American Journal of Cultural Sociology (2025) 13:271–297
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-024-00221-z

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Why do states discriminate between refugee groups? Understanding how Syrian and Ukrainian refugees were framed in Germany and Poland

Daniel Drewski[1] · **Jürgen Gerhards**[2]

Accepted: 24 June 2024 / Published online: 29 July 2024

Abstract

Previous studies hypothesize that countries discriminate between refugee groups of different backgrounds depending on cultural similarity to the host population and whether they flee from a rivaling regime. We argue that these explanations miss how political actors frame the collective identity of the host nation and the refugees in political discourse, and the nation state-specific cultural repertoires they draw on. The different responses of the German and Polish governments to Syrian and Ukrainian refugees are a case in point. While Poland welcomed Ukrainian and rejected Syrian refugees, Germany differentiated relatively little between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in terms of its admission policy. Based on a qualitative analysis of parliamentary debates in Germany and Poland, we show that the German government employed mostly "cosmopolitan" frames by highlighting Germany's humanitarian orientation, the commitment to international law, and the principles of liberal democracies. In contrast, the Polish government employed mostly "communitarian" frames by highlighting Poland's national sovereignty and drawing strong cultural boundaries.

Keywords Syrian refugees · Ukrainian refugees · Refugee admission policy · Framing · Political discourse

✉ Daniel Drewski
daniel.drewski@uni-bamberg.de

Jürgen Gerhards
j.gerhards@fu-berlin.de

[1] Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany

[2] Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Introduction

Over the last decade, the European Union (EU) has been the destination of two of the largest refugee movements worldwide. Following the eruption of the Syrian civil war and other conflicts in the Middle East and Northern Africa, the EU received around 1.2 million first-time asylum applications both in 2015 and in 2016 (Eurostat 2024a). A few years later, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, an estimated 6.6 million Ukrainians have been displaced abroad (UNHCR 2024b), of which more than 4 million have registered for temporary protection in the EU as of mid-2023 (Eurostat 2024b). According to international human rights and refugee law, refugees have a right to apply for asylum, and states are not allowed to discriminate between them based on race, religion, or country of origin.[1] The corresponding instruments like the 1951 Refugee Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol have been signed by all member states of the EU and are affirmed by EU law. However, EU member states have responded in very different ways to pressures to admit refugees and differ in the extent to which they treat refugee groups of different origins equally.

A case in point is the response of the German and Polish governments to refugees mostly from Syria[2] on the one hand and Ukrainian refugees on the other. Germany has differentiated little between both groups in terms of reception. In the late summer of 2015, the German government opened Germany's borders to Syrian refugees traveling via Hungary and temporarily suspended the EU's Dublin Regulation, which would have stipulated to send back refugees to their first country of arrival in the EU. Germany also proposed a mechanism to relocate refugees within the EU according to specific quotas (Zaun 2018). Despite more restrictive measures later on, Germany hosts the largest number of refugees from Syria and other Middle Eastern and Northern African countries in the EU (UNHCR 2024a). Then, in 2022, Germany, along with all other EU member states, supported the activation of the EU's temporary protection directive and welcomed Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion (around 1.2 million as of mid-2024; UNHCR 2024b).[3] In contrast, Poland reacted very differently to both groups. The Polish government refused to take part in the distribution of refugees, mostly from Syria, among EU member states. On the other hand, it hosts around 1 million Ukrainian refugees in line with the EU's temporary protection

[1] There is a broad debate in political philosophy about the normative foundations of international refugee law (Drewski and Gerhards 2024b).

[2] During the 2015/16 refugee movement to the EU, most of the refugees applying for asylum came from Syria, followed by persons from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Western Balkan countries. While Syrians had the highest recognition rates, applicants from the Western Balkans were mostly rejected. Some of the policies we discuss, such as Germany's lifting of the Dublin Regulation, applied mainly to Syrians, while others, like the EU relocation mechanism, also applied to other nationalities. Given that the main country of origin and the focus of debates was mostly on Syria, we speak of "Syrian refugees" in this paper.

[3] Ukrainians already enjoyed visa-free travel to the EU before the war, and under the temporary protection directive are granted a residence permit for one year (and up to three years), access to employment, housing, education and social services, and free movement within the EU (European Council 2024).

directive as of mid-2024 (UNHCR 2024b). At the time of writing, no significant restrictions to this approach have been enacted.

In this paper, we ask how to understand these cross-national differences in the extent to which Germany and Poland have differentiated between Ukrainian refugees on the one hand, and Syrian refugees on the other. We focus on the positions of the German and Polish governments as expressed in public statements and parliamentary debates. As explained in the next section, the most pertinent explanation in the literature for why states differentiate between refugees of different origins are cultural/ethnic closeness and international rivalry (see Abdelaaty 2021): Governments are more open to refugees that are culturally/ethnically similar to the majority of the host population, and to those that flee from a rivaling regime. We highlight that these explanations miss an important point, namely the role of political actors and their framing, and the cultural repertoires they can draw on. Echoing other studies (e.g., Morgül 2024), we argue that depending on how the collective identity of the host nation is defined ("who are we?"), and how the refugees are interpreted in relation to this identity construction ("who are they?"), a differentiation between refugees of different origins is made or is attenuated.

As outlined in the methodological section, this paper is based on a qualitative content analysis of parliamentary debates and public statements on the Syrian/Middle Eastern and Ukrainian refugee crises in Germany and Poland. We analyze the frames employed by the German and Polish governments and governing parties in debates on the admission of Syrian refugees in particular in 2015/16 and of Ukrainian refugees in 2022. While, in our interpretations, we can build on previous research on how the 2015/16 refugee crisis was framed in political debates in Germany (e.g., Vollmer and Karakayali 2018; Holzberg et al. 2018; Lemay 2024) and Poland (e.g., Cap 2018; Jaskułowski 2019; Krzyżanowski 2018, 2020), we move beyond the existing literature by adopting a comparative approach that covers two countries (Germany and Poland), and two different refugee groups (Syrians and Ukrainians).

Overall, we show that in Germany, the government employed mostly "cosmopolitan" frames resulting in a position that hardly discriminated between different refugee groups. In the discourse during the 2015/16 refugee crisis, it highlighted German society's humanitarian orientation, the commitment to international law, and de-emphasized cultural boundaries toward refugees. In the discourse on Ukrainian refugees, in turn, the German government also emphasized Germany's commitment to international law and to liberal democracy, from which it derived its support of Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion. In contrast, the Polish government employed mostly "communitarian" frames, which led to a strong discrimination between different refugee groups. In the 2015/16 discourse on Syrian refugees, the government emphasized Poland's national sovereignty, drew strong cultural boundaries, and rejected any moral obligation to receive refugees. With respect to the Ukrainian refugees, however, this communitarian framing turned into solidarity with Ukrainians, who were interpreted as culturally close and as people suffering a similar fate as Poles with regard to Russian aggression. We argue that these differences can be interpreted less as reflecting ideological differences between the German and Polish governments and governing parties, and

more as cross-national differences between the cultural repertoires available to them.

Conceptual framework

There are several possible explanations for why countries differentiate between refugee groups of different origins in their admission policies. Summing up the state of the art, Lamis Abdelaaty (2021) recently highlighted two. The first explanation is *cultural and/or ethnic closeness* between the majority population of the host society and the refugees. The more similar refugees are to the host society in terms of their cultural characteristics or ethnic origins, the higher the probability of admission. The second explanation refers to foreign policy and highlights *international rivalry*. Governments are more open toward refugees that flee from a rival regime than toward those that flee from an allied regime. This is because admitting refugees implies stigmatizing the regime generating the displacement as breaching basic human rights. As Abdelaaty shows, the two variables ethnic/cultural closeness and international rivalry generally offer a good explanation for why countries discriminate in the admission of refugees of different origins (see also Blair et al. 2022).

