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The Expression of Hate Speech in Online News Comments Towards War Refugees

Abstract

Lithuania has been the biggest supporter of Ukraine since the armed attacks and invasion of the country in 2022. There has been a significant influx of Ukrainian war refugees to Lithuania. Despite the large-scale individual and institutional initiatives of support for Ukraine and its display in the mainstream media, social media reflected a diverse picture. The aim of this research is to identify the expression of hate speech in Lithuanian online news comments on the Ukrainian war refugees, to identify and analyse nominations which might be reconstructed on the basis of these comments, and to define them as rhetorical and cognitive means that are used to form the intended image of the Ukrainian war refugee. The research focuses on Facebook comments posted under articles on the Ukrainian war refugees, published on the main Lithuanian news websites.
Keywords: hate speech; refugees; stereotypes; nominations; prejudice

1 Introduction

The European Union experienced a mass influx of war refugees in February 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine. Refugees from Ukraine evoked mixed feelings in receiving countries and regions – from compassion and willingness to help, to different fears, prejudices and even hatred. Modern societies make use of social media to express their true opinions, feelings, attitudes and beliefs; social media enables its users to hide behind fake or anonymous accounts, thus functioning as a very powerful platform for persuasion and propaganda.

Although hate speech studies related to various sensitive and vulnerable social groups, especially migrants and refugees (Aldamen, 2023; Arcila-Calderón et al., 2020, 2022; Blanco-Herrero et al., 2024), have been gaining attention within the research community, studies into the expression of hate speech aimed at refugees fleeing war- or armed clashes-related crises are still scarce. A number of studies on hate speech have been published with the focus on millions of refugees from Syria who have fled the country because of the civil war (Álvarez-Benjumea & Winter, 2020; Chen et al., 2023; Saridou et al., 2023; Sayimer & Derman, 2017; Toker, 2019). There are also some reports published on hate speech towards refugees from Myanmar in the well-known Rohingya crisis (Brooten, 2020; Schissler, 2025) and refugees from former Yugoslavia (Bajt, 2016).

The Ukrainian war crisis may still seem rather a recent one; yet, its beginnings, although much less globally known, date back to 2014 when eastern regions of Ukraine – Donetsk, Luhansk and Crimea – were invaded by Russian forces, causing the Donbas war and making thousands of people seek asylum in more western parts of the country or even outside it. Although a decade has passed since the very beginning of armed attacks on the eastern part of the country and more than two years since the full-scale attack on the entire country, resulting in over 6 million refugees displaced from Ukraine, studies focused on discourse towards refugees from Ukraine remain notably limited. Some research findings have been published, namely on the discourse towards Ukrainian refugees as compared with Roma migrants in Slovakia

(Poslon & Lášticová, 2024), antagonistic views towards refugees in Polish social media (Kasińska-Metryka & Pałka-Suchojad, 2023), anti-refugee discourse in Italian social media comparing the Syrian and Ukrainian crises (Kiyak et al., 2023), discourse in German social media (Winiker, 2023), the media discourse on refugees from Ukraine in the first month of the invasion and attacks (Martínez de Bartolomé Rincón & Rivera Martín, 2023), hate speech in Ukrainian media discourse (Monakhova & Tuluzakova, 2022), language consciousness and Ukrainian students' attitudes towards the Ukrainian language in a time of war (Yaremko & Levchuk, 2023), etc.

Lithuania has been the biggest supporter of Ukraine since the armed attacks and invasion of the country in 2022. War refugees from Ukraine make up the biggest number of immigrants in Lithuania, contributing to different areas of social and public life. The expression of hate speech aimed at war refugees from Ukraine is the object of this research. It seeks to analyse the attitudes of Lithuanian citizens towards the Ukrainian war refugees at the beginning of the war in 2022. It seeks to identify and analyse nominations which might be reconstructed on the basis of these comments and to define them as rhetorical and cognitive means that are used to form the intended image of the Ukrainian war refugee. Furthermore, the research aims at the formation of the war refugee image in the first three months of war. The research focuses on Facebook comments posted under articles on the Ukrainian war refugees, published on the main Lithuanian news websites – `www.delfi.lt`, `www.lrytas.lt`, `www.15min.lt`. The relevance of studying social media is grounded in other researchers' findings that social media may exacerbate the violence against war refugees (Brooten, 2020) and serve as an arena where tensions unravel in toxic ways (Nyi Kyaw, 2020). Social media may also reflect directly the "collapse of EU migration, integration and asylum policies" (Bajt, 2016), thus posing threats to global peace and security. The need to address the emerging tensions between international standards regulating freedom of expression and the commitments of modern societies to combat hate speech is among the most significant issues related to hate speech (Ruzaitė, 2024). We believe that the contribution of our study to the existing body of scientific literature is significant in drawing attention to the various forms and patterns that hate speakers employ feeling unsupervised and unstoppable on social media. This work should also serve as an invitation to scholars working on hate speech for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural collaborations, fostering a broader dialogue on the challenges posed by hate speech and hate speakers.

