed Conflicts - Refugee Crises in Ukraine and Gaza

In the context of this paper, the term "war zones" refers to areas affected by active armed conflicts that have serious humanitarian consequences, including mass displacement of the population, violations of human rights, and threats to the security of civilians. Such areas are characterized by violent conflicts between states or within states, often accompanied by violations of international humanitarian law (Kaldor, 2013). War zones are defined not only by the presence of armed conflict but also by its consequences for the local population, particularly through the creation of refugee waves and the need for international protection. This paper analyzes two current conflicts that have produced significant refugee crises and triggered intense media interest: the war in Ukraine, which began in 2022 with the Russian invasion, and the conflict in the Gaza Strip, which escalated during 2023. The war in Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, with the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory. The conflict is the result of years of political and territorial tensions, including the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, and Ukrainian aspirations toward membership in NATO and the European Union (Reuters, 2022). Russia presented this conflict as a "special military operation," justifying it by the need to protect the population and the alleged expansion of a Western threat, while the international community widely condemned the invasion as a violation of international law

and the sovereignty of Ukraine (United Nations Secretary-General, 2022; Kursar, 2022). According to a UNICEF report, attacks on civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and railway stations, were recorded in the early stages of the war, triggering mass waves of refugees and demands for international humanitarian aid (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2022). The second case study covers the conflict in the Gaza Strip, which stems from the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rooted in territorial disputes, the question of Palestinian statehood, the status of Jerusalem, and the rights of Palestinian refugees (B'Tselem, 2023). The latest escalation occurred in October 2023, when Hamas launched a surprise attack on southern Israel, killing hundreds of civilians and soldiers. This was followed by a fierce Israeli military offensive on the Gaza Strip, which caused a humanitarian catastrophe of immense proportions. According to a report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Occupied Palestinian Territory (OCHA oPt, 2023), more than 90% of the population of Gaza was forced into internal displacement, alongside severe shortages of food, water, and medicine. Although the context, dynamics, and actors of the wars in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip differ significantly regarding the political order, the international legal status of the territories, and regional affiliation, both conflicts share a common consequence: mass displacement of the population and severe humanitarian crises. Ukraine, with its internationally recognized state borders and democratically elected government, triggered a refugee wave toward European Union member states; more than 10,909 people entered Croatia, mostly women and children, who were provided with private and collective accommodation (Mrvoš Pavić, 2022). The conflict in Gaza, under the control of Hamas, has resulted in large numbers of deaths and injuries and extensive internal displacement within the enclave (Reuters, 2023). This tension between security and human rights constitutes a key analytical dimension of this paper.

The war in Ukraine has resulted in more than six million refugees to date, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Regional Bureau for Europe (2023), and European institutions have provided temporary protection to those fleeing Ukraine through an expedited procedure. In contrast, the Israeli-Palestinian war in Gaza is long-standing in nature. Still, the 2023 escalation further worsened the humanitarian situation. It caused new displacement, coupled with the near-total impossibility of evacuation from Gaza and an extremely high level of civilian casualties (OCHA oPt, 2023). These two case studies illustrate media reporting in different wartime contexts-one

European, the other Middle Eastern- and raise questions regarding the selectivity of attention, the political framing of reporting, and the differentiated approach toward refugees depending on the geopolitical position of the conflict. Based on the theoretical insights presented regarding the relationship between security and human rights and the role of the media in shaping public discourse, it can be concluded that the way the media frames refugee crises plays a vital role in shaping public understanding of migration. Since the media do not relay reality neutrally, but rather actively select and interpret information, the objective is to examine how different wartime contexts are reflected in their reporting through framing patterns, tone, and dominant narratives. Therefore, a comparative content analysis is applied in the following section of this paper to systematically compare the portrayals of refugees from Ukraine and Gaza in Croatian online news media.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative content analysis to examine how Croatian online news media represent war-related displacement across two conflict-driven crises: Ukraine in 2022 and the Gaza Strip in 2023. Four high-reach online media outlets were selected to combine audience relevance with ideological diversity: Index.hr, Jutarnji.hr, Večernji.hr, and Dnevno.hr. These outlets are consistently among the most-used online news brands in Croatia. In the Reuters Institute *Digital News Report 2025* (Croatia), self-reported weekly reach for online news brands places Index.hr (49%), Jutarnji online (31%), Večernji online (24%), and Dnevno.hr (19%) among the most widely used sources in the Croatian digital news environment (Peruško, 2025). Ideological diversity for this paper was treated as a sampling rationale rather than a deterministic classification. Prior research and audience studies commonly associate Index.hr and Jutarnji.hr with more liberal/progressive orientations and Dnevno.hr and Večernji.hr with more conservative orientations or conservative-leaning audiences (Grbeša & Volarević, 2021).

Articles from the selected outlets were retrieved using TakeLab Retriever, an AI-driven search engine designed for systematic discovery and collection of articles (and associated metadata) from Croatian news outlets (Dukić et al., 2024). To capture early-stage interpretive consolidation after major escalations, the authors decided to cover the first 30 days following each event: 24 February-25 March 2022 for Ukraine and 7 October-6 November 2023 for Gaza. For the retrieval of articles using the TakeLab Retriever, the keyword “izbjeglice” (eng. “refugees”) was applied. Subsequently, duplicate and irrelevant

items, defined as texts not referring to displacement related to Ukraine and/or Gaza, were removed from the corpus, as is standard in content analysis procedures (Neuendorf, 2017; Riffe et al., 2019).

