

Joint Master in Global Economic Governance and Public Affairs

*Sentiment analysis of Flemish
media on the Syrian and
Ukrainian refugee and asylum
crisis: explaining double
standards in integration policy*

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Thesis pitch

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26 June, 2025 Michelle Watteel

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Abstract

Questions have been raised in the research landscape about the presence of a double standard in migration when comparing narratives and policy between the 2015 and 2022 refugee and asylum seeker crisis in Europe. This thesis aims to contribute to this research topic through the investigation of Flanders' (Belgium) media sentiment and integration policy in both time periods, being the destination country of a sizeable number of refugees and asylum seekers in both crises. To conclude on a possible double standard, a quantitative sentiment analysis of Flemish newspaper articles and an analysis of integration policy and legislation has been conducted. The sentiment analysis shows that news reporting about Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in 2015 was significantly more negative than news reporting about Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers in 2022. The Flemish government published a document outlining special measures taken to facilitate the integration policy for Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers, containing 17 special integration measures such as the development of a translation application and the elimination of bureaucratic procedures while accessing social welfare agencies. Integration policy in 2015-2016 focused on knowledge of the Dutch language, anti-radicalization and anti-discrimination. Legislative obligations are, however, more stringent in 2022 than they were in 2015, introducing an integration contract that obligates the participation in several integration initiatives. Flanders thus shows a double standard in news reporting, with reporting being more negative in 2015 but no causality or correlation with the introduced integration policies, can be proven.

Introduction

Europe has experienced two major refugee waves in the last decade: the 2015 Syrian refugee wave and the Ukrainian refugee wave in early 2022 following Russia's full-scale invasion. As European countries have dealt with these refugee waves, debates were sparked on whether European countries have treated these two groups of refugees and asylum seekers differently in either their policies and/or their media narratives, calling it a double standard (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024; Esposito, 2022; Ibañez Sales, 2023).

National politics play a crucial role in shaping refugees' and asylum seekers' experiences in EU member states. Since public sentiment significantly influences those political decisions, it is essential to examine this sentiment (Ajana et al., 2024). The country-level sentiment towards these vulnerable groups of refugees and asylum seekers can be an important indicator for possible double standards and its policies. Even though general migration policy is created at the EU-level, member states are responsible for the implementation of that legislation, and more importantly, the integration of refugees into their societies.

This thesis will thus examine media sentiment towards the two major refugee and asylum crises and the integration policy, in 2015 and 2022, to answer the following research questions:

RQ: *“In what way has the sentiment of Flemish written media towards Syrian and Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers, differed?”*

SQ1: *“What is the sentiment of Flemish media towards Syrian refugees and asylum seekers?”*

SQ2: *“What is the sentiment of Flemish media towards Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers?”*

SQ3 *“In what way does written media-sentiment act as an indicator for integration policy in Flanders?”*

The geographical region that will be analyzed in this research, is Flanders, Belgium, as a case study for the media sentiment comparison of the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crisis. Belgium has historically had a lot of asylum applications relative to the size of the

country, to the extent where it is compared to France and Italy (Eurostat, 2024). Migration and integration is thus an integral policy area for the country, and it is influenced by public-, media- and political sentiment. The region of Flanders, instead of the whole of Belgium, is selected because its primary language is the native language of the author, eliminating the need for computer translation. The sentiment of selected written media will be researched through a sentiment and policy analysis with the aim to explore whether there is a difference in the sentiment and integration policy of Flanders regarding both refugee crises, and if so, how we can explain it.

This research will contribute to the existing landscape that has analyzed media sentiment and double standards in other European nations, providing a sound basis to investigate correlation and/or causality between narrative, framing or sentiment and integration policy.

Literature review

The aim of this literature review is to look at researched media sentiment and policy-differences that might be present when comparing the 2015 Syrian refugee- and asylum wave and the 2022 Ukrainian refugee- and asylum wave. First, key concepts will be defined, such as framing and the role of media in public sentiment. Once that theoretical base is established, the double standard that is mentioned in literature between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers is analyzed, looking at the media framing that has been researched in other countries. Which factors could have influenced the sentiment or framing that is described in literature, are summarized. Thirdly, the status quo on research of Belgian and Flemish media sentiment on refugees will be assessed. Lastly the research gap that this thesis aims to contribute to will be explicitly laid out.