However, there are important cross-national variations in the extent to which countries differentiate between refugee groups of different origins that cannot be explained by these variables, such as the difference between the German and the Polish responses to refugees from Syria and other countries in 2015/16 and Ukrainian refugees in 2022 addressed in this paper. Even though the theory would have expected both countries to react in similar ways, Poland has privileged Ukrainian refugees over Syrians in terms of admission, while Germany has not (or to a lesser extent).[4]

On the one hand, the variables cultural and/or ethnic closeness and international rivalry seem to work well to understand Poland's response. Syrians are predominantly Muslims and therefore culturally distant to the Christian majority in Poland, and Poland is not directly involved in the Syrian civil war as an opponent of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In contrast, as Central and Eastern Europeans with a Christian heritage, Ukrainians are culturally close to Poles and they flee an invasion by a regime that is an antagonist to the Polish government, namely that of Russia's Vladimir Putin. On the other hand, both variables do not predict the German response very well, as one would have expected a similar differentiation between the two groups as in Poland: Ukrainians are culturally closer to the German majority population than Syrians, and the German government is much more engaged in opposing the regime of Putin in Russia than the Assad regime in Syria.

[4] An important contextual factor may be the unequal constraints imposed by international treaties and membership in international organizations, because of normative commitments to equal treatment and potential sanctions in the case of non-compliance (e.g., de Haas et al. 2018; Helbling and Kalkum 2018; see also Soysal 1994). In our case, however, both Germany and Poland are equally constrained by international refugee law and EU law as member states of the EU, and yet they have pursued quite different refugee policies.

Apart from ethnic closeness and international rivalry, there are further possible explanations for why Ukrainians were more favorably received in the EU than Syrians and others, but these cannot account for cross-national differences as well. For example, it has been pointed out that for Ukrainians, the EU is the first safe destination in fleeing from the Russian invasion, while this is not the case for Syrians, who have to travel via third countries to reach the EU (Koopmans 2023). Furthermore, in demographic terms, Ukrainian refugees are mostly women, children and elderly, while there is a majority of males among Syrian refugees (Koopmans 2023). Both factors might make EU countries more welcoming of Ukrainian than Syrian refugees. However, these factors cannot explain why Germany differentiated less between Ukrainian and Syrian refugees than Poland, as they are constant for both countries.

To account for these deviations, we advance two arguments. First, we argue that the explanations for why countries discriminate between refugee groups identified in the previous literature omit processes of interpretation or "framing" by political actors. Whether refugees are ethnically/culturally close to the host population or flee from a rival country are not so much objective factors, but depend on how political actors define *the collective identity and characteristics of the host country* ("who are we?"), as well as their definition of *the identity and characteristics of the refugees* ("who are they?"). For instance, the impact of the variable "ethnic/cultural closeness" hinges on whether and which ethnical/cultural characteristics are interpreted as salient markers of national identity, and how the ethnical/cultural identity of the refugees is assessed. In his study on the Turkish government's discourse on Syrian refugees, Kerem Morgül (2024) makes a similar argument, showing how Syrians are included in the imagined community of "us" by referring to the shared Ottoman past and religious similarity.

In line with the relevant literature (for many others, see Entman 1993; Gerhards 1995; Scheufele 1999; Snow 2013), we understand "frames" to be schemata of interpretation through which social actors make sense of the world. Framing is an important element of politics and policymaking, as frames suggest what is at stake regarding an issue, provide a justification for a certain policy position, and mobilize political support (Ferree et al. 2002).[5] One could understand political actors' framing merely as a device to "sell" a policy to the public (Benford and Snow 2000), in which case there would be no substantial relationship between the policy and the frame. Following other studies (e.g., Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Helbling 2014), we argue instead that the policies proposed by political actors must be embedded in frames that resonate with the ideology and program of a political party on the one hand, and the broader cultural repertoire that is taken for granted in a particular country on the other. Otherwise, the policies will not appeal to the broader public of a country and the specific targeted electorate (at least in democracies, in which politicians with different proposals contend). Furthermore, and in empirical terms, our analysis shows that there is some

[5] For the importance of framing in the formulation of migration policy, see, e.g., Boswell et al. (2011). Helbling (2014) explores how political parties in Europe frame the issue of migration.

coherence in framing over time, even across the two refugee crises, which suggests that frames are not chosen at random but reflect an underlying orientation.

Second, we argue that in interpreting and framing the "we" and the "others," political actors are constrained by "cultural repertories" specific to their country (Lamont and Thévenot 2000; see also Gamson 1992; Díez Medrano 2003), which help understand cross-national differences in framing. These repertoires consist of collectively shared cultural elements like narratives, historical memories, and ideologies that have been constructed by various actors (politicians, intellectuals, academics etc.) over time and are institutionalized in the respective countries. For instance, as we will show in our empirical analysis below, the notion that German politics are bound by the memory of National Socialism and the Holocaust is a cultural repertoire specific to Germany (Olick and Levy 1997), while the narrative that Poland is historically at risk of being attacked by its neighbors (Germany and Russia) is an important repertoire in Poland (Lewicki and Mandes 2015).

Evidently, there are within-country differences between political parties in how they frame political issues like the question of admitting refugees. Depending on their ideological profile, they may emphasize certain narratives of the repertoire over others, and they may interpret similar narratives in different ways. However, we claim that each country has some dominant cultural repertoires that are relevant for most political parties and constrain their options to frame an issue.Thus, even though political parties may have similar ideological profiles in different countries, there remain cross-national variations that can only be understood with reference to each country's dominant cultural repertoire.

It should be noted that we do not assume that cultural repertoires "determine" how politicians view the world and "cause" political action. They are often underdetermined and inconsistent, leaving some margin of maneuver for politicians to draw on them strategically. They may also change over time through processes of re-interpretation. This becomes evident in the case of Germany, where the memory of National Socialism and the Holocaust only became a widely accepted constraint on national politics in the wake of the 1968 student movement and is currently being challenged again (by the radical right). Again, however, echoing Max Weber's switchmen metaphor, we do argue that cultural repertoires provide the "guardrails" for how politicians can act. They shape what is taken for granted and what approach can be viewed as legitimate within certain contexts, as it must resonate with the political culture of a country.

Our analysis shows that taking into account processes of framing and the cultural repertoires that frames are based on helps to understand why Germany discriminated less between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees than Poland. We demonstrate that the Polish government adopted predominantly "communitarian" frames by emphasizing threats to national sovereignty (once by the EU and once by Russia) and the importance of "cultural fit" between natives and refugees, thus differentiating between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. In contrast, the German government adopted mainly "cosmopolitan" frames, de-emphasizing cultural boundaries between Germans and refugees and expressing adherence

to humanitarian principles and international law, leading to little differentiation between Syrians and Ukrainians.[6]

Methodological approach

This paper is based on a qualitative content analysis of political statements and parliamentary debates in Germany and Poland. On the one hand, Germany and Poland host the largest number of Ukrainian refugees among the EU member states and have adopted an unrestricted policy of open borders. On the other hand, they differ markedly with regard to their position on the Syrian refugee crisis. While Germany has initially adopted a rather open border policy and (despite some later restrictions) hosts the largest number of refugees from Syria and the Middle East in the EU, Poland was among the staunchest opponents to the admission and distribution of Syrian refugees in the EU. Thus, comparing the German and Polish case allows us to disentangle why states differ in the extent to which they differentiate between refugee groups of different origins.