Thus, the final dataset includes N=342 Ukraine-related articles: Index.hr (N = 117), Jutarnji.hr (N = 122), Večernji.hr (N=100), and Dnevno.hr (N=3). For Gaza, the dataset includes N = 28 articles: Index.hr (N =14), Jutarnji.hr (N=6), Večernji.hr (N=6), and Dnevno.hr (N=2). The unit of analysis is the individual article (Krippendorff, 2018). Each item was coded along three dimensions: (1) dominant frame (humanitarian, security, economic), defined as the primary interpretive lens used to construct the displacement issue; (2) evaluative tone (positive, neutral, negative), reflecting the overall valence toward refugees/displaced people; and (3) political narrative (PN for short), conceptualised as a separate second-layer rhetorical dimension indicating whether and how coverage mobilises explicit political stances (Entman, 1993; de Vreese, 2005). PN categories were defined as follows: PN1 national-sovereigntist narrative (sovereignty/border-order claims), PN2 humanitarian-liberal narrative (rights/solidarity claims), PN3 politically instrumentalized narrative (domestic point-scoring/party conflict), and PN0 no explicit political narrative (descriptive/service reporting). Results are reported as distributions (counts) by conflict and outlet. Furthermore, given the small Gaza subsample and the very low counts for Dnevno.hr, outlet-level comparisons for those strata are treated as descriptive and interpreted as indicative patterns only (Neuendorf, 2017; Riffe et al., 2019).

All articles were coded manually by two coders using a predefined codebook. To assess intercoder reliability, both coders independently coded a random 10% subsample for the dominant frame variable. Coding disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached, and the same decision rules were then applied throughout the full corpus.

Table 1 summarises the coding categories and operational definitions for all variables.

Variable	Category	Operational definition	Typical indicators (examples)
Dominant frame	Humanitarian	The article portrays displacement primarily as a humanitarian emergency requiring protection and	Aid, shelter, medical care, vulnerability, children/women, solidarity,

		assistance.	accommodation, integration support.
Dominant frame	Security	The article portrays displacement primarily as a security/governance issue involving risk, control, or threat management.	Border control, policing, security risk, “wave”/pressure language, screening, illegal entry, crime/terror references.
Dominant frame	Economic	The article portrays displacement primarily as an economic issue (resource pressure, costs, or labour-market effects).	Costs, welfare, housing pressure, jobs, labour market, public spending, “burden”, economic impact.
Evaluative tone	Positive	The article portrays refugees/forced migrants in a sympathetic or supportive manner.	Empathetic language, legitimising protection/help, favourable depiction of refugees.
Evaluative tone	Neutral	The article portrays refugees/forced migrants in a predominantly descriptive, non-evaluative manner.	Administrative updates, procedures, descriptive reporting, statistics.
Evaluative tone	Negative	The article portrays refugees/forced migrants in an unfavourable manner, associating them with threat, burden or using stigmatising/dehumanising language	Stigmatising labels, threat/burden language tied to refugees, dehumanising.

Political narrative (PN)	PN1 National-sovereigntist narrative	The article advances a national-sovereigntist political narrative that prioritises sovereignty, border order, and restriction/control.	“Protect borders”, restriction/control, national interest, sovereignty/order claims.
Political narrative (PN)	PN2 Humanitarian-liberal narrative	The article advances a humanitarian-liberal narrative prioritising rights, solidarity, and inclusion.	Human rights, protection duty, solidarity, inclusion/integration policy calls.
Political narrative (PN)	PN3 Politically instrumentalized narrative	The article uses displacement to advance domestic political conflict or partisan point-scoring.	Attacks on opponents, election rhetoric, domestic blame games, cross-party conflict ideas.
Political narrative (PN)	PN0 No explicit political narrative	The article contains no explicit political narrative; reporting remains primarily descriptive/service focused.	Absence of policy prescriptions, blame, or ideological positioning.

Table 1: Coding categories and operational definitions for content analysis

The three coded dimensions (dominant frame, evaluative tone, and political narrative) are used to infer the direction of endangerment and the implied security problem. The humanitarian frame (especially when paired with a neutral/positive tone) typically positions displaced people as the referent object, exposed to endangerment, and makes displacement legible as a security problem of protection (survival, safety, and rights). The security and economic frames can signal a shift of the referent object toward institutions, borders, and resources; however, only when they co-occur with a negative tone and/or a national-sovereigntist narrative (PN1) and explicit threat language do they amount to a portrayal of refugees as a source of societal/national endangerment. This interpretive distinction is applied in the Results and Discussion to avoid treating any “security” reference as automatic threat-attribution to refugees. (Bjelajac, 2018; Mijalković & Popović Mančević, 2018).

Based on the above operationalisation of framing, evaluative tone, and political narrative for the analysis of selected online media, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Croatian online media frame and evaluate war-related displacement in the first month after escalation in Ukraine (2022) and Gaza (2023), and to what extent do these representations position refugees primarily as populations exposed to endangerment or as potential sources of societal endangerment, thereby shaping recognition of displacement as a security problem?

RQ2: How does evaluative tone toward refugees/displaced people (positive, neutral, negative) differ between Ukraine- and Gaza-related coverage, and does tone vary across outlets?