The theoretical and methodological framework guiding this study is grounded in the sociocultural phenomenon of social media discourse, the concept of hate speech, linguistic markers of hate speech, and hate speech models, which are discussed in the next section.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social Media Discourse

Social media is a powerful and easily accessible tool exploited by various age, gender, social, etc. groups to form the intended opinion about themselves and others, which is usually based on the classical taxonomy `I/we` vs `They,ingroup` vs `outgroup` (Wodak, 2002). Moreover, social media seems to be extensively used for image shaping as a platform of propaganda, hate speech and hybrid war. According to Matthes et al. (2024), it shapes society's perception and attitude towards refugees.

Although some scholars, such as McGregor and Siegel (2013), Alencar (2018) state that social media has a positive impact on refugee integration, others emphasise its negative impact. Aldamen (2023) states that "when news, photos and headlines related to refugees' suffering and negative representation continue to be circulated and appear repeatedly on social media, the audience could react negatively, as a result, gradually they start to show a less positive reaction since they see or read about the same negative content repeatedly without any ability to make a change, which could affect their compassion towards refugees" (p. 93). Matthes et al. (2024) in their research into how social media shapes negative attitudes towards refugees offer the conclusion that "social media […] has great affective potential in terms of anger and fear" (p. 961). They also state that social media discourse might evoke negative emotions aimed at refugees, exaggerate refuge-related threats and associations with terrorism (Matthes et al., 2024). Sutkutė (2022) writes that social media evokes demonisation of refugees and defines them as "as an unwanted group of people because of what they can do to society" (p. 689).

What reason lies behind social media discourse being so powerful in shaping opinions and images? The answer might be that it is uncontrolled. Official media sites are either censored or have established ethical policies; however, social media discourse in the majority of cases is not regulated. Although "virtual police officers" are responsible for combating and eliminating hate speech online, the increasing number of comments demonstrating hate speech aimed at the Ukrainian war refugees on Lithuanian social media, shows that such measures are ineffective or even invalid. Another reason is the aforementioned anonymity; Arroyo López and Moreno López (2017) claim that Internet users take advantage of anonymity and therefore feel free to express any form of hate speech that they would not dare to do offline.

Negative comments, discriminatory and derogatory speech, verbal insults, non-normative expressions, swear words are the linguistic markers of hate speech peculiar to social media discourse, having the effect of exclusion, polarisation and separation of refugees from the receiving society. This research focuses on the role and effect of hate speech aimed at the Ukrainian war refugees in Lithuanian society.

2.2 Hate Speech Concept

According to Matsuda (1989), Stone (1994), Delgado and Stefancic (2004), Sponholz (2023), the term *hate speech* was coined in the 1980s by law scholars in the USA and was related to communication against historically oppressed groups in terms of racism. There are many definitions of hate speech; thus, Kindermann states that "the term 'hate speech' today is ubiquitous, and there is little agreement on what exactly it means" and suggests replacing this term with another: 'discriminatory speech' (Kindermann, 2023, p. 814). This scholar grounds his assumption by presenting hate speech definitions from constitutional doctrine where it is described as verbal and non-verbal communication involving hostility aimed at social groups and based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, etc. discrimination.

Sponholz (2018) defines hate speech as shaping human inferiority and argues that such communication may intentionally activate contradictions between groups of people (Sponholz, 2022). In the case of the Ukrainian war refugees, hate speech might be an intentionally activated hybrid war weapon aimed at destabilizing political, social and economic situation in receiving countries. Further intention might be emotional – to evoke separation and hostility towards refugees based on prejudices and negative stereotypes expressed in the form of hate speech.

Particular groups facing hate speech are also within the scope of Howard's (2019) research where he defines hate speech as "a term of art, referring to the particular expressions of hatred against particular (groups of) people in particular contexts" (Howard, 2019, p. 95). One of the forms of hatred, expressed on social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc., might mobilise cyber hate and even trigger specific events and actions, e.g., protests or attacks against refugees (Blakemore, 2012; Yilmaz et al., 2023). Sponholz (2022) also discusses the role of hate speech as a communicative act. She argues that various discriminatory actions may be performed via hate speech, including incitement to hatred, contempt, discrimination, violence, even genocide and crimes against humanity (or attempts to justify these), which may be expressed as insults, ridicule and slander, and disseminated as discriminatory ideas through participation in discrimination-promoting organisations and activities (Sponholz, 2022).