Theoretical framework

The topic of media framing and its role in public sentiment and policy requires some theoretical concepts to be defined for the purpose of this research. This section lays out the concepts of framing, sentiment analysis and the term usage for refugees and asylum seekers that will be adhered in the remainder of this thesis.

Public opinion and public policy can be heavily influenced by the media that the public consumes. The media finds itself in a position to relay information to the public while creating diverse narratives in favor of or against the relayed situation. It is even argued that “all knowledge about political matters is inherently and unavoidably mediated”. (Ajana et al., 2024)

Hooghe and De Vroome (2015) argue that this influence of the media on public opinion is especially important when the subject is ethnic minorities. The way immigration matters are represented in the media can be an important factor in social bias (Hooghe & De Vroome, 2015).

The way that media influences opinions is through framing. Framing is the emphasizing or holding back of aspects of the real situation in, for example, news media (Ajana et al., 2024; d’Haenens et al., 2019). In order to investigate the influence of media on public opinion or policy, a sentiment analysis can be conducted to show the emotional attitude towards a specific topic (Caporusso et al., 2024). A sentiment analysis is a methodology

that aims to give an insight into public opinion through the automated gathering and analyzing of data (Wankhade et al., 2022). In this research a sentiment analysis will be conducted on online news articles, and in this literature review, literature on previously conducted sentiment analyses will be considered.

An equally as important theoretical concept is the naming of the subject groups that this thesis considers. Refugee, asylum seeker, migrant and immigrant are all terms that are, often interchangeably, used to refer to groups of people relocating abroad for whichever reason (Jacques, 2022). In this thesis, the naming convention of Amnesty International will be applied. This means that the focus groups, namely the Syrian and Ukrainian groups will be referred to as refugees and asylum seekers. A refugee is ‘a person who has fled their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution there’ (“Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants,” n.d.). An asylum seeker is defined as ‘a person who has left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but who hasn’t yet been legally recognized as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim’ (“Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants,” n.d.). Since it is not possible to manually assess which group each news article is referring to, the combination of these two terms will be adhered to.

Double standards according to literature

After establishing the influence that media sentiment has on public opinion and public policy, a closer look into the existing research about migrant and refugee sentiment is provided.

Europe dealt with two major refugee and asylum crises in the past decade: the Syrian refugee and asylum seeker wave in 2015 and the Ukrainian refugee and asylum seeker wave in 2022. While both of these refugee and asylum seeker waves were set into motion because of war endangering citizens, Europe’s (policy) responses vary, according to multiple sources, calling the discrepancy “double standards” (Esposito, 2022; Ibañez Sales, 2023; Sosa Popovic & Welfens, 2024).

One of the most prominent examples of the manifestation of double standards in migration policy, is the fact that the EU’s Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) was

implemented for the first time during the Ukrainian refugee and asylum seeker crisis, while it was discussed but not activated in 2015 (De Coninck, 2023; Drewski & Gerhards, 2024; Esposito, 2022; Ibañez Sales, 2023). The activation of this TPD consists of the following measures for eligible asylum seekers: immediate and automatic access to the EU, immediate and automatic granting of refugee status without needing to go through an asylum procedure, quick access to essential services and a work permit (De Coninck, 2023). The lack of this implementation during 2015 meant that Syrian refugees had to wait six months to over a year or longer, for asylum approval in every EU country (Ibañez Sales, 2023). Subsidiary protection was eventually granted to Syrian asylum seekers, allowing residence- and work permits but not family-reunification (Ibañez Sales, 2023). Additionally, Syrians had no choice in their destination country, whereas Ukrainians were able to settle in the EU-country of their choice (Ibañez Sales, 2023).

This double standard was researched not only on a policy level, but also on the media coverage of the two groups (Caporusso et al., 2024; Garcia, 2021; Ibañez Sales, 2023; Kiyak, De Coninck, et al., 2024; Kiyak, Mertens, et al., 2024). The following section will delve into a synthesis of the sentiment that materialized in existing literature.

Media sentiment on Syrian refugees and asylum seekers

To comment on the difference in sentiment regarding both refugee groups, it is essential to investigate the existing research on sentiment towards each group at the time of the crisis. This section considers literature regarding sentiment research about Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, no matter the country this sentiment is portrayed in. Sentiment towards Syrian refugees and asylum seekers has been researched in multiple countries, including the UK, Slovenia, Poland, Germany. One study looks at interventions produced in the European Parliament.