In each country, we focus on the positions and frames employed by members of the government and governing parties as expressed in statements and debates in parliament (i.e., the "Bundestag" in Germany and the "Sejm" and "Senat" in Poland).[7] Even though we have also analyzed the positions and frames of the opposition parties in both countries, we will not go into this in more detail in order not to overburden the paper. However, we will briefly summarize our findings in order to substantiate our argument that these parties too are influenced by the cultural repertoires of their countries.

We selected those parliamentary sessions where the question of refugee admissions was most extensively discussed (see Table 1). In the German Bundestag, the Syrian refugee crisis was heavily discussed during the general budget debate in September 2015 and prior to the meeting of the European Council in March 2016, in which the readmissions agreement between Turkey and the EU was approved. Additionally, we included the "summer press conference" with the German Chancellor in August 2015, during which the Chancellor discusses more general governmental policies, and which formed an important point of reference for the German debate. In Poland, the Syrian refugee crisis was discussed during

[6] With this terminology, we refer to the recent literature on political cleavages. Scholars have suggested that governments' and political parties' positions on immigration and asylum are structured by an ideological divide between "cosmopolitanism" and "communitarianism" (for many others, de Wilde et al. 2019; see also Kriesi et al. 2008; Hooghe and Marks 2018). While cosmopolitans adhere to universalist principles of justice and thus support open borders, multicultural societies, and supranational institutions, communitarians emphasize the importance of bounded communities of solidarity and thus support closed borders, culturally homogenous societies, and national sovereignty.

[7] Focusing on parliamentary debates has the following advantages: (1) As arenas of political communication and discussion, they provide a window into the different political actors' positions on and interpretations of an issue. (2) The debates in parliament are relevant for decision-making, as the speakers refer to policy proposals and justify their positions. (3) Finally, cross-national comparisons such as this study require easily accessible data, and most parliaments publish their proceedings online.

Table 1 Overview of sampled statements and debates on the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crises in Germany and Poland

	Germany			Poland		
	Date	Forum	Topic	Date	Forum	Topic
Selected parliamentary sessions and statements on Syrian refugees	August 31, 2015	Summer Press Conference	Current topics of domestic and foreign affairs	September 16, 2015	Sejm	Information of the Prime Minister on the refugee crisis in Europe and its ramifications for Poland
	September 9, 2015	Bundestag	General budget debate	October 19, 2016	Sejm	Report of the European Union Affairs Committee on the EU relocation mechanism
	March 16, 2016	Bundestag	Government declaration on the European Council ("EU-Turkey deal")	October 19, 2016	Senat	Report of the European Union Affairs Committee on the EU relocation mechanism
	March 21, 2018	Bundestag	Government declaration after the formation of the new coalition government			
Selected parliamentary sessions and statements on the war in Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees	February 27, 2022	Bundestag	Government declaration on the Russian aggression in Ukraine	February 18, 2014	Sejm	Information of the Prime Minister on the situation in Ukraine
	March 17, 2022	Bundestag	Special session on the situation of Ukrainian refugees	March 5, 2014	Senat	Information of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the situation in Ukraine
				May 7, 2014	Sejm	Debate on the Act of Protection of Foreigners
				February 24, 2022	Sejm	Statement on Russian aggression in Ukraine
				March 3, 2022	Sejm	Bill on helping Ukrainians in relation to war in their country
				March 10, 2022	Senat	Bill on helping Ukrainians in relation to war in their country

a special sitting of the Sejm on this issue in September 2015, and during a debate on the EU relocation mechanism in October 2016.

The reception of Ukrainian refugees was less discussed in both countries in explicit terms, as there seems to have been a consensus across party lines that they should be admitted. Instead, the issue of Ukrainian refugees was embedded in debates on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and on Germany's and Poland's foreign policy, respectively. In Germany, this included a government declaration and debate following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as a special session on the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Germany. In Poland, debates on the conflict in Ukraine and on Ukrainian refugees already took place in early 2014, after the eruption of the Maidan protests, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and the military conflict in the Donbas region. In addition, we included a debate following the Prime Minister's statement on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and on a bill addressing Ukrainian refugees in March 2022.

During the Syrian refugee crisis, the German government was formed by a "grand coalition" between the social democratic party (SPD) and the Christian democratic parties (CDU and CSU) under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel. Following federal elections in 2021, Olaf Scholz of the SPD became Chancellor, backed by a coalition with the Greens and the Liberal party (FDP). In Poland, the government was formed by the centrist Civic Platform (PO) until elections in September 2015, when it was replaced by the right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS). PiS continued to form the government until 2023, first under Prime Minister Beata Szydło, then Mateusz Morawiecki. It formed the "United Right" coalition together with some minor parties. Although some sampled debates from Poland refer to the period under the government of Civic Platform, we will concentrate here only on PiS and the United Right. After the latest elections in 2023, the Civic Platform is back in government.

The sampled statements were subject to a qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2014). We used a system of categories of interpretation developed elsewhere (Drewski and Gerhards 2024a). It was developed both inductively based on the empirical material, as well as deductively with reference to other methods of discourse analysis (in particular, Reisigl and Wodak 2016). After several rounds of interpretation, two dimensions turned out to be key to understand political actors' stance on the admission of refugees: (1) The definition of the national identity ("who are we?") and (2) the definition of the identity and characteristics of the refugees ("who are they?"). Consequently, our analysis will focus on these two dimensions. As explained in more detail in Drewski and Gerhards (2024a), we reconstructed six different ways both the "we" and the refugees can be framed: in economic, cultural, moral, legal, security, and international terms. Each of these six frames can be filled with different content. For example, the cultural identity of the host society can either be described as culturally homogeneous or as multicultural, leading to opposite conclusions regarding refugee admission. Table 2 describes the six frames in more detail. Based on these categories of analysis, each speech was first interpreted by a member of the research team, then checked and revised by two further team members. Results were written down in the form of thematic case summaries.

Table 2 Frames of the "we" and the "others" that shape public discourse on the admission of refugees

	How are "we" defined and characterized?	How are the refugees as "others" defined and characterized?
Economic	Capacity to absorb refugees: e.g., level of economic development, labor market requirements, and capacity of welfare state	"Human capital" of refugees: Skills and resources
Cultural	Ethnic and cultural characteristics of the nation: e.g., homogenous or heterogeneous	Ethnic and cultural distance of refugees to host population
Moral	Values that define the nation: e.g., humanitarian principles, religious values, historical obligations, etc.	Refugees' neediness and deservingness: e.g., motivation of flight, vulnerability of the group
Legal	Laws and norms that bind the nation: e.g., international law	Rights and obligations of asylum seekers: e.g., distinction between "real refugees" and "economic migrants"
Security	Degree of public safety	Security threats associated with refugees: e.g., terrorism, crime and human trafficking*
International	Relationship with the country from which refugees come; international standing of the nation	Refugees as political allies or enemies fleeing a rival regime

*On this, see the literature on "securitization" (Huysmans 2006)

The discourse on Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Germany

The German governments discriminated relatively little in their positions toward Syrian and Ukrainian refugees.[8] Table 3 summarizes the frames of the "we" and the "others" these positions were based on. In both cases, the German government adopted mostly frames with a cosmopolitan character, blurring the boundaries between "us" and "them." With regard to Syrian refugees, it emphasized Germany's commitment to humanitarianism, human rights, international law, and the values of the EU and portrayed the German economy as open to foreign labor.[9] With regard to Ukrainian refugees, the emphasis shifted to the international frame, but stayed consistent with a cosmopolitan perspective, depicting Germany as a defender of international law, liberal democracy, and human rights against Russian aggression. Even though the parties in government changed between the first and the second event, the framing has hardly undergone any change. Furthermore, most frames were also shared by the main opposition parties (except for the right-wing challenger party "Alternative for Germany," AfD), which supports our argument that there is a dominant cultural repertoire in Germany.