RQ3: To what extent do articles contain an explicit political narrative (PN), which narrative orientations dominate when politicisation is present, and how do these patterns differ by conflict (Ukraine vs Gaza) and by outlet?

Results

This section presents the results of the comparative content analysis. To maintain analytical clarity, the findings are presented first for Ukraine (N=342) and then for Gaza (N=28) across the selected online media outlets, and in the first month of each conflict. Within each case, the analysis is organized around three analytic dimensions: dominant frame (humanitarian, security, economic), evaluative tone (positive, neutral, negative), and political narrative (PN: PN0-PN3). Given the limited number of Gaza items overall and the sparse representation of Dnevno.hr in particular, outlet-by-outlet contrasts for Gaza should be read as descriptive signals rather than robust comparative differences.

Firstly, regarding the dominant frames across Ukraine-related coverage, Figure 1 shows that the humanitarian frame is clearly dominant across all three high-volume online media outlets, with the highest counts in Jutarnji.hr (N=86), followed by Večernji.hr (N=79) and Index.hr (N=76), while the security frame is consistently secondary (Index.hr N=33; Jutarnji.hr N=24; Večernji.hr N=17) and the economic frame remains fairly marginal (Index.hr N=8; Jutarnji.hr N=12; Večernji.hr N=4). Furthermore, the dominance of humanitarian framing is evident across all high-volume media outlets. In this context,

Index.hr exhibits a comparatively higher proportion of security-oriented narratives than the other two major publications. This shift in framing suggests a slightly more pronounced emphasis on governance and coordination, which were reported alongside humanitarian concerns. One example of this pattern is Jutarnji.hr’s *Hrvatski Crveni križ pokrenuo apel za pomoć izbjeglom i raseljenom stanovništvu, evo kako možete pomoći* [eng. *Croatian Red Cross launches an appeal to help refugees and displaced people: Here’s how you can help* (Vulić, 2022), a prototypical humanitarian story, contrasted with Index.hr’s *COFOE: O dodjeli azila trebala bi odlučivati EU, a ne države članice* [eng. *COFOE: Asylum decisions should be made by the EU, not individual member states* (Hina, 2022b), which stresses institutional control and policy coordination. Economic framing appears only sporadically (e.g., Večernji.hr’s *Prve izbjeglice stigle i u Austriju, austrijska vlada izdvojila 25 milijuna za humanitarnu pomoć Ukrajini* [eng. *The first refugees have arrived in Austria; the Austrian government allocated €25 million for humanitarian aid to Ukraine* (Herek, 2022), and lastly, because Dnevno.hr includes only three items (N=3), its distribution is not meaningfully comparable and is reported only for completeness.

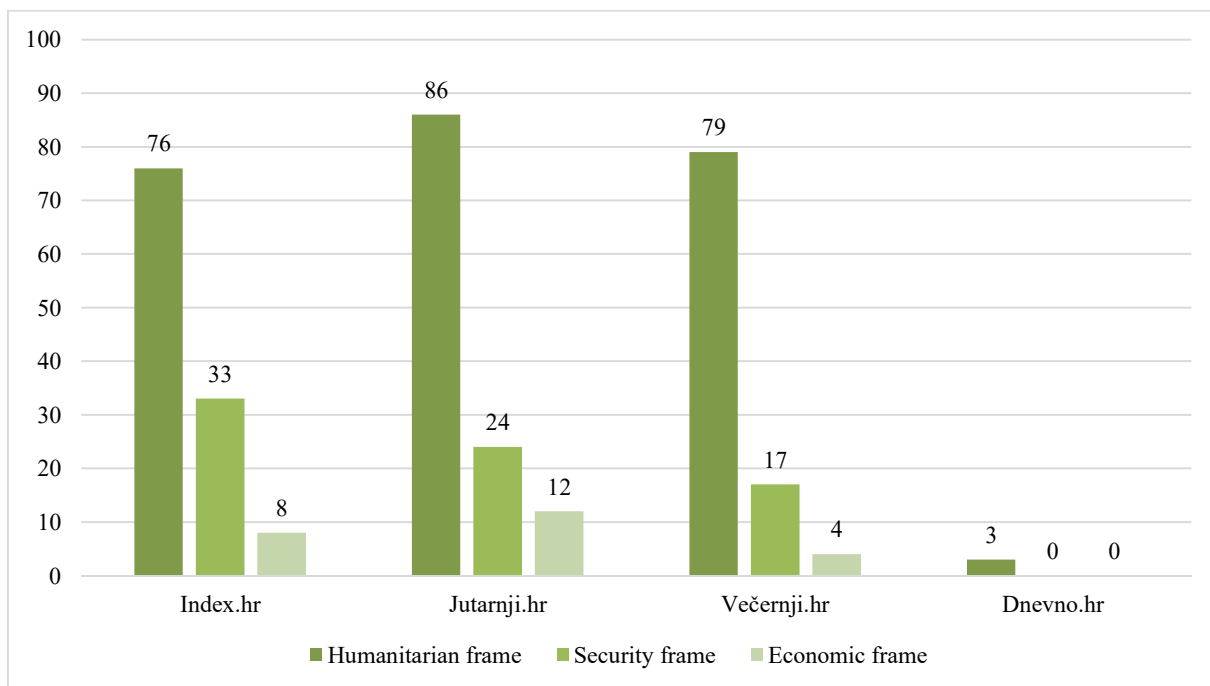


Figure 1. Dominant frames in Ukraine-related coverage by online media outlets.