In the UK, the sentiment of different newspaper outlets were researched by Ajana et al. (2024). They focus on the framing used by The Sun and show that it was mainly focused on the economic costs of the integration of Syrian refugees and the national security of the UK, which is not unique, as Slovenian media sentiment also reflects this sentiment of Syrian refugees as a threat to European security (Ajana et al., 2024; Drewski & Gerhards, 2024).

In Poland, political sentiment was analyzed by Drewski & Gerhards (2024). Keeping in mind that during 2015 the Polish ruling parties were PiS and PO. Their sentiment was predominantly negative, focusing on sovereignty, the threat to the Polish Christian identity and security risks of Muslim refugees (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024). German political sentiment under CDU and SPD (The Left and The Greens were in the opposition) was found to be more positive, the dominant sentiment being one of humanitarianism, international law and human rights (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024). The tolerance of the German people towards Syrian refugees was also prominently underlined (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024).

Sentiment research does not stop at the national level: the sentiment or discourse towards both refugee groups has manifested in official interventions of Members of the European Parliament and other EU officials (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024). Proceedings during the 2015 crisis were analyzed and show that Syrian refugees were often presented as a threat to the EU by the reference to a violent and culturally distant population (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024). Depersonalization through painting the refugees as an anonymous mass and the use of the term ‘illegal migration’ was prominent (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024). It could be concluded that, in general, the sentiment towards Syrians reflected stigmatization, dehumanization and a focus on safety and control aspects (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024).

Media sentiment on Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers

Following the sentiment research about the Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, this section considers literature regarding sentiment research about Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, Slovenia, Poland and Germany.

Ukrainian asylum seekers and refugees generally brought a discourse of a common, European, ‘we’-mentality (Sosa Popovic & Welfens, 2024). In the research of Ajana et al. (2024) on the sentiment towards different refugee groups, Ukrainian refugees were accompanied by a humanitarian and moral media frame in BBC reporting. Even The Sun articles took on a humanitarian aspect while also underlining the threat of Putin for Ukraine and Europe as a whole. The urgency to protect Ukrainian refugees was explicitly mentioned. (Ajana et al., 2024)

Unlike other research, studies on Slovenian media sentiment analysis show that the concept of *migrant* was closer to moral disgust during the Ukrainian refugee-period than during the Syrian refugee-period. This might have been caused by the observed increase in negative discourse about migration since the Syrian refugee and asylum seeker-period. However, during the Ukrainian refugee and asylum seeker-period, there was less moral disgust associated with Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers than there was, at the same time, with non-Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers. (Caporusso et al., 2024)

There thus seems to be a difference in sentiment towards refugees and asylum seekers in general between the two timeframes, which does not directly correlate with the sentiment towards the particular refugee groups within their own timeframe. However, during the height of the Ukrainian refugee wave, the concept of migrant was associated with words like human and applicant or child and student, indicating a more human framing of this group. (Caporusso et al., 2024)

Both in Poland and Germany, the sentiment of parliament was predominantly positive towards Ukrainians. The German government saw a moral duty in the supporting of Ukraine, and refugees were seen as innocent victims. Security-related framing was not used for Ukrainian refugees by Germany. Poland drew a clear line between the free world and Russia, where the invasion was seen as a threat to national sovereignty. The country shows a stark contrast with 2015 when talking about refugees and asylum seekers in 2022. Ukrainian refugees were framed as “friends, neighbors, brothers”. Also here the frame of Ukrainian refugees as a threat to security or economic burden was absent. (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024)

Mir et al. (2023) analyzed Twitter posts, showing that the sentiment towards Ukrainian refugees was predominantly supportive. Tweets were mainly categorized as follows: fundraising and donations, call for help for Ukraine, expressing support for Ukraine and evincing emotions (Mir et al., 2023).

Comparison of sentiment and influential factors

Concluding on the existing research, sentiment does seem to differ between the Syrian and Ukrainian crisis, showing more positive associations for the Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers than for the Syrian refugees and asylum seekers. This section investigates the causal factors that are presented in literature that might explain the discrepancy in sentiment.