The framing of the German government (CDU/SPD) in the discourse on Syrian refugees

(1) At the heart of the discourse of the government coalition on Syrian refugees was a definition of the German "we" in *morally* humanitarian terms. German society was not defined as a closed community, which is only committed to the well-being of its own members. Rather, it was described as being committed to the values of humanitarianism and international solidarity and thus ready to extend a helping hand to foreigners who are in need. The carrier of this humanitarianism was German civil society, which the government saw as having self-organized in an exemplary manner to welcome and help the refugees coming to Germany. The "images from Munich of helpfulness, solidarity, and mutual respect" were contrasted with the "chaos and helplessness" in Budapest: "Thanks to these helpers, Germany is showing the whole world its best side during these days" (Thomas Oppermann, SPD, September 9, 2015). In turn, the government drew strong symbolic boundaries against those who

[8] It should be noted that the governing grand coalition not always acted in unison on the Syrian refugee crisis. Next to minor differences between the CDU and the SPD, Merkel's refugee policy particularly caused a rift between the two sister parties CDU and CSU. While the CSU parliamentarians supported Angela Merkel's policy, the CSU chairman, Horst Seehofer, demanded a more restrictive policy. Initially, the government resisted these calls, but over the winter of 2015/16, the coalition moved toward a more restrictive position—without, however, giving in to the CSU's demand for an "upper limit" to the number of refugees admitted.

[9] Previous analyses confirm the dominance of humanitarian and cosmopolitan frames during the debate in the summer of 2015, but also point toward a more restrictive framing later on. This shift, however, was not built on mobilizing communitarian frames, but on the issue of "deservingness" and the effort to distinguish between "real refugees" and "economic migrants" (Vollmer and Karakayali 2018; Holzberg et al. 2018; Lemay 2024).

Table 3 The framing of the German governments in the discourse on Syrian and Ukrainian refugees

	Discourse on Syrian refugees		Discourse on Ukrainian refugees	
	Who are "we"?	Who are the refugees?	Who are "we"?	Who are the refugees?
Moral	A humanitarian country with a strong civil society	People in need fleeing war	A humanitarian country with a strong civil society	People in need fleeing war
Legal	Committed to international law, human rights and the German Constitution	Refugees have a right to apply for asylum, while economic migrants have not	–	As refugees, Ukrainians have a right to claim asylum (taken for granted)
Economic	A strong economy, but which faces labor market shortage	Refugees are a human capital	–	–
Cultural	An open and tolerant country of immigration	–	–	–
International	Committed to the fundamental values of the EU	–	Germany as part of the international community defending (1) international law and (2) the values of liberal democracies	Ukrainians as fighting for liberal and democratic values
Security	–	–	–	–

do not share its cosmopolitanism and have protested the admission of refugees, like anti-immigrant movements and the AfD. They were defined as not representing the true German society (Angela Merkel, CDU, September 9, 2015).

In line with its moral definition of the "we," refugees were defined as people fleeing a grave humanitarian crisis who therefore require help. Speakers vividly emphasized violence and disaster as sources of displacement, the refugees' plight during their journey to Europe, and the poor conditions in the refugee camps in first arrival countries. They emphasized that "we all follow the tragedies that take place," such as the death of young Aylan Kurdi, and that there are individual fates behind the "numbers" (Angela Merkel, CDU, September 9, 2015).

(2) The moral framing blended into a *legal* framing. In the view of the governing coalition, the German state is bound by international law, human rights, and the underlying universalist principles, which includes granting asylum to those who flee from persecution. These values are also enshrined in its Constitution, which is the result of Germany's historical responsibility for mass persecution and displacement during World War II:[10]

> The fundamental right to asylum for politically persecuted persons applies. We can be proud of the humanity of our Basic Law. It is particularly evident in this article. We also grant protection to all those who flee from wars and come to us. They, too, are entitled to this protection. (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015)

Accordingly, refugees were seen as carriers of fundamental rights and thus having a right to apply for asylum in Germany, as stipulated in national and international law. At the same time, a distinction was made between those who have a right to stay according to refugee law, and those who do not and have to be sent back. The latter include those who are migrating for economic reasons. Note, however, that even though the distinction between migrants and refugees was made, speakers did try to show compassion with those who "merely" migrate for economic reasons or come from "safe countries of origin," like the Balkan countries. One speaker referred to the history of his home region, the Swabian Alb, from which many emigrated to America in the past century, to underline that he perfectly understands the reason to migrate for better opportunities: "But it is also clear that we have to say: Those who have no reason for asylum and come anyway must return to their homeland as quickly as possible" (Volker Kauder, CDU, September 9, 2015).

(3) Third, Germany was also defined in *economic* terms as a strong economy that has the capacity to carry the "burden" of receiving refugees. This is precisely the message Chancellor Merkel sent when she stated that "we can do it." But what is more, the German economy was also defined as needing refugees as labor power to top up labor market shortages resulting from Germany's demographic decline: "We must also see it as a great opportunity for an aging society to attract young skilled

[10] Even though the scope of this right was restricted during the so-called asylum compromise of 1993, speakers frequently evoke the original spirit of the law.

workers" (Thomas Oppermann, SPD, September 9, 2015). The influx of refugees with the necessary skills was seen as a partial remedy.

In line with this economic frame, refugees were seen as a human capital that can fill up shortages on Germany's labor market, as expressed in the quote referring to "young skilled workers" just mentioned (Thomas Oppermann, SPD, September 9, 2015).

(4) Fourth, the government coalition's political discourse on refugees was also shaped by an *international* positioning of Germany as a country that is strongly committed to the EU. Germany was not imagined as an isolated nation, but as embedded within a European community of values. In the view of the government coalition, it is a requirement of the fundamental values of the EU to help refugees and show solidarity by distributing them among member states:

> Universal civic rights have been closely linked to Europe and its history. This is one of the founding impulses of the European Union. If Europe fails on the refugee issue, this close bond with universal civic rights will be broken. It will be destroyed, and it will not be the Europe that we imagine, and it will not be the Europe that we must continue to develop today as a founding myth. (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015)

(5) Finally, but less salient, Germany was also defined in *culturally* cosmopolitan terms as an open and tolerant country that makes no distinctions based on the cultural background of the refugees. The question of whether Germany is a "country of immigration" had caused heated political debates in the past. During the refugee crisis, the grand coalition now answered this question affirmatively (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015).

Accordingly, the grand coalition rejected drawing cultural boundaries against refugees. Instead, it strongly criticized radical right-wing movements and the emerging AfD for highlighting the cultural and religious background of refugees and suggesting that as Muslims, they are incompatible with the German culture. Instead, speakers blurred cultural boundaries by referring to the equal dignity of all persons, regardless of their background:

> I believe that our system of values in Europe is built on the dignity of every individual. It grieves me when people then start saying, "We don't want Muslims, we are a Christian country." Maybe tomorrow someone will say, "Christianity is also not so important anymore, we are without any religion." That cannot be right. I have just as little understanding for that as I do for statements that are made in our own country, and we have to talk about that in Europe, too. (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015)

Overall, it is notable that the grand coalition did not mobilize *security*-related frames, not even to justify more restrictive policies. To the contrary: even after security incidents, it was emphasized that one should not blame all refugees for terrorist attacks or crime.

The government's framing was mostly shared by the main opposition parties in parliament. Both the Left and the Greens adopted a cosmopolitan framing,

with only minor differences to the government. They emphasized humanitarianism and expressed pride in the solidarity of German civil society while drawing strong symbolic boundaries to delineate right-wing anti-refugee movements. Like the government, they emphasized Germany's constitutional commitment to human rights generally and the right to asylum specifically, and they converged on the view that Germany, qua member of the EU and historically committed to European unity, should search for a European solution to the crisis. Finally, they highlighted the capacity and even the need for the German economy to absorb refugees. We interpret the commonalties between the coalition government and the two left-wing opposition parties as evidence for our argument that, despite ideological differences between the parties, there is a dominant country-specific cultural repertoire to which most parties referred.