Incitement to hatred, contempt and discrimination, threats, expressions of insults, ridicule, slander and discriminatory ideas may also be the consequential results of hate speech aimed at Ukrainian war refugees in Lithuania, which will be further discussed.

2.3 Linguistic Expression of Hate Speech

In the linguistic perspective, hate speech may take various forms of expression. Biri et al. (2023) provide that first-person verbal aggression is a popular form of online hatred, including simple and conditional threats of physical aggression, expression of mental aggression – "they convey internal mental states that the first-person writer ascribes to themselves. This main category includes boulomaic expressions conveying a wish and emotive expressions evaluating the target" (Biri et al., 2023, p. 122).

Aguiar and Barbosa (2023) put emphasis on emotional deixis in online hate speech expression. While conducting research into demonstrative determiners in Portuguese, the scholars arrived at the conclusion

that exclamativity of emotional deixis has a significant impact on the expression of hate speech. In their opinion, "[…] the negative sentiment value is higher when the demonstrative is followed by a proper noun and is inserted in an exclamatory sentence" (Aguiar & Barbosa, 2023, p. 160).

Bick (2023) analyses derogatory linguistic mechanisms in Danish in his research and focuses on a "lexical snapshot of productive compounds and the extraction of syntactic attributions of derogatory content" (p. 166). This scholar distinguishes between the three most popular mechanisms for pejorative word formation: pejorative modifiers, pejorative noun heads and pejorative derivation. Bick (2023) also stresses the importance of compound slurs, compounds as narrative and stereotype carriers, dehumanizing metaphors, etc. in the Danish expression of hate speech.

Parvaresh and Harvey (2023) discuss rhetorical questions as conveyors of hate speech and presume that hateful rhetorical questions are exploited to derogate vulnerable groups, such as Afghans, who experienced displacement. The results of their research show that all viable types of responses were aimed at shaping a negative image of Afghans. Furthermore, emojis and gifs also highly contribute to the expression of hate speech and even intensify it.

Thus, linguistic discourse markers, in parallel with paralinguistic markers, enable online users to exploit a huge variety of methods in expressing hate or discriminatory discourse, to imply and emphasise their personal opinions, threats and shape the intended image of an outgroup.

2.4 Hate Speech Models

Alongside a vast number of hate speech definitions, scholars suggest different models for hate speech research and analysis. Ermida (2023) introduces a five-factor annotation model for hate speech which she simplistically rephrases as a five-question model comprising (1) content, (2) target, (3) purpose, (4) agent and (5) channel related questions. Ermida defines prejudice as "any form of preconceived and stereotyped opinion about (members of) a group of people, which voices politically incorrect ideas that may negatively affect them" (Ermida, 2023, p. 50). She also expands the definition of target in hate speech research and therefore focuses not only on a group of individuals, but also on the individual themself. Furthermore, Ermida shifts from a universal depiction of group vulnerability to a more neutral one and talks about groups of people who may experience all types of disadvantages, including social, political, economic, legal, historical, physical, or symbolic, if they belong to a group (Ermida, 2023).

Ermida (2023) emphasizes the importance of intention of hate speech because "haters *intend* to cause a harmful *effect*" (Ermida, 2023, p. 54). Moreover, she discusses the significance of agent identification to combat the spread of hate speech. Ermida (2023) acknowledges that public transmission of online hate speech in comparison to face-to-face communication plays an important role allowing the Internet to serve the purpose of hate speech dissemination.

Balsiūnaitė (2016) analyses hate speech aimed at refugees on the basis of a two-factor model: stereotypes and prejudice. The most popular identified stereotypes portray refugees as radical Muslims, terrorists, criminals, dependants and shams. The most prevalent prejudices are aimed at possible future scenarios where refugees will not be able to integrate into the European labour market, will destroy Christianity and even destroy the old continent. This scholar offers the conclusion that the effect of hate speech is rather hierarchical – it starts from stereotypes and prejudice and leads to racism, later to racial discrimination/ xenophobia/ stigmatisation and, consequently, to hate crimes.

Another hate speech detection and analysis model has been suggested by Sellars (2016). This model is based on eight features: (1) targeting of a group, or individual as a member of a group; (2) content in the message that expresses hatred; (3) the speech causes harm; (4) the speaker intends harm or bad activity; (5) the speech incites bad actions beyond the speech itself; (6) the speech is either public or directed at a member of the group; (7) the context makes violent response possible; and (8) the speech has no redeeming purpose (Sellars, 2016, p. 4).