The analysis of sentiment towards Syrian and Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers shows a seemingly predominant distinction: a security framing versus a humanitarian framing. Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers were predominantly exposed to humanitarian and moral obligation framing, relying on a common European identity. Syrian refugees and asylum seekers were framed more often in a security discourse, mentioning threats to security and economic burden.

Firstly, cultural proximity is raised by multiple researchers as a causal factor for sentiment difference. Ukrainian refugees are perceived as culturally alike to Europeans by holding shared values and backgrounds (Ajana et al., 2024; Caporusso et al., 2024; De Coninck, 2023; Drewski & Gerhards, 2024; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024). Tied to that is religion. Ukraine's religious composition is more similar to that of other European countries', unlike the religious composition of Muslim refugees (De Coninck, 2023). An increase in Islamophobia and xenophobia in the recent decade could be an augmenting factor (De Coninck, 2023). Research shows that the European public prefers migrants with the same ethnicity over migrants from another ethnicity (De Coninck, 2023). A study of the European Parliament's debates, shows that Islam was more mentioned used during interventions about Syrian refugees than the Christian religion during interventions about Ukrainian refugees (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024).

Another frequent causal factor for sentiment difference is the security threat framing that can be used when communicating about refugees. They can be presented in two ways: either as a threat to security or as the threatened subject in need of rescue. Syrians were portrayed as a threat to security both in national media and in the European Parliament (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024). Scholars find that Germany is an exception to this, as the country installed the open-door policy in 2015 allowing

refugees to freely enter the country (Drewski & Gerhards, 2024; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024)

An influencing element related to security is the context of the conflict that generates the refugees. While media coverage and thus the conflict in Ukraine was more clear because of Russia being the obvious aggressor, the Syrian civil war was much more complex, causing a less consistent media-image (Ajana et al., 2024; Caporusso et al., 2024). Russia was quickly promoted to be a common enemy for many European countries, also because of the geographical proximity (Ajana et al., 2024; De Coninck, 2023; Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024; Mir et al., 2023).

There are other factors raised in literature that are less common, like the collective conscience Europe has with Ukraine, as raised by (De Coninck, 2023). Ukraine being present in global events like sports and music, created a smaller distance with Europe and even the US, being the collective conscience (De Coninck, 2023). Additionally, analysis of the European Parliament's debates shows that gender-based victimization had an influence on the sentiment towards Ukrainian refugees (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024). In debates taking place, Ukrainian women and children were framed as vulnerable groups, which may have lead to a more lenient attitude towards Ukrainian refugees (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024).

Thus, various factors are raised in the literature that might explain the difference in sentiment and/or treatment of refugees. The most prominent being the cultural proximity of the refugee group and the security threat that is perceived in the receiving countries.

The case of Belgium

The amount of research done on sentiment towards Syrian or Ukrainian refugees in Flanders, Belgium, is limited. Despite the limited availability, the available knowledge about Belgian media sentiment will be set out in this section.

In d'Haenens et al. (2019), multiple authors brought forward chapters on the portrayal and news sentiment in Belgium of refugees from a period ranging between 2005 and 2018. Important facts are the following: in 2005, Belgian newspapers frame refugees most often as a victim or intruder. In 2016, a negative bias is observed towards refugees in

Flemish broadcasted news. In 2017, a negative discourse surrounding refugees was observed by De Cleen e.a., in a publication of Barlai et al. (2017).

An overarching analysis on Flemish newspapers over the period of 2015 until 2017 concludes on the most common themes in articles about refugees (of undisclosed nationality), the top three mentioned themes being: political responses and policy, aid supplies and post arrival integration. The three least mentioned themes are: health risk, cultural threat and search and rescue. It is important to note that this research was carried out as a comparative analysis with a Swedish newspaper, and in this comparison Belgium scores higher (the themes thus being more common) than Sweden in all mentioned themes except political response and policy. (d'Haenens et al., 2019)

De Coninck and Joris (2021) researched threat perceptions of refugees in Flanders from September-October 2017 until June-July 2018, a period of declining refugee numbers post 2015. The nationality of the refugees is undisclosed. Results show that the fear of crime (safety threat) perception has increased in Flanders, possibly because of an increase of transit migrants dangerously stowing themselves on vehicles and news media focusing on these incidents. (De Coninck & Joris, 2021)