Secondly, regarding evaluative tone, Figure 2 indicates that the overall tone toward refugees/displaced people is predominantly neutral across all selected media outlets.

Neutral coverage is most frequent in the Index.hr (N=98), Jutarnji.hr (N=96), and Večernji.hr (N=91), while Dnevno.hr includes only N=3 neutral articles. A smaller share of articles adopts an explicitly supportive tone, most notably in Jutarnji.hr (N=26) and Index.hr (N=19), with a more limited presence in Večernji.hr (N=8). One example is Index.hr’s *Međugorje dočekalo ukrajinske izbjeglice: “Mi znamo kako vam je”* [eng. *Međugorje welcomed Ukrainian refugees: “We know how you feel”*] (Hina, 2022a), which centres reception practices and solidarity. By contrast, negative tone is recorded only once in the entire subsample, appearing in Večernji.hr (N=1). The example is Večernji.hr’s *Njemačka: Ukrajinske izbjeglice kao konkurencija useljenicima sa zapadnog Balkana?* [eng. *Germany: Ukrainian Refugees as Competition to Immigrants from the Western Balkans?*] (Deutsche Welle, 2022), which problematises displacement through a competition- or pressure-lens.

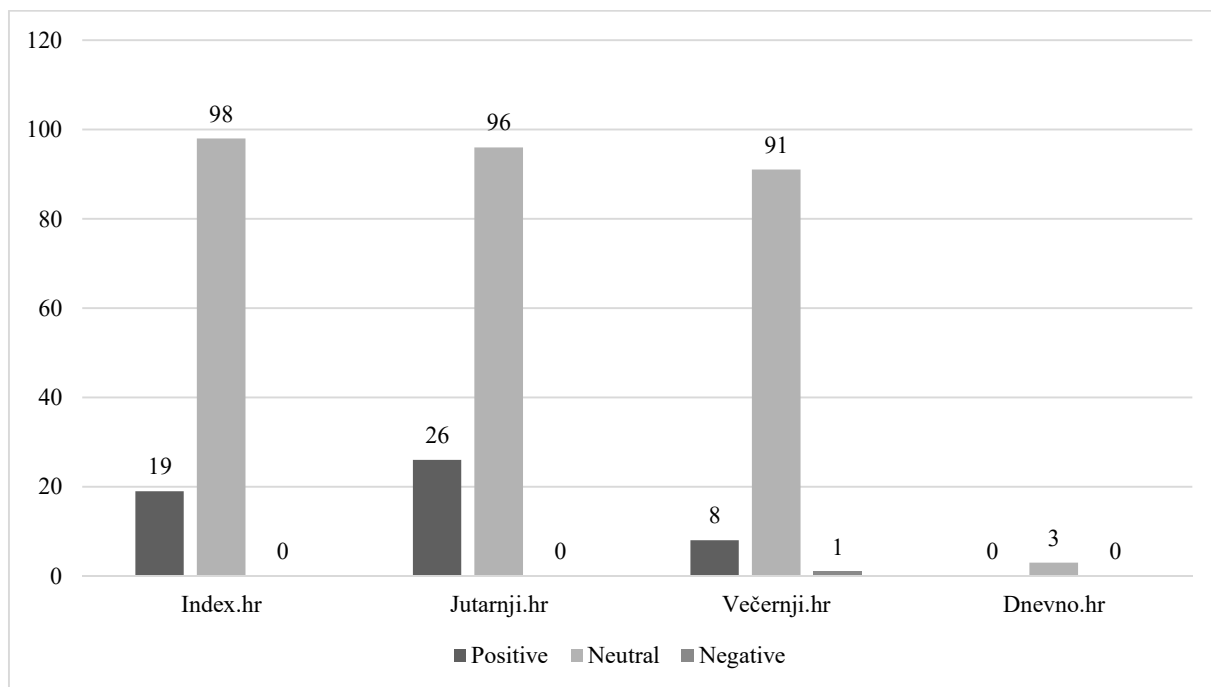


Figure 2. Evaluative tone in Ukraine-related coverage by an online media outlet.

Thirdly, regarding political narratives, Figure 3 shows that most Ukraine-related articles fall into the no explicit political narrative category, with the highest counts in the Index.hr (N=72), followed by Večernji.hr (N=65) and Jutarnji.hr (N=59). One example of this pattern is Jutarnji.hr’s *Hrvatska počinje izdavati izbjegličke iskaznice: Ovako izgleda isprava koja će Ukrajincima jamčiti niz prava* [eng. *Croatia begins issuing refugee ID cards: This is what the document will look like and what rights it will guarantee to*

Ukrainians (Krnić, 2022), which centres procedures and entitlements rather than political argumentation. When an explicit political narrative is present, the most frequent orientation is humanitarian-liberal, most notably in Jutarnji.hr (N=47) and Index.hr (N=26), followed by Večernji.hr (N=32). A representative example is Index.hr's *Tomašević: Zagreb spreman pružiti svu pomoć izbjeglicama iz Ukrajine* [eng. *Tomašević: Zagreb is ready to provide all assistance to refugees from Ukraine* (Index Vijesti, 2022), which features solidarity, institutional readiness, and rights-based protection. Politically instrumentalized narratives are less frequent and appear most often in the Index.hr (N=14) and Jutarnji.hr (N=9), with only N=1 such article in Večernji.hr. One example is Večernji.hr's live coverage *Plenković: Rusija je udarila u same temelje svjetskog poretka, spremni smo primiti ukrajinske izbjeglice* [eng. *Plenković: Russia has struck at the very foundations of the world order; we are ready to receive Ukrainian refugees* (Večernji.hr & Veljković, 2022), where displacement is situated in broader domestic and geopolitical positioning.