This model is more extensive and detailed than the one suggested by Ermida (2023) and encompasses not only traits and features of hate speech, but also possible intentions, outcomes, results and actions evoked by it, and might successfully contribute to comprehensive research into hate speech. Moreover, it might be applicable to online and offline hate speech analysis.

3 Methodology

Comments about the Ukrainian war refugees in Lithuania, posted below articles of the most popular Lithuanian media portals Delfi, Lrytas, 15min on Facebook, served as the research material. The research period encompasses comments posted only within the timeframe of 24 February – 24 April 2022. The war started on 24 February 2022; therefore, this date was chosen as the initial point of the research data collection. There were a lot of heated discussions in the first few months of the war, targeted at refugees from Ukraine. Thus, the first two months of the war were chosen for analysis. The comments, demonstrating hate speech aimed at the Ukrainian war refugees, were collected manually, classified on the basis of their type, e.g., expressing stereotypes or prejudice. Further, nominations applied by Lithuanian online users to the Ukrainian war refugees were identified and categorised on the basis of the most prevalent and recurring comments, and their semantic, rhetorical and comparative analysis was conducted. Finally, the role and function of hate speech in the formation of the war refugee image was discussed.

The analysis was conducted within a methodological framework comprising of combination of linguistic and rhetorical means in social media discourse on war refugees. Thus, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), lexico-semantic and comparative research methods were applied to identify and analyse the expression of hate speech in Lithuanian online news comments on the Ukrainian war refugees. Cognitive linguistic concepts, such as semantic fields, and linguistic means, such as stereotypical nominations and prejudices, which might be reconstructed on the basis of these comments and defined as rhetorical and cognitive means that are used to form a negative image of the Ukrainian war refugee, were identified. Thus, discursive strategies and linguistic discourse markers used in the expression of online hate speech in Lithuania are within the scope of this research. The analysis comprises a combination of social media discourse and cognitive linguistics; and therefore, the study may be defined as interdisciplinary research.

4 Results

4.1 The Expression of Hate Speech

The Russian occupation of Ukraine started in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and has been continuing until today. The beginning of occupation was not marked by a huge influx of refugees to other countries. However, when Russia brutally attacked and invaded other parts of Ukraine in 2022, the world faced significant numbers of Ukrainian war refugees who wanted to save their lives. This influx has evoked many fears, prejudices and uncertainty in the receiving countries. Although the majority of citizens in the receiving countries have expressed support for the refugees, have volunteered in different civic and charitable organisations helping the refugees, the media and the most popular influencers encouraged the Lithuanians to support the war victims financially and morally, the minority of the resident population of Lithuania expressed their dissatisfaction, prejudices and fears in the form of online hate speech.

The research shows that the expression of hate speech in www.delfi.lt, www.15min.lt, www.lrytas.lt comments falls into two categories: nominations, based on stereotypes and stereotypical thinking, and prejudice.

The most prevalent nomination on Facebook accounts of all three media sites in 2022 is *the dependent*, derived from the *benefit* semantic field. This nomination evokes negative connotations because it is usually associated with someone who does not want to work but wants to live either on social benefits or donations. The *dependent* nomination is based on the following ideas extracted from comments:

(1) The Ukrainians have excellent conditions in Lithuania, all possible guarantees; they get everything and at once; the Ukrainians get all privileges, benefits and financial support without having necessary experience or knowing the Lithuanian language, their life here is so good, just living and having fun (*15min.lt*).

(2) Everything is only aimed at the Ukrainians – good salaries, free admission to the theatre; now I know where and why my money disappears each and every month; don't bring any possible dependents here; how long can we feed them when we ourselves are beggars; the Ukrainians must start thinking how to live on their own, everything has been free for them so far (*delfi.lt*).

(3) Are you going to feed them all?; they will feed them on the money of taxpayers; they will take away the last euro from their own people, but will feed our brothers and sisters, as they call them; they all have money, but get benefits and support from our pockets; the Ukrainians can easily buy bread for themselves because the war took away their homes, but not money (*lrytas.lt*).