In Hooghe and De Vroome (2015), an interesting finding is that the Flemish often overestimate the amount of non-nationals in their local communities and those who do that, perceive immigrants to be more hostile. However, living in more ethnically diverse communities does not implicate a more negative attitude towards immigrants. (Hooghe & De Vroome, 2015)

There is one thesis present, at the moment of writing this thesis, in the literature landscape that was considered for this thesis. Vermeersch (2024) performed a discourse analysis of Flemish newspapers during both the 2015 refugee crisis and the 2022 Ukrainian refugee crisis. The work concludes on an increase in recognition of the need for expertise to tackle refugee crises and a switch from political debates to a more practical debate since 2015. Language use and its implication seemed to have increased since 2015 as well.

The status quo in Flemish research is thus limited, with little distinction between targeted refugee groups. This literature provides a base for the research gap this thesis wishes to

contribute to, being an investigation of a possible double standard in Flemish news media sentiment.

Literature review: conclusion

The field of double standards in migration has been touched upon by scholars. Research was already conducted and published, investigating the presence of double standards in migration (policy) and media sentiment. The overall tendency in the reviewed literature shows that there seems to be a difference in media sentiment regarding Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in different parts of Europe. It is likely to be caused by deeply influential factors such as cultural proximity and perceived security of the refugees' and asylum seekers' cultural and geographical heritage.

Taking it a step further, there is also affirmation that this sentiment influences regional policy or stances taken by countries in international migration politics.

For the region researched in this thesis, Flanders, Belgium, there is only one existing thesis within the search-pool of this research, investigating media sentiment on the two migration groups. Other secondary literature covering this topic and target group, to the best of our knowledge, does not exist. Thus, this will be the research gap defined for this research. It will contribute to the current theoretical foundation on media sentiment and its possible connection with integration policy, providing more evidence in the case of a double standard.

Methodology

The necessary background was provided through the literature review, in which secondary literature, mostly academic journal articles and previously conducted theses are considered because of the limited amount of research available that focuses on the geographical region of Flanders.

Please refer to the main research question (RQ) and subquestions (SQ) mentioned below. The main research question as well as SQ1 and SQ2 will be answered by conducting a sentiment analysis. A sentiment analysis is a form of data-analysis that scrapes written media from the web, over which a dictionary is run to discover the most prevalent sentiment appearing in the written text. This analysis will be carried out using the RStudio and Python programming language and software.

SQ3 will be answered by the means of a study of a limited amount of policy documents. One policy note will be analyzed for each time period (2015 and 2022) and the Flemish legislation on integration will be analyzed for each period as well. This analysis is purely an objective summary of the measures taken and the policy that was, or is, in place.

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SQ1: *“What is the sentiment of Flemish media towards Syrian refugees and asylum seekers?”*

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SQ3 *“In what way does written media-sentiment act as an indicator for integration policy in Flanders?”*

Sentiment analysis: data collection and preprocessing

The newsmedia of Flanders’ most popular newspapers (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Het Nieuwsblad* and *De Standaard*, which were selected according to the region’s official statistics (Mediaconcentratie Vlaanderen, 2016)) were scraped from the database Belgapress. In Belgapress all articles of Belgian newspapers are uploaded daily, with the possibility to go back in time until the mid-90’s. The decision to select newspapers by

their popularity thus ensures that the most influential articles are taken into consideration. Both web- and physical articles are part of the selected sample.

For both samples (Syrian and Ukrainian), a search query is applied in Belgapress, including search terms like “Syrië” (Syria), “Oekraïne” (Ukraine), “Vluchtelingen” (Refugees), “Migranten” (migrants) and variations. Next, the time period is selected: January 2015 – December 2015 for the Syrian sample and February 2022 – December 2022 for the Ukrainian sample. This yields 1,216 results for the Syrian sample and 6,162 results for the Ukrainian sample.