Finally, national-sovereigntist narratives are comparatively rare in this subsample, recorded most often in Jutarnji.hr (N=7) and Index.hr (N=5), with only Večernji.hr (N=2). As before, Dnevno.hr is not meaningfully comparable because it contains only N=3 Ukraine-related articles, split between humanitarian-liberal (N=2) and no explicit political narrative (N=1).

Viewed through a security-science lens, the Ukraine corpus overwhelmingly constructs refugees as populations exposed to endangerment, reflected in the dominance of humanitarian framing and a neutral-to-positive tone. Displacement is therefore positioned primarily as a security problem of protection and organized reception. The security frame appears only secondarily, and it does not primarily imply "refugees as a threat". Instead, it concentrates on administrative preparedness, procedures, and coordination. In this sense, security is articulated mainly as governance capacity and risk management.

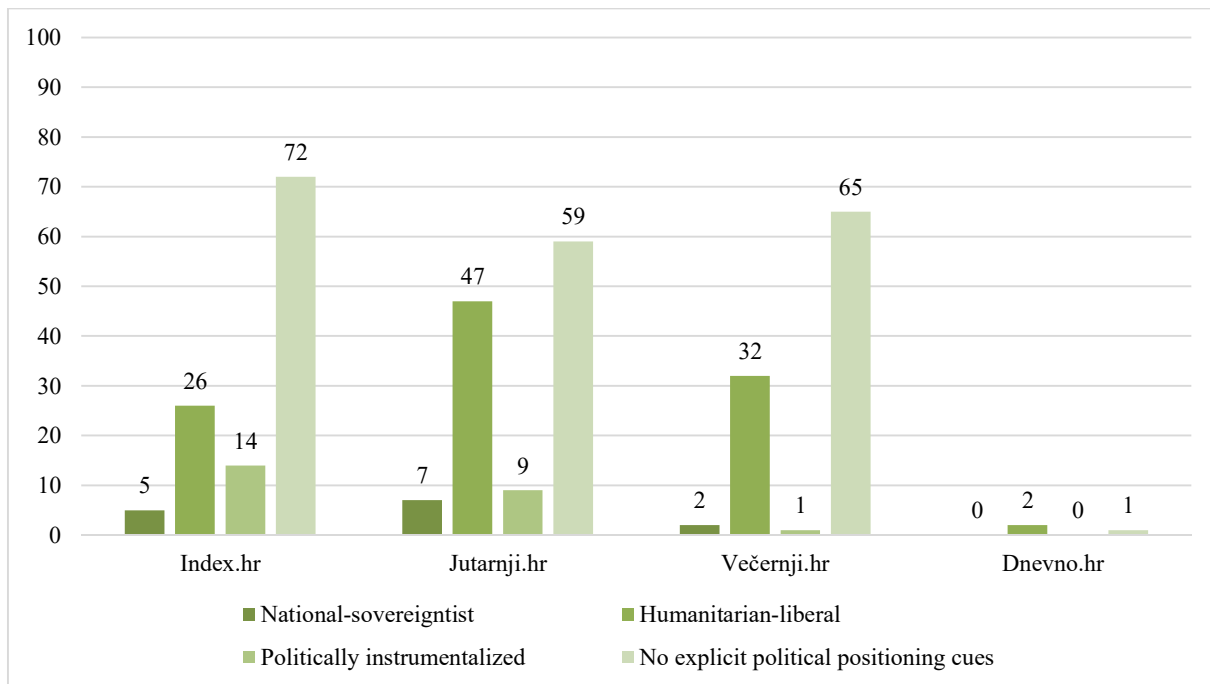


Figure 3. Political narratives (PN) in Ukraine-related coverage by an online media outlet

After examining how Croatian online media framed and evaluated displacement in the Ukraine case, the analysis now turns to the Gaza escalation. It is important to note, however, that the Gaza corpus is substantially smaller, which limits the strength of outlet-level comparisons and warrants a more descriptive interpretation of the observed patterns. As shown in Figure 4, the Gaza-related sample is markedly smaller overall, and within this limited set, coverage is predominantly framed in humanitarian terms. Humanitarian framing is most frequent in the Index.hr (N=8), followed by Jutarnji.hr (N=5), Večernji.hr (N=4), and Dnevno.hr (N=2). A smaller number of articles incorporate a security frame, recorded in the Index.hr (N=6), Jutarnji.hr (N=1), and Večernji.hr (N=2), while the economic frame is not observed in any outlet in this subsample. One example of humanitarian framing is the Index.hr’s *UN: Izraelci pogodili školu s izbjeglicama u Gazi, ubijena i djeca* [eng. *UN: Israelis hit a school sheltering refugees in Gaza; children were also killed* (Hina, 2023b), which foregrounds civilian harm and the vulnerability of displaced people by centring UN-sourced reporting on casualties and the loss of a presumed place of refuge. In addition, as before, Dnevno.hr is not meaningfully comparable because it contains only N=2 Gaza-related articles, both of which are coded as humanitarian. It should be noted that Dnevno.hr, it seems, contains almost no articles on both the Ukraine and Gaza cases, which is, in itself, indicative. However, this may also reflect a methodological limitation: because retrieval

relied on the keyword “izbjeglice”. It is possible that Dnevno.hr covered both situations under different labels and terminology, so the search query may not have captured relevant articles.