In example (1), the hatred is expressed implicitly, the Lithuanian commentators demonstrate dissatisfaction with the supportive actions of the Lithuanian government. These comments imply that the government does not ensure guarantees, benefits and financial support for their own citizens, but aims at helping refugees. Thus, here *the dependent* nomination is formed on the basis of the classical dichotomy *we* vs *them*/*others*, where *we* stands for the Lithuanians who are deprived of all the benefits *they* get all the benefits that have been taken from the Lithuanians. Therefore, hatred is evoked by drawing a very clear line between an ingroup (*we*) and outgroup (*they*). Delfi.lt readers demonstrate a more intense and explicit hate asking not to *bring any possible dependents* and raising a rhetorical question – *how long can we feed them when we ourselves are beggars?* This question also contains an implied reference to the Lithuanian government as it does nothing for its own citizens; thus, they feel underprivileged beggars in their own country. The majority of comments in example (3) are implicitly addressed to the Lithuanian government in the form of the plural pronoun *they*/*them* which enables Lithuanian society to dissociate from the actions of the government and to express dissatisfaction with them. Here again hatred is expressed via the opposition between the residents of the receiving country and the Ukrainian war refugees. This distinction is expressed in the form of juxtaposition – *they will feed them on the money of taxpayers; they will take away the last euro from their own people, but will feed our brothers and sisters, as they call them. The relative* nomination – *our brothers and sisters* acquires a pejorative connotation in this context because, according to the commentator, only the government perceives the Ukrainians as relatives, but the Lithuanian citizens do not position them as such. The last comment in example (3) is aimed at evoking extremely negative emotions and hatred targeted at the Ukrainian war refugees and emphasizing *the dependent* nomination as the commentator claims that refugees are self-sufficient; nevertheless, they seek all possible benefits and guarantees.

The dependent nomination is intensified by a *sponger* nomination, identified only in a *lrytas.lt* Facebook account:

(4) They are spongers, they want to live at the expense of others; I haven't seen any working [Ukrainian], their women know how to shield themselves with their children in the same way as the gypsies (*lrytas.lt*).

In example (4) hate speech is directly constructed on the pejorative noun *spongers* and its definition. The next comment is aimed at both genders – it becomes clear from the context that the Ukrainian men are granted *sponger* nomination because the commentator claims that she has never seen a working Ukrainian. The Ukrainian female refugees are compared to gypsies who usually have a negative reputation in Lithuania due to the fact that they do not work, have many children and live on social benefits. The response of another commentator supports the *sponger* nomination and at the same time positions the Ukrainians as *the gypsies*:

(5) They are definitely gypsies, they will take everything, even if they don't need it and if it is unattended (*lrytas.lt*).

Example (5) implicitly refers to the Ukrainians as criminals because they might steal items that are left unattended. *The gypsy* nomination is built upon a popular stereotype that all gypsies are thieves. Thus, it emphasizes the negativity of the nomination itself and signifies the expression of hate speech.

Hate speech expressing nationality discrimination is aimed at both genders and manifested by a derogatory nomination, used by Russians when addressing Ukrainians – *khokhol*. This is the second prevalent nomination in all three sources. All identified cases of this nomination demonstrate the replacement of the noun marking nationality, the Ukrainian, with the pejorative noun *khokhol*. This nomination is extremely insulting and sensitive for the Ukrainian war refugees as they have been attacked and occupied by Russia

and now the citizens of the receiving country address them by the Russian slur presumably identifying them as Russians. The latter identification is emphasised in the following examples:

(6) Not Ukrainians but khokhols are fleeing the country, a motherland for khokhols is there where it is more beneficial (*delfi.lt*).

(7) Read history, the wish to communicate with khokhols will disappear (*15min.lt*).

Example (6) draws a distinction between Ukrainians and another group of people living in Ukraine, the *khokhol* nomination here implies the idea that trustworthy Ukrainians stayed to defend their country, but presumably Russians entered the territory of Lithuania and will pose a danger and a threat to our country. Another commentator (Example (7)) demonstrates a subjective approach to history and therefore warns others about some obscure future scenarios. Here a purposefully intentional negative image of war refugees from Ukraine might be treated as propaganda. The Ukrainians are also granted an extremely insulting nomination – *the Russians*, an expression of hate speech when the victim is identified with the criminal and their actions:

(8) People think that they have hosted Ukrainians, but it turns out that these are Russians who lived in Ukraine and who will set a new order as soon as they move to hospitable homes (*delfi.lt*).

Some other cases expressing hate speech on the basis of nationality have also been identified in all three sources:

(9) Ukra, banderovtsy (*15min.lt*).

(10) Katsaps, banderovtsy (*delfi.lt*).

(11) Ukrai, banderovtsy, hahlamondia (*lrytas.lt*).

Two words having the same root -ukr, *Ukra* and *ukrai*, are pejorative abbreviations of the name of the country and its citizens. *Ukra* stands for Ukraine, *ukrai* stands for the Ukrainians. Such abbreviations in the Lithuanian language express a negative and humiliating approach towards the people and country they are used to depict. The nomination *banderovtsy* prevails in all sources, it might have been adopted from the present Russian political and war discourse where it has a pejorative meaning and is targeted at the Ukrainian citizens who speak not Russian, but the Ukrainian language. There are many Russian-speaking residents in Lithuania who came here in the Soviet period, the majority of them did not want to learn the Lithuanian language and still speak Russian, they follow Russian media, get brainwashed and spread the Russian propaganda in terms of hate speech. *Hahlamondia* is a neologism, and it is impossible to find any other cases of its application; therefore, it is limited to one single case and might have been coined by the commentator on the basis of the distorted *khokhol* nomination, thus acquiring negative connotations and expressing a negative attitude towards the Ukrainian war refugees.