To extract the content of each article together with relevant metadata (news brand, date of publication, title...), a scraping algorithm was written in Python. This webscraper applied all previously mentioned filters and provided the raw data for each sample in a CSV format. In order to perform an analysis on these news articles, some preprocessing was required. Unwanted HTML text and other foreign symbols were removed from the text and duplicate articles were removed (61 duplicates for the Syrian sample and 346 duplicates for the Ukrainian sample). Articles were then split into sentences. Usually, sentiment analysis is performed on tokenized text, meaning that each word is evaluated for its sentiment and an aggregate measure is used as the sentiment for the text. However, this is not the preferred approach for news articles, as negation is commonly used (e.g. the words “not” and “nice” of a passage similar to “this is not nice”, would be evaluated separately and thus would lead to a neutral sentiment). In order to control for this negation and capture greater overall sentiment, all articles were split and evaluated in full sentences. Each sentence then is evaluated for its sentiment, and this score was aggregated into a weighted mean sentiment score for each article. More details about this process will be discussed in the following subsection.

Sentiment analysis: technical details

A sentiment analysis requires a software package that evaluates each sentence for its sentiment. The package used in this research is RobBERT in Python. RobBERT is a finetuned version of RobBERTa (the English version) by Belgian research group DTAI-KU Leuven. It is important to use an appropriate package for the data at hand, as language use in e.g. Tweets differs from language in news articles. RobBERT v2 (used in this

research) is trained on book reviews and the base model is trained on Wikipedia corpora (pretraining). (Pieter Delobelle, n.d.)

Different sentiment analysis tools were evaluated, but the pool was small as Dutch is not a frequently used language in sentiment analysis. DutchSentimentAnalysis for RStudio was one of the only contenders, but it has not been updated for more than six years and thus was not functional anymore. Remaining packages were only available in Python, and the decision was made to use RobBERT instead of Pattern.nl. This decision was made based on the expertise of the author, based on the fact that RobBERT uses an NLP approach instead of a lexicon-based approach like Pattern.nl does, which makes for an intelligent algorithm to classify sentiment.

The sentiment scores that were obtained with RobBERT were sentence based, and gave either a ‘negative’ or ‘positive’ label to each sentence, with a confidence score attached to it. Since we will aggregate these sentiment scores to an article-based score, the author decided to weight each sentiment score so that low-confidence scores are not equally important to the end-result as high-confidence score sentiments.

All code (general scraper, sentiment analysis, pre- and postprocessing) can be provided on request, however, note that the account and password used to access Belgapress were anonymized, and is thus needed to replicate this analysis. The used code in Python and R was written by the author of this thesis, with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence to improve efficiency of the workflow and to help solve errors.

Further analysis, policy documents and integration legislation

After obtaining sentiment scores for each sample, further analysis of policy documents and legislation was conducted.

As mentioned in existing research and previous theses, the use of language regarding groups of refugees might influence public perception of the group (Giancaspro & Lucenti, 2024; Jacques, 2022; Vermeersch, 2024). That is why the frequency of terms such as ‘migrant’, ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’ was analyzed as well. The connotation that these terms carry, and is thus adhered in this thesis, is based on the RASIM framework by Jacques (2022).

Following the conclusion reached from the sentiment analysis, a focused policy analysis was carried out in order to identify a possible connection with the outcome of the sentiment analysis. This policy analysis was carried out on Flemish policy because of the regional effects. It provides insight into the political discourse present in the Flemish Parliament at that time. Two policy notes covering integration measures were analyzed, one for each sample group. Lastly, the Flemish legislation that covers integration obligations was analyzed in order to compare the true rights and obligations a refugee or asylum seeker has or had during the relevant time.

Results

The results section is structured as follows: firstly, the most important results of the sentiment analysis are laid out for each sample, meaning that both the news sentiment of the Syrian and Ukrainian target group is covered separately. This is followed by a comparative analysis which compares the most important quantitative results across the samples. Thirdly, the analysis of two policy documents is provided, outlining integration measures that were taken in each time period. Lastly, an overview of the relevant integration legislation published by the Flemish government is given. Please note that all tables and figures shown, are produced by the author of this thesis.

Media sentiment: Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in 2015

The sample of news articles regarding Syrian refugees in 2015, contains 1165 articles. Please refer to Table 1 for an overview of the number of articles that are in the sample per newsbrand.

When we consider the frequency of articles over time, there is a noticeable peak in the months of August until October, with the number of articles peaking at 336 articles in September of 2015. Please refer to Figure 1 for a full timeseries of the number of articles. The overall distribution of articles per news brand have been somewhat consistent, for each month.

News brand	Amount of articles in sample
Het Laatste Nieuws	459
De Standaard	396
Het Nieuwsblad	310

Table 1: sampled articles per newsbrand