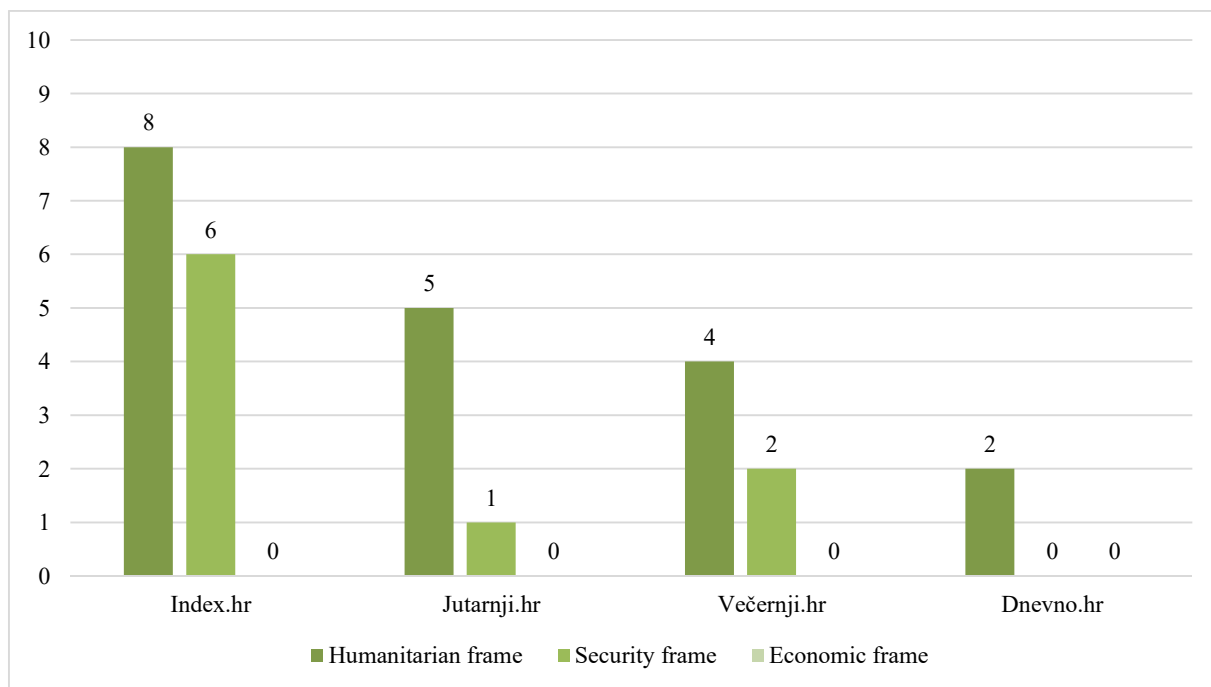


Figure 4. Dominant frames in Gaza-related coverage by online media outlets.

Turning to evaluative tone in Gaza-related coverage, Figure 5 shows that reporting is predominantly neutral across all outlets. The neutral tone is most frequent in the Index.hr (N=14), followed by Večernji.hr (N=6), Jutarnji.hr (N=5), and Dnevno.hr (N=2), while a negative tone is not recorded in this subsample. A positive tone appears only once, in Jutarnji.hr (N=1), and is illustrated by the article *Bivši hrvatski reprezentativac ozlijedio gležanj, pa pozvao na donaciju palestinskim izbjeglicama* [eng. *Former Croatian national team player injures his ankle, then calls for donations to Palestinian refugees* (Hina, 2023a), which puts an accent on a humanitarian appeal and an explicitly empathetic stance.