The nomination *awful people* aimed at war refugees from Ukraine demonstrates the expression of hate speech in online comments. It was identified as one of the prevalent nominations in the analysed sources:

(12) Just look at what they are doing in Poland, it's awful! Many countries are already crying over them, they come and feel as if they are kings (*15min.lt*).

(13) You can't meet worse and more cunning people than khokhols; banderovtsy are the real bad guys; many people who hosted them, are already complaining; wherever khokhol stands, the grass will not grow (used twice); I saw who they are, I wouldn't call them people, there will be rubbish-heaps and huge disorder everywhere (*lrytas.lt*).

The expression of hate speech in both examples (12)–(13) is formed on the basis of threatening the receiving country and thus forming a negative image of a war refugee with the aim to deny them access to help and asylum. Therefore, the Ukrainian war refugees are granted the *awful people* nomination, derived from the *threat* semantic field, referring to negative experience in other EU countries. The example of Poland is given on purpose because Poland is one of Lithuania's closest neighbours and their experience is extremely

relatable to the citizens of Lithuania. The majority of comments, in example (13), demonstrate personal experience which validates the significance and truthfulness of the presented information. As this is just the beginning of the war and huge numbers of refugees are arriving, many people do not know a lot about the Ukrainians, the commentators aim at threatening them that the refugees are so bad and cunning that they *wouldn't call them people*. The saying *wherever khokhol stands, the grass will not grow* has been used twice by different commentators and has been targeted at depicting the Ukrainians as *awful people* who destroy everything in their way and will leave *rubbish-heaps and huge disorder everywhere*. The Lithuanians are really proud of the greenery and cleanliness in their country; thus, this is a huge discouragement to accept refugees.

Another case of hate speech targeted at the Ukrainian war refugees portrays them as egoistic; therefore, the nomination *egoists* may be formed:

(14) Moldova and Poland have already seen what kind of 'refugees' arrived. They demand five-star hotels, but when they are placed there, they complain that the hotels are too bad; five ukri came and wanted to get a free manicure, but nobody did that for them, so they were really surprised; they want brand new things [don't want to take second-hand ones]; I offered a room in a new country house, but it didn't suit them, it was too bad (*lrytas.lt*).

(15) It's never enough for them, they impudently ask for more; reach out a hand to the Ukrainians and they will expel you from your home they get on the whole world's nerves, not only on the Lithuanians' (*delfi.lt*).

The *egoist* nomination is aimed at forming a negative image of refugees, to depict them as being ungrateful for the support they are offered in Lithuania, ranging from accommodation to non-vital services, such as a free manicure. Furthermore, this nomination should evoke uncertainty and fear because the Lithuanians are threatened that if they "*reach out a hand to the Ukrainians …they will expel you from your home*." This threat is emphasised by a commentator's subjective and non-validated personal experience that such a situation is already prevalent in other countries and the Lithuanians will also soon face it. The *egoist* nomination evokes negative connotations which are formed on the basis of the following lexical markers – *what kind of 'refugees', ukri, it's never enough for them*.

Another nomination within the scope of hate speech targeted at the Ukrainian war refugees is related to various criminal threats. The following comments grant the refugees the nomination of *criminals*:

(16) All the Ukrainians whom I met, had forged Lithuanian or Moldovan passports; they are thieves, pugnacious people and swindlers; how can we know what kind of people have already arrived; honest people did not have enough money to flee, but different disreputable fellows have already warmly settled in Lithuania (*lrytas.lt*).

The image of *criminals* is repulsive in any society and the Lithuanians are no exception. Before the influx of refugees from Ukraine, Lithuania faced an influx of illegal refugees pushed from the side of Belarus as a result of hybrid war. The behaviour of these refugees and their positioning in Lithuanian and foreign media formed the *criminal* image of those refugees and evoked fear. Thus, positioning the Ukrainian war refugees as criminals is highly unbenevolent and might be used deliberately by hostile countries as propaganda or a metaphorical weapon to discourage global societies from receiving refugees from Ukraine. The expression of hate speech in the form of the nomination *criminals* is based on overgeneralisation – *all the Ukrainians whom I met, had forged Lithuanian or Moldovan passports*, direct accusation of them being *thieves, pugnacious people and swindlers* and the implied *criminal* background of refugees because it is not clear *what kind of people have already arrived*. Furthermore, the implied conclusion that the refugees are *criminals* is drawn due to the fact that honest people could not afford to flee.