The refugee movement of 2015 also saw the rise of the right-wing populist AfD, which entered the Bundestag on an anti-refugee platform following the subsequent federal elections. It radically challenged the dominant position and frames of the established parties by drawing on different cultural repertoires, such as a sovereigntist and ethnic understanding of the German nation state, which had shaped migration policy in Germany in earlier decades (Brubaker 1992). However, the fact that the AfD depicted itself as anti-establishment challenger and that the other parties drew strong symbolic boundaries against it suggests that these repertories did not count as "legitimate" in the political discourse.

The framing of the German government (SPD/Greens/Liberals) in the discourse on Ukrainian refugees

(1) The German discourse on Ukrainian refugees following the Russian invasion of Ukraine was dominated first and foremost by an *international* framing that included Ukraine in the "we" and defined Russia as the "other." It contained two dimensions. On the one hand, the German government positioned Germany on the side of the international community that adheres to the basic principles of international law as institutionalized in the UN Charter, namely the principles of non-intervention and of peaceful international relations. As Russia challenged both by invading Ukraine, Germany must stand by the side of Ukraine:

> This war is an attack on peace in Europe. This war is an attack on our freedom. This war is an attack on international law. This war is an attack on all the values of a rules-based international order. This war is an attack on human peaceful coexistence. (Annalena Baerbock, Greens, February 27, 2022)

Furthermore, the German government positioned Germany within the family of liberal democracies sharing the same basic values, such as democracy, freedom, rule of law, and human rights. These values were contrasted with Russia and its authoritarian and oligarchic regime under Vladimir Putin. In this interpretation, Ukraine aspired to become a liberal democracy, posing a direct challenge

to Russia's authoritarian regime, which reacted with military means. This generates the moral obligation to stand by Ukraine's side:

> In Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odessa and Mariupol, people are not only defending their homeland. They are fighting for freedom and their democracy, for values that we share with them. As democrats, as Europeans, we stand by their side, on the right side of history. (Olaf Scholz, SPD, February 27, 2022)

In other words, much like in the debate on Syrian refugees, the German government's definition of the "we" was not restricted to the German nation but encompassed those who share cosmopolitan values (international law, liberal democracy, human rights etc.). If specific carriers of these features were mentioned at all, they were mostly the "European community" or the "West," which must stand united against Russia (Reem Alabali-Radovan, SPD, March 17, 2022).

In line with this international framing dominating the debate, Ukrainians were defined as people who share the same values (freedom, democracy and the rule of law) as "us," thus blurring the boundary between Germans and Ukrainians. They have "our" support because they are not only fighting for their survival and that of their home country, but also for "our" values of freedom and democracy (see the quote reported above: Olaf Scholz, SPD, February 27, 2022).

(2) While an international framing dominated the discourse, the government also mobilized a *moral* self-definition. As in the discourse about Syrian refugees, Germany was defined as a country that adheres to the principles of humanitarianism and international solidarity with people in need, thus blurring the boundaries between "us" and "them." Again, German civil society and the many volunteers were identified as the carriers of these values:

> What is being done these days is outstanding. Germany is helping people in the greatest need. […] Germany is standing together. People just get going, day in, day out. For that, they deserve our utmost respect and recognition. (Reem Alabali-Radovan, SPD, March 17, 2022)

Accordingly, Ukrainian refugees were defined in morally humanitarian terms as innocent victims who are forced to leave behind their homes because Russia is bombing civilian areas, including schools, homes, and hospitals (Stephan Thomae, FDP, March 17, 2022). In particular, speakers emphasized that the majority of people who were forced to flee belong to particularly vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and the elderly: "Within the last three weeks, more than three million people, mostly women and children, have already left Ukraine" (Stephan Thomae, FDP, March 17, 2022).

(3) Consistent with the cosmopolitan framing by the German government is that, from a *legal* perspective, some speakers emphasized that there should be no special treatment of some refugee groups in contrast to others, "whether they came from Ukraine before or from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, or Iraq." Thus, Ukrainians should not be admitted qua Ukrainians, but because they belong to the universal

category of "refugees": "We do not divide into groups; we give security to all people who need protection because they are human beings" (Reem Alabali-Radovan, March 17, 2022). In contrast to Poland, possible cultural similarities were not addressed.

Just like in the debate on Syrian refugees, the government's frames were shared by the strongest opposition party, in this case the conservative CDU/CSU. Like the government, it emphasized the strong obligation to admit Ukrainian refugees, deriving not only from humanitarian commitments but also from a self-understanding of Germany as a country of liberal democratic values and from the interpretation of Ukrainians as defending these same values against authoritarian Russia. The other two parties in parliament—the Left and the right-wing populist AfD—also expressed their support for the admission of Ukrainian refugees, but were more hesitant in framing Russia as Germany's "other," based on the suspicion that the war is also partly the fault of the "West" and NATO, including Germany. Despite their increasing opposition to government policy, the dominant framing of the Ukrainian refugee crisis has not changed over time. Again, the convergence of most parties' positions and frames suggests the existence of a dominant cultural repertoire.

The discourse on Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Poland

In contrast to the response by the German governments, the Polish government differentiated strongly between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. Table 4 summarizes the frames of the "we" and the "others" employed by the Polish government to support its policy positions. It adopted mainly communitarian-type frames. In the discourse on Syrian refugees, it emphasized national sovereignty against intervention by the EU, national solidarity and Poland's Christian heritage, thus drawing a cultural boundary against Middle Eastern/Northern African refugees and representing them as a "threat."As regards Ukrainian refugees, the Polish government again adopted communitarian frames, which, in this case, however, supported a welcoming stance toward Ukrainian refugees. Like the German government, it also emphasized the international frame, but with a different meaning, focusing on the Russian threat to the national sovereignty not only of Ukraine, but to Poland as well. While the positioning and framing of the government and opposition largely converged with regard to the admission of Ukrainians, there was less agreement with regard to Syrian refugees, suggesting somewhat more disputed cultural repertoires than in the German debate.

The framing of the Polish governing parties (PiS/United Right) in the discourse on Syrian refugees

(1) The representatives of the PiS coalition vehemently denied that Poland has any obligation to participate in the admission and relocation of Syrian refugees within

Table 4 The framing of the Polish government in the discourse on Syrian and Ukrainian refugees

	Discourse on Syrian refugees		Discourse on Ukrainian refugees	
	Who are "we"?	Who are the refugees?	Who are "we"?	Who are the refugees?
International	A victim of the EU's big powers, in particular Germany	–	(1) Poland as a country defending the principle national sovereignty (2) Experience of being a victim of Russia	Ukrainians as fighting for national sovereignty
Cultural	A Christian Catholic nation with a homogenous culture	Refugees are Muslims that cannot be assimilated	–	Ukrainian refugees as culturally close
Moral	A Christian community that should take care of its own members first	–	(1) A humanitarian country with a strong civil society (2) Poles as personally affected by the fate of Ukrainians	(1) People in need fleeing war (2) Friends and neighbors
Economic	A developing country, which belongs to the poorer part of Europe	Refugees are lazy and do not work	–	–
Legal	–	Most refugees are not "real" refugees, but economic migrants, who have no claim to asylum	–	Ukrainians as "real refugees" who have a right to claim asylum (in contrast to Syrians)
Security	–	Most refugees are criminals and terrorists	–	–

the EU. This denial was primarily based on their understanding of Poland's *international position* and its relation to the other EU member states. Politicians of the PiS coalition described Poland as a state whose national sovereignty is at risk within the EU. They accused the EU of being dominated by the interests of the large and powerful "Western" member states—primarily by Germany—that are taking advantage of weaker nations like Poland and trying to bully them into submission, for example, by forcing them to accept refugees. The emphasis on protecting Poland's national sovereignty was derived from PiS' reading of Polish history, which should make it wary of its Western neighbors and their intentions, then and now:

> Additionally, the German state and its representatives want to teach us solidarity. They constantly tell us about solidarity. In that case, I would like to ask, where were these countries, where was the West when Prime Minister Putin harassed us, the Republic of Poland? After all, you know the answer to this question. The West then signed Nord Stream II four days ago. Not to mention the kind of Western solidarity with us we know from history. Well, High Sejm, not to look far, [let me remind you] the September Campaign [of 1939], the Warsaw Uprising, Yalta. We remember all of this, High Sejm. And the fact that the West wants to teach us solidarity now is peak insolence. (Patryk Jaki, Sejm, United Poland, September 16, 2015)

(2) In justifying their rejection of refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa, the representatives of the United Right coalition also mobilized a *cultural frame* to define Poland as a homogenous, Christian (particularly Catholic) nation. In doing so, they emphasized the historical role of the Catholic Church in the formation of the Polish nation:

> The Polish nation—regardless of whether someone likes it or not—is evidently a nation very strongly associated with Christianity, with Catholicism. And we, as Poles, will emphasize it, not because someone likes it or not, but because it results from our internal sensitivity. (Jan Żaryn, PiS, October 19, 2016)

Some representatives even interpreted Poland as a defender of Europe's Christian heritage against Islam. They drew on the historical myth of Poland as Europe's "*bulwark of Christianity*," e.g., evoking the role of the Polish King Jan Sobieski in liberating Vienna besieged by the Ottomans (Patryk Jaki, United Poland, September 16, 2015). This framing suggests that Poland should nowadays play a similar role in stopping the expansion of Islam in Europe, in particular by opposing the failed "multiculturalist" policies enacted in other countries that now threaten Europe's Christian heritage (Konrad Głębocki, PiS, October 20, 2016).

Accordingly, the refugees were frequently "othered" in cultural and religious terms as "Muslims." Immigrants with a Muslim background were not only seen as incompatible with Poland's cultural and religious heritage, but also as posing a serious threat to it, e.g., by desecrating places of worship and implementing sharia law:

> What is happening in Italy? Churches occupied, used sometimes as toilettes. What is happening in France? Incessant row, sharia law implemented as well, patrols enforcing sharia law. The same in London, also in Germany the strong-

> est, the toughest on this point these kinds of occurrences take place. Do you want this to appear in Poland, so that we'll cease to be hosts in our own country? Do you want that? (Jaroslaw Kaczyński, PiS, September 16, 2015)

(3) Third, the cultural definition of Poland as Christian nation also contained a self-definition in *moral* terms. Central to Christian ethics is the principle of charity, that is, to "love thy neighbor" and to aid people who are in need. In contrast to the official position of the Catholic Church, however, PiS' chairman Kaczyński turned the argument of Christian charity around. According to him, this principle obliges Poles to help their own families and their nation first, because help cannot be extended to all foreigners: "There is such a principle and it's 'ordo caritatis,' the order of loving. Based on that principle, the loved ones go first, family, then the nation, then others" (Jaroslaw Kaczyński, PiS, Sejm, 16 September 2015).

(4) Fourth, PiS representatives occasionally also drew on an *economic* frame to justify the rejection of refugees, suggesting that they are a burden to the national economy. For example, one Senator described Poland as a "developing" country and suggested that refugees should be settled in "rich" and geographically closer countries like Saudi Arabia and the Arab Emirates (Waldemar Bonkowski, PiS, October 19, 2019).

In line with this economic framing, refugees were seen as less hardworking than Poles and lazy, suggesting that they will be a burden on the national economy and social services. According to one speaker, data from other countries show that "90% of the so-called emigrants do not want to work, they do not want to accept any job, despite the fact that they get the job" (Patryk Jaki, United Poland, September 16, 2015). What is more, Middle Eastern and Northern African refugees were contrasted negatively to those Poles that have emigrated in the past, as these have contributed to their countries of destination.

(5) Fifth, the Law and Justice coalition also mobilized a *legal frame* by repeatedly questioning whether the persons migrating from the Middle East and Northern Africa to the EU are bona fide "refugees" fleeing war and persecution, or rather "economic migrants" looking for better opportunities. Categorizing them as "mere" migrants implies that destination countries do not have the legal obligation to admit them and can rightfully turn them back, given that their lives are not at risk. According to one speaker, they are "migrants impersonating refugees" and therefore "abusing of the asylum system" (Konrad Głębocki, PiS, October 10, 2016).

(6) Finally, PiS also mobilized a *security*-framing of Muslim refugees as potential "criminals" and "terrorists" from the Islamic State: "The United States in its last position clearly indicate that among the refugees there will also be representatives of the Islamic State" (Patryk Jaki, United Poland, September 16, 2015). As such, they pose a security threat to Poles and should therefore not be admitted.

Compared to the PiS government, the oppositional Civic Platform was less opposed to the admission of Syrian refugees and their redistribution via the EU relocation mechanism. Under PO Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz (in government until November 2015), Poland agreed to voluntarily accept some relocated refugees,

but the party aligned with PiS to oppose any automatic relocation within the EU, a stance that continues until the time of writing. PO's more compromising stance was supported by a framing that draws on another cultural repertoire specific to Poland. Most importantly, Civic Platform suggested that refusing to cooperate at least somewhat would put Poland's reputation within the EU at risk. It highlighted the narrative that Poland had "returned to Europe" after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Sztompka 2004) and that it was indebted to the EU for its support with structural funds (as well as receiving many Polish emigrants in the past).[11] Nevertheless, the Civic Platform did not approximate the open discourse of political parties in Germany and did not appeal to universal values like humanitarianism and international human rights law in the same way. We interpret this as evidence of cross-national differences in cultural repertoires shaping these responses.

The framing of the Polish governing parties (PiS/United Right) in the discourse on Ukrainian refugees

(1) Much like in the German case, the Polish discourse on Ukrainian refugees was embedded in a foreign policy discourse on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and thus dominated first and foremost by an *international* framing. However, the content of the international frame differed significantly from the German debate. Similar to Germany, the Polish government situated Poland within the "free world" and drew a strong boundary against Russia as the "other"—but the term "freedom" referred primarily to the idea of national self-determination. Thus, the definition of who "we" are did not transcend the category of the nation state, and the Russian invasion was interpreted less as an attack on liberal democracy and human rights, as in the German discourse, but rather as an attack on national sovereignty, which could also endanger Poland:

> This morning, February 24th, 2022, will go down in history as the day when Russia chose war, as the day when one country in Europe attacked another, attacked without the slightest reason, without any provocation, without any reasons that could in any way justify such an act of aggression. This barbarism, which we encounter beyond our eastern border, must meet with the determined resistance of the entire free world. (Mateusz Morawiecki, PiS, February 24, 2022)

In line with this interpretation of the war, support for Ukraine was not derived from the wish to uphold values like liberal democracy and human rights. Instead, it was primarily derived from a reading of Poland's own history of having been a victim of Russian aggression as part of the Eastern bloc. This creates a particular solidarity with Ukrainians who share this fate. As Morawiecki continues:

> We are perfectly aware of how well the risk, the Russian threat, is visible from our perspective, and we also know that until very recently it was not so

[11] It also pointed to Poland's forgotten multicultural past to suggest that Poland would be able to receive at least some refugees of other cultural backgrounds.

> clearly visible in Western Europe. Today, Europe speaks more and more in a Polish manner. (Mateusz Morawiecki, PiS, February 24, 2022)

Accordingly, Ukrainians were also framed in international terms. But in contrast to Germany, Ukrainians were not seen as defenders of democracy and liberal values, but as people who are actively defending their homeland and fighting for national self-determination:

> Today it must be emphasized with all might that Ukraine is fighting not only for its own independence. Today Ukraine is fighting not only for its own freedom. Today Ukraine is also fighting on behalf of all Europe, for the freedom of all Europe. (Mateusz Morawiecki, PiS, February 24, 2022)

As Ukrainians are also fighting on behalf of "our" freedom, this creates a particular obligation to help Ukrainians and support the refugees who are fleeing.

(2) Secondly, much like the German government, the Polish government characterized Polish society in *moral* terms as a humanitarian and caring society, pointing out how Polish civil society self-organized to receive Ukrainian refugees. According to a speaker, Poland has even become the "conscience of Europe" and, in a swipe against Western Europe, which had been critical of Poland before, a humanitarian and diplomatic "spokesperson for the Ukrainian cause in Europe" (Błażej Poboży, PiS, March 10, 2022). In contrast to the German discourse, however, Polish society was also portrayed as particularly emotionally affected by the war in Ukraine and the ensuing refugee crisis, because of being an immediate neighbor and the many personal ties of Poles with Ukrainians (Błażej Poboży, PiS, March 10, 2022).

In line with this interpretation, Ukrainian refugees were framed from a morally humanitarian perspective as people in existential need. To emphasize their neediness, government politicians often pointed out that it is mostly women, children, and the elderly who are fleeing, and of whom Poland must take care, while the men are defending their homeland at war (Błażej Poboży, PiS, March 10, 2022). As just noted, however, Ukrainian refugees were additionally framed as having close ties to Poles—as "our friends, our neighbors, our brothers from Ukraine" (Błażej Poboży, PiS, March 10, 2022), which generates a particular obligation of solidarity.

(3) Third, there is also some evidence that Ukrainians were interpreted in *cultural* terms. Especially during the 2015/16 debate on refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa, Ukrainians were defined as culturally close, and therefore capable of being integrated more easily in Poland, though it is not mentioned what the cultural commonality consists of:

> It is possible that there may be a situation where millions of actual refugees from Ukraine, refugees who are culturally closer to us, will rapidly come flooding in here. I believe that we cannot open ourselves to culturally alien nations.' (Waldemar Bonkowski, PiS, October 19, 2016)

(4) Finally, much like in the German debate, the *legal* status of Ukrainians as refugees was not debated but taken for granted. However, in the Polish debate, a contrast

was made between Ukrainians, who were considered "real" refugees, and Middle Eastern and Northern African refugees, who were assumed to be mostly economic migrants. Even though until 2022, Poland had admitted Ukrainians mostly as labor migrants, several politicians from PiS already argued before the Russian invasion of early 2022 that Ukrainians are akin to refugees, and the fact that Poland has admitted them weighs up its reluctance to admit refugees from the Middle East and North Africa (Jan Żaryn, PiS, October 19, 2016).

In contrast to how Syrian refugees were portrayed, a noticeable characteristic of the discourse on Ukrainian refugees was the complete absence of frames that portrayed them as security threat or an economic burden.

Finally, a brief summary of the policy positions and frames of the main opposition party. The Civic Platform also supported the admission of Ukrainian refugees and justified this with frames similar to those of the government, by highlighting the closeness between Poland and Ukraine and the need to support Ukrainians in their fight against Russia, not least to protect Poland's own national sovereignty. Thus, both the government and the opposition seemed to be influenced by similar cultural repertories, such as the memory of when Poland was under the geopolitical influence of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Conclusion

Several variables have been identified in the literature to explain why countries discriminate between refugee groups of different origins, such as cultural/ethnic similarity and international rivalry (Abdelaaty 2021). While we do not deny their relevance, our study points to cross-national variations that do not fit these expectations, as is the case for Germany's and Poland's response to the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crises. Poland strongly preferred Ukrainian over Syrian and other Middle Eastern and Northern African refugees, while this was less the case in Germany, even though one could have expected both countries to respond in a similar way as they were confronted with the same groups of refugees. We have put forward two theoretical arguments in this study to account for this deviation.

First, we have emphasized the importance of framing by political actors. Ethnic similarity and international rivalry are not objectively given factors but are open to interpretation in political discourse. For example, we could show that the variable "cultural/ethnic closeness" was nearly absent in the German discourse, because the German government tended to interpret German identity in cosmopolitan terms and de-emphasized cultural boundaries, whereas the Polish government defined Polish identity as Christian, which implied cultural boundaries against Syrians as Muslims (but not against Ukrainians).

Second, we have argued that how political actors frame the issue is strongly shaped by the cultural repertoires specific to a country. Consider, for instance, how the Polish and German governments justified the admission of Ukrainian refugees. The governments of both countries emphasized the duty to receive Ukrainians, because they have fled the attack by a rival regime, namely Putin's Russia. In the German case, however, this sense of duty was derived from a commitment

to universal values like freedom and democracy, which Ukrainians allegedly share. Germany was imagined as a defender of the liberal international order, to which it subscribed as a lesson from its nationalist and violent past. In contrast, the Polish debate emphasized the threat to national sovereignty: solidarity with Ukrainians was derived from a shared history of having been Russian victims in the past and the sense that "we could be next."

By highlighting the importance of cultural repertoires, we are not saying that ideological differences between political parties are insignificant for the framing of political issues. However, we do argue that in each country there are dominant repertoires that constrain the options of political parties to frame an issue. In order to further substantiate this argument, we have also analyzed the framing of the opposition parties in Germany and Poland on both issues and briefly summarized the results.

In line with our argument, the two left-wing parties that formed the opposition to Angela Merkel's government in the debate on the admission of Syrian refugees largely shared the government's cosmopolitan framing. We find similar results for the debate on the admission of Ukrainian refugees, as the framing of the government headed by Chancellor Olaf Scholz—a social democrat—was supported by the strongest opposition party, the conservative CDU/CSU. We interpret these findings as evidence for our argument that there exists a dominant country-specific cultural repertoire to which most parties refer.

In Poland, cultural repertoires are more disputed, reflecting a more polarized political landscape and leading to larger differences in framing between political parties. While we do not find any framing differences between the two main political parties (PiS and PO) concerning Ukrainian refugees, we do find differences with respect to the Syrian refugees. Unlike the PiS, the Civic Platform was more ready to participate in the (voluntary) relocation of refugees in the EU. However, it justified this by drawing on a specific Polish narrative about Poland's place in Europe and did not appeal to humanitarianism and human rights as in the German debate, thus adopting a more restrictive position than the CDU in Germany. In this context, it is interesting to see what refugee policy the Civic Platform is pursuing since it took over the government in December 2023 and Donald Tusk became Prime Minister. In early 2024, Tusk spoke out against the relocation mechanism that was negotiated as part of the reform of the Common European Asylum System because it is mandatory and not voluntary, thus restricting Poland's self-determination and sovereignty.[12] This suggests a convergence with the restrictive policy position and framing of PiS.

Finally, it can be noted that survey research also suggests that there is a difference between the German and the Polish populations in the extent to which they prefer Ukrainian over Syrian refugees. The gap is larger in Poland than in Germany (Dražanová and Geddes 2023). Even though one cannot say whether this is an effect of the way the respective governments have framed the issue, or whether the governments have simply followed public opinion, the result shows that cross-national differences between the two countries are significant.