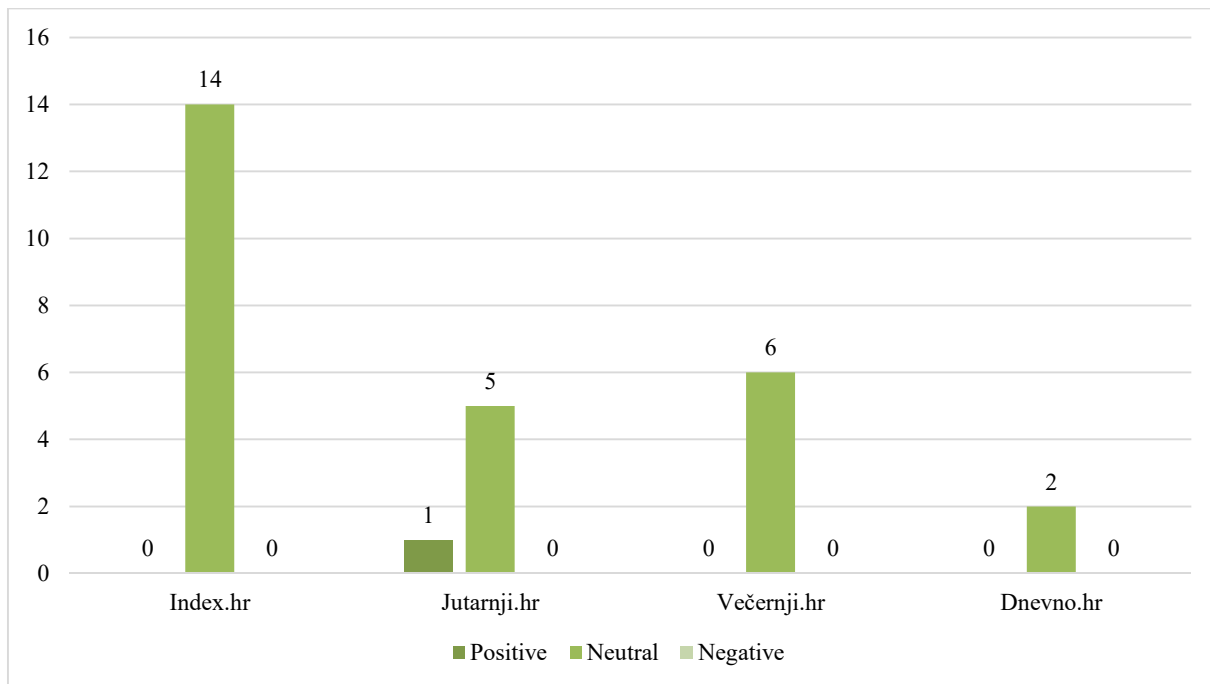


Figure 5. Evaluative tone in Gaza-related coverage by an online media outlet.

Lastly, regarding political narratives in Gaza-related coverage, Figure 6 shows that the majority of articles fall into the no explicit political narrative category, most notably in Index.hr (N=12), followed by Jutarnji.hr (N=6), Večernji.hr (N=4), and Dnevno.hr (N=2). In other words, many texts remain largely descriptive, or they relay official statements and conflict updates without developing a clearly articulated political storyline that would be classifiable as humanitarian-liberal, instrumentalized, or national-sovereigntist. One example is Index.hr’s *Izraelci počeli napadati jug Gaze: Moramo ući u Han Junis da bismo eliminirali Hamas* [eng. *Israelis began attacking the south of Gaza: We must enter Khan Younis to eliminate Hamas* (Hina, 2023c), which largely transmits the military/political justification of Israeli authorities with limited additional interpretive positioning, making it difficult to assign a more explicit narrative category. Where an explicit political narrative is present, it appears only as humanitarian-liberal and remains limited: Index.hr (N=2) and Večernji.hr (N=2), with no such articles recorded in Jutarnji.hr in this subsample. National-sovereigntist and politically instrumentalized narratives are not recorded in the Gaza subsample.

Despite the presence of a security frame in part of the Gaza subsample, the coding results show no negative tone and only minimal politicisation. This indicates that refugees

are not constructed as a threat to society. Instead, most security references relate to the conflict itself, such as military operations and official security claims. In this context, displacement is primarily mentioned as a humanitarian consequence. As a result, Gaza-related displacement is recognized less as a domestic or EU security policy issue and more as an endangerment affecting civilians in the conflict zone.

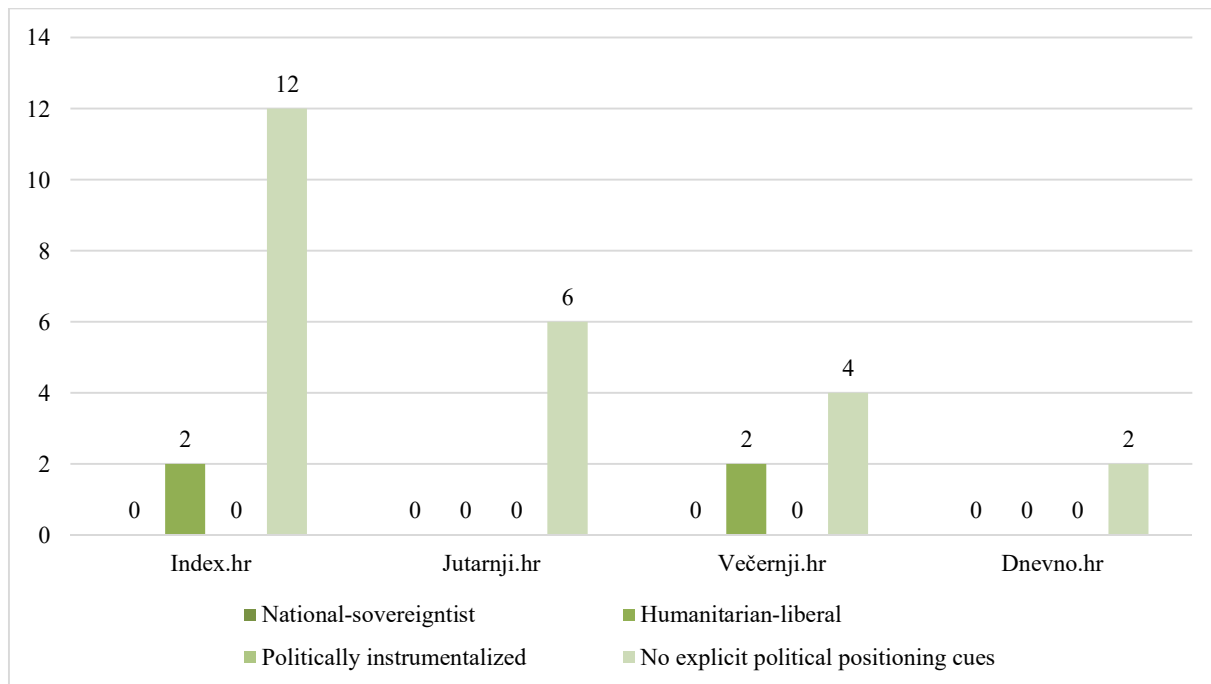


Figure 6. Political narratives (PN) in Gaza-related coverage by an online media outlet