As it has already been mentioned, hate speech might be expressed via stereotypical nominations and prejudices. Receiving so many refugees has been a new experience for the Lithuanians; thus, they have mixed feelings, a lack of intercultural knowledge leading to uncertainty and different prejudices aimed at the Ukrainian refugees. Moreover, these prejudices have been intensified by online commentators. The

research shows that the most numerous cases of prejudice in all three sources are related to the idea that *the Lithuanian government cares more about the Ukrainians than about their own citizens*.

(17) The Lithuanian government puts all its efforts into helping the Ukrainians, but they don't care about their own country; they don't support their own people as the others; the state cannot ensure dignity for 2.5 milion people, so how will they deal with 40 milion; firstly, they should care about their own people, but they put a burden on their shoulders; the Lithuanians will be left with nothing, but the Ukrainians will live in warmth and respect; they support refugees, but we have to emigrate (*15min.lt*).

(18) They get flats, houses, schools, kindergartens, everything and we, Lithuanians, are screwed; the foreigners are in the first place, but our own people …; the Ukrainian children have been insured by the Lithuanian insurance company, but the majority of us can't afford to insure our children; they get so much material support that the Lithuanians, who pay taxes, have never seen in the history of the country; their own people search trash containers, but for these it's all inclusive: transport, living (*lrytas.lt*).

(19) Why don't they pay their own people such salaries; they don't give anything to their citizens but show priority to khokhols; it's no big deal, the Lithuanians can sweep streets for a minimum wage, the most important thing is to create a good life for the Ukrainians; the Ukrainians are welcomed with open arms and the Lithuanians are left outside (*delfi.lt*).

This case of prejudice is built on counterposition and contrast, all the actions taken in favour of refugees by the Lithuanian government are contrasted with the lives and position of the Lithuanians. This prejudice is aimed at evoking dissatisfaction among the citizens of the receiving country towards their government, refugees, and positioning the Lithuanians as less privileged and worthy than the newcomers. Hate speech is expressed via such expressions as *they put the burden on their shoulders; the Lithuanians will be left with nothing* (ex. (17)); *the foreigners are in the first place; their own people search trash containers* (ex. (18)); *they don't give anything to their citizens; it's no big deal, the Lithuanians can sweep streets for minimum wage; the Lithuanians are left outside* (ex. 19). Here, the Lithuanians are portrayed as deprived citizens who will have to accept the burden of supporting refugees and will be left without any support from the government and, finally, *will be left outside*. The irony in example (19) emphasizes a counterposition between the Lithuanians and Ukrainians because it seems appropriate for the Lithuanians to do low-paid, unskilled work, but the government cares more about the comfort of foreigners than their own people.

Another common prejudice is that the Ukrainians will occupy Lithuania and expel the Lithuanians from their own country:

(20) Soon there will be no place for us; soon you will have to chant Ukraine and not Lithuania, you will also need to learn Ukrainian; I've got an impression that we are already living in Ukraine; our own people will be expelled and the Ukrainians will be received; Lithuania will soon become the state of Ukraine; we all will be made to speak Ukrainian and serve them; half of our lives we were dependent on the Russians, now we will be kissing Ukrainian asses (*delfi.lt*).

(21) Not the Ukrainians will learn our language, but we will learn Ukrainian. If it is true, the Lithuanians have only 10 years left as a nation; soon we will be Ukrainians and the Lithuanian language will be forbidden; Lithuania will become Ukrainlithuania; Lithuania will become a little Ukrainian village; they will say the same as the Russians after the war – we are the hosts here and everybody will speak Ukrainian, one more occupier; Lithuania will become little Ukraine (*lrytas.lt*).

(22) Change the official language to Ukrainian, cede your homes to them and emigrate; there will be no place for the Lithuanians, we will be made to emigrate (*15min.lt*).

The independence of the state and national identity are the most significant and sensitive values for the Lithuanians. Thus, the threat of being occupied again, losing the national language and identity for such a small country, which persistently tries to save and protect these values, forms an extremely negative and repulsive image of the Ukrainian war refugees. The prejudice identified in examples (20)–(22), claiming

that *the Ukrainians will occupy Lithuania and expel the Lithuanians from their own country*, serves as a tool of propaganda aimed to draw a counterposition and evoke conflict between the Lithuanians and refugees. The pejorative expressions *kissing Ukrainian assess*; *Ukrainlithuania* and direct references to occupation – *the state of Ukraine, little Ukraine, Ukrainian village* and being forbidden to speak the mother tongue should repel the Lithuanians from giving help and support to refugees. The negative image of the Ukrainian war refugees is emphasised by comparing them to the Russians – *they will say the same as the Russians after the war – we are the hosts here*.