[12] https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-wont-accept-migrant-relocation-mechanism-pm-says-2024-04-10/

Acknowledgements This paper was written in the context of the Cluster of Excellence "Contestations of the Liberal Script" (EXC 2055, Project-ID: 390715649), which is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy –EXC 2055. The paper builds on and extends the analyses presented in the book "Framing Refugees: How the Admission of Refugees is Debated in Six Countries across the World," published with Oxford University Press in 2024. We would like to thank our student assistant, Lea Murru, for her support in interpreting the parliamentary debates, as well as Julian Kania for researching and translating debates in the Polish parliament. Thanks also go to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. The article was written in the context of the Cluster of Excellence 'Contestations of the Liberal Script' (EXC 2055, Project-ID: 390715649), which is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy—EXC 2055.

Data availability All coded texts are available upon request.

References

Abdelaaty, L.E. 2021. *Discrimination and delegation: explaining state responses to refugees*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Benford, R.D., and D.A. Snow. 2000. Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 611–639.

Blair, C.W., G. Grossman, and J.M. Weinstein. 2022. Forced displacement and asylum policy in the developing world. *International Organization* 76 (2): 337–378.

Boswell, C., A. Geddes, and P. Scholten. 2011. The role of narratives in migration policy-making: A research framework. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 13 (1): 1–11.

Brubaker, R. 1992. *Citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Cap, P. 2018. "We don't want any immigrants or terrorists here": The linguistic manufacturing of xenophobia in the post-2015 Poland. *Discourse & Society* 29 (4): 380–398.

De Haas, H., K. Natter, and S. Vezzoli. 2018. Growing restrictiveness or changing selection? The nature and evolution of migration policies. *International Migration Review* 52 (2): 324–367.

De Wilde, P., R. Koopmans, W. Merkel, O. Strijbis, and M. Zürn, eds. 2019. *The struggle over borders: cosmopolitanism and communitarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Díez Medrano, J. 2003. *Framing Europe: Attitudes to European integration in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dražanová, L., and A. Geddes. 2023. Attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees and governmental responses in 8 European countries. In *EU responses to the large-scale refugee displacement from Ukraine*, ed. S. Carrera and M. Ineli-Cigler, 135–145. San Domenico di Fiesole: European University Institute.

Drewski, D., and J. Gerhards. 2024a. *Framing refugees: How the admission of refugees is debated in six countries across the world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Drewski, D., and J. Gerhards. 2024b. The liberal border script and its contestations: An attempt at definition and systematization. In *The liberal script at the beginning of the 21st century: Conceptions, components, and tensions*, ed. T.A. Börzel, J. Gerschewski, and M. Zürn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Entman, R.M. 1993. Framing: Towards clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43 (4): 51–58.
European Council (2024) Infographic—Refugees from Ukraine in the EU. European Council online, 24 January. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/ukraine-refugees-eu/. Accessed 1 July 2024.
Eurostat. 2024a. Asylum and first time asylum applicants—annual aggregated data (rounded). Eurostat online, 18 April. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00191/default/table?lang=en. Accessed 1 July 2024.
Eurostat. 2024b. Beneficiaries of temporary protection at the end of the month by citizenship, age and sex—Monthly data. Eurostat online, 28 June. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asytpsm__custom_8221615/default/table?lang=en. Accessed 1 July 2024.
Ferree, M.M., W.A. Gamson, J. Gerhards, and D. Rucht. 2002. *Shaping abortion discourse: Democracy and the public sphere in Germany and the United States*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Gamson, W.A. 1992. *Talking politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Gerhards, J. 1995. Framing dimensions and framing strategies: contrasting ideal- and real-type frames. *Social Science Information* 34 (2): 225–248.
Helbling, M. 2014. Framing immigration in Western Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40 (1): 21–41.
Helbling, M., and D. Kalkum. 2018. Migration policy trends in OECD countries. *Journal of European Public Policy* 25 (12): 1779–1797.
Holzberg, B., K. Kolbe, and R. Zaborowski. 2018. Figures of crisis: The delineation of (un)deserving refugees in the German media. *Sociology* 52 (3): 534–550.
Hooghe, L., and G. Marks. 2018. Cleavage theory meets Europe's crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the transnational cleavage. *Journal of European Public Policy* 25 (1): 109–135.
Huysmans, J. 2006. *The politics of insecurity: Fear, migration and asylum in the EU*. London/New York: Routledge.
Jaskułowski, K. 2019. *The everyday politics of migration crisis in Poland: Between nationalism, fear and empathy*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Koopmans, R. 2023. *Die Asyl-Lotterie: Eine Bilanz der Flüchtlingspolitik von 2015 bis zum Ukraine-Krieg*. München: C.H. Beck.
Kriesi, H., E. Grande, R. Lachat, M. Dolezal, S. Bornschier, and T. Frey. 2008. *West European politics in the age of globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Krzyżanowski, M. 2018. Discursive shifts in ethno-nationalist politics: On politicization and mediatization of the "refugee crisis" in Poland. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16 (1–2): 76–96.
Krzyżanowski, M. 2020. Discursive shifts and the normalisation of racism: Imaginaries of immigration, moral panics and the discourse of contemporary right-wing populism. *Social Semiotics* 30 (4): 503–527.
Kuckartz, U. 2014. *Qualitative text analysis: A guide to methods, practice and using software*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd.
Lamont, M., and L. Thévenot. 2000. *Rethinking comparative cultural sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Lemay, I. 2024. Theorizing the life and death of moments of openness toward refugees in the global north: The case of Germany during the 2015–2016 refugee "crisis." *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 22 (1): 113–133.
Lewicki, M., and S. Mandes. 2015. Changing frameworks of national identity in post-communist Poland. In *Religion and national identities in an enlarged Europe*, ed. M. Koenig and W. Knöbl, 39–67. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Morgül, K. 2024. Beyond the inclusion–exclusion dichotomy in populism studies: Erdoğan's Muslim nationalist discourse on Syrian refugees. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 12 (3): 138–168.
Olick, J.K., and D. Levy. 1997. Collective memory and cultural constraint: Holocaust myth and rationality in German politics. *American Sociological Review* 62 (6): 921–936.
Reisigl, M., and R. Wodak. 2016. The discourse-historical approach. In *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, ed. R. Wodak and M. Meyer, 23–61. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications Ltd.
Scheufele, D.A. 1999. Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication* 49 (1): 103–122.
Sniderman, P.M., and S.M. Theriault. 2004. The structure of political argument and the logic of issue framing. In *Studies in public opinion: attitudes, nonattitudes, measurement error, and change*, ed. W.E. Saris and P.M. Sniderman, 133–165. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Snow, D.A. 2013. Framing and social movements. In *The Wiley-Blackwell encyclopedia of social and political movements*, ed. D.A. Snow, D. della Porta, B. Klandermans, and D. McAdam. Blackwell Publishing.
Soysal, Y.N. 1994. *Limits of citizenship: Migrants and postnational membership in Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Sztompka, P. 2004. From East Europeans to Europeans: shifting collective identities and symbolic boundaries in the New Europe. *European Review* 12 (4): 481–496.
UNHCR. 2024a. Global trends: Forced displacement in 2023. UNHCR online, 13 June. https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022. Accessed 1 July 2024.
UNHCR. 2024b. Operational data portal: Ukraine refugee situation. UNCHR online, 13 June, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine. Accessed 1 July 2024.
Vollmer, B., and S. Karakayali. 2018. The volatility of the discourse on refugees in Germany. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16 (1–2): 118–139.
Zaun, N. 2018. States as gatekeepers in EU asylum politics: Explaining the non-adoption of a refugee quota system. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56 (1): 44–62.

Daniel Drewski is a Junior Professor for the Sociology of Europe and Globalization at the Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg. His main research interests include the sociology of European integration, symbolic boundaries, and borders.

Jürgen Gerhards is a Professor for Sociology at the Freie Universität Berlin. His main research interests include comparative cultural sociology, and sociology of European integration.