Discussion

This study compares how Croatian online media framed and evaluated war-related displacement (refugees) during the first month after the escalation of two conflicts, Ukraine (2022) and Gaza (2023), focusing on dominant frames, evaluative tone, and political narratives. The most striking comparative result is the asymmetry in visibility. The Ukraine corpus (N=342) is an order of magnitude larger than the Gaza corpus (N=28), even though both cases were sampled using the same early-phase window and the same retrieval keyword “izbjeglice” (eng. “refugees”). This gap likely reflects more than a purely technical property of the dataset: it is consistent with agenda selection in which displacement in Ukraine becomes a routine, high-frequency topic, whereas displacement linked to Gaza remains marginal within the retrieved corpus. Analytically, this matters because repeated coverage creates the conditions for frames to recur, consolidate, and

become recognizable interpretive templates, while sparse coverage offers fewer opportunities for such stabilisation. Across both cases, the direction of endangerment and the implied security problem differ less in moral orientation than in the extent of policy work undertaken by the coverage. In the Ukraine case, the dominant humanitarian frame clearly positions refugees as the referent object and foregrounds their exposure to endangerment. A secondary security layer redirects attention toward an institutional referent object, including borders, procedures, and reception capacity, without strongly attributing endangerment to refugees themselves. In security-science terms, displacement is rendered a security problem primarily through organized protection and the risk management of reception. In the Gaza case, displacement is also described predominantly through humanitarian vulnerability, but it is more closely tied to conflict reporting. Security language is more often attached to the Israel-Hamas conflict than to refugees as risk-bearing actors. The practical outcome is that displacement linked to Gaza remains weakly articulated as a security problem in Croatian or EU policy terms within this dataset. Evaluative tone and political narratives further sharpen this interpretation. The prevalence of neutral tone in both corpora, combined with the absence of negative tone in the Gaza subsample, suggests that Croatian coverage rarely activates a “refugees as danger” template that would be expected if refugees were being constructed as a source of societal endangerment. Where positive tone appears, particularly in the Ukraine case, it reinforces a protection-oriented security problem by emphasizing solidarity, reception practices, and integration. Politicisation follows the same pattern. Ukraine coverage is incorporated into Croatian and EU governance debates, including temporary protection, institutional readiness, and labour market access, creating space for explicit political narratives.

Gaza coverage, by contrast, remains largely depoliticised and externally oriented, which limits the media’s translation of endangerment into a locally actionable security problem. This distinction matters analytically because it prevents a common category error, namely, treating the mere presence of a security frame as evidence that refugees are securitised as threats. Here, security framing largely operates through administrative security, such as coordination, procedures, and capacity, or through conflict-security context. At the same time, the dominant direction of endangerment runs from war to refugees rather than from refugees to the receiving society. Finally, the retrieval strategy may have shaped what becomes visible as “refugee coverage”. Because the collection relied solely on the keyword “izbjeglice”, relevant Gaza-related stories that use alternative labels

such as “raseljeni” (displaced) or “civilno stanovništvo” (civilians) may be underrepresented. Even with this limitation, the comparison points to selective attention and unequal narrative development across the two crises. When one case is repeatedly presented as a high-salience humanitarian priority, and the other appears sporadically and mainly through conflict updates, media coverage can indirectly shape perceptions of proximity and public relevance, and influence how audiences interpret who is seen as needing protection and what kinds of responses appear legitimate, even when both contexts involve severe human suffering and mass displacement.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify the interpretation of these results in this paper. First, the Gaza corpus is small (N=28) compared to Ukraine (N=342), which reduces the stability of outlet-level distributions and makes the Gaza patterns more sensitive to single texts. For that reason, comparisons for low-count strata are appropriately treated as descriptive/indicative rather than inferential. Second, retrieval relied on a single keyword, “izbjeglice” (eng. “refugees”), which may under-capture displacement reporting that uses alternative labels. This is maybe particularly relevant for Dnevno.hr, which appears minimally in both corpora and may reflect terminological choice as much as editorial attention. Third, the design focuses on the first 30 days after escalation; frames, tone, and political narration can shift over longer periods, so the findings describe early-stage coverage rather than the full trajectory of either crisis. Fourth, while the study uses manual coding with two coders and a reliability check on a 10% subsample for the dominant frame variable, reliability was not separately reported for all coded dimensions, and any category scheme involves some degree of interpretive judgement. Furthermore, the study analyzes media content, not audience reception; it cannot directly establish effects on public attitudes, only the patterns of representation available to audiences within the sampled online media outlets and the explored time windows. Finally, the endangerment-direction reading used to answer RQ1 is an analytic inference from the coded dimensions rather than a separately coded variable, and should be interpreted accordingly.

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