Prejudices targeted at the Ukrainian refugees demonstrate different threats, e.g., the threat that *the Ukrainians will deprive the Lithuanians of jobs*:

(23) It will be more difficult to find a job and the salaries won't be raised; khokhol will come and will deprive us of work (*15min.lt*).

(24) Some companies fire Lithuanians and employ Ukrainians; there will be no chances to get a job for the Lithuanians; our teachers don't have jobs, but the newcomers are employed (*lrytas.lt*).

(25) There are no vacancies for Lithuanians, the most important thing is to employ the Ukrainians; employ your own people, but not refugees; soon the Lithuanians will have to emigrate as only the Ukrainians will be working here (*delfi.lt*).

Although, according to statistics, there are many vacancies on the Lithuanian labour market, the negative image of the Ukrainian war refugees is based on the prejudice that they are and will be more attractive for employers than the Lithuanians. Example (23) implies that the Ukrainians are cheaper employees than the Lithuanians; thus, *the salaries won't be raised*. Example (24) implies the idea that refugees are more attractive employees because their employers get subsidies from the Lithuanian government; therefore, *some companies fire Lithuanians and employ Ukrainians*. Example (25) demonstrates a direct imperative for the government – *employ your own people, but not the refugees* and negative future prospects that the citizens will soon have to emigrate, but the Ukrainians will settle here, thus again referring to the Ukrainian occupation of Lithuania.

Overall, it might be stated that online hate speech expressed via stereotypical nominations and prejudices in the first year of the war is aimed at forming a negative and even harmful image of the Ukrainian war refugees and discouraging people from helping or receiving refugees. Thus, the expression of hate speech might be regarded as a tool of propaganda in hybrid war.

5 Conclusion

In academic research, the topic of hate speech tackles the main challenge – looking for measures and ways to eliminate, or at least reduce, its spread, especially on social media where haters can easily mask their identities and circulate their discriminatory attitudes without fear of any punitive measures. Hate speech towards war refugees is a serious issue and may take various expression patterns and formats even if the general attitude in a receiving country is compassionate and inclusive.

Hate speech in Lithuanian online news comments on the Ukrainian war refugees at the start of the war in 2022 is expressed via stereotypical nominations and prejudice. There were numerous cases of nominations and prejudice identified in 2022 because at the beginning of the war people faced an influx of Ukrainian refugees that they were not ready for; moreover, the majority of the receiving society lacked intercultural competence, which led to different fears, negative stereotypes, preconceptions and prejudice related to the Ukrainian war refugees.

Stereotypical nominations in 2022 were derived from two semantic fields – *benefit* and *threat*. The most prevalent stereotypical *benefit* nominations were *the dependent*, *sponger*, *egoists*; *threat* nominations included *gypsies*, *criminals*, *awful people*. Negative nominations formed on the basis of nationality were also identified: *kokhol*, *ukra*, *banderovtsy*, *hahlamondia* and even identification with the occupier – *the Russians*.

In 2022, the Ukrainian war refugees were negatively positioned on the basis of prejudice that the Lithuanian government cares more about the Ukrainians than about their own citizens, the Ukrainians

will occupy Lithuania and expel the Lithuanians from their own country, the Ukrainians will deprive the Lithuanians of jobs.

The role of hate speech, expressed through stereotypical nominations and prejudices, has been to form a negative image of refugees in order to evoke various fears, negative feelings and unwillingness to help or accept them. Hate speech has also been aimed at polarisation and the exclusion of the Ukrainian war refugees. Furthermore, the majority of hate comments in the first months of the war were posted by commentators having Russian names and surnames, frequently using incorrect and non-normative Lithuanian. Thus, the conclusion could be drawn that hate speech in Lithuanian online news comments on the Ukrainian war refugees is used as a Russian propaganda tool in Russia's hybrid war against the EU. The validity of this conclusion is supported by a press release issued in 2023 by the Lithuanian Armed Forces whose investigation results show that Russia's hostile information campaign towards Lithuania was the most aggressive in 2022, as it was mainly targeted at discrediting the Ukrainian war refugees and undermining the confidence of Lithuanian citizens in the government and its policies (Lithuanian Armed Forces, 2023).

Further research will focus on the data collected during the 2023–2024 period with the intention to compare its evolving dynamics with the findings of the current study. This and forthcoming studies may provide a deeper understanding of how hate speech trends shift over time.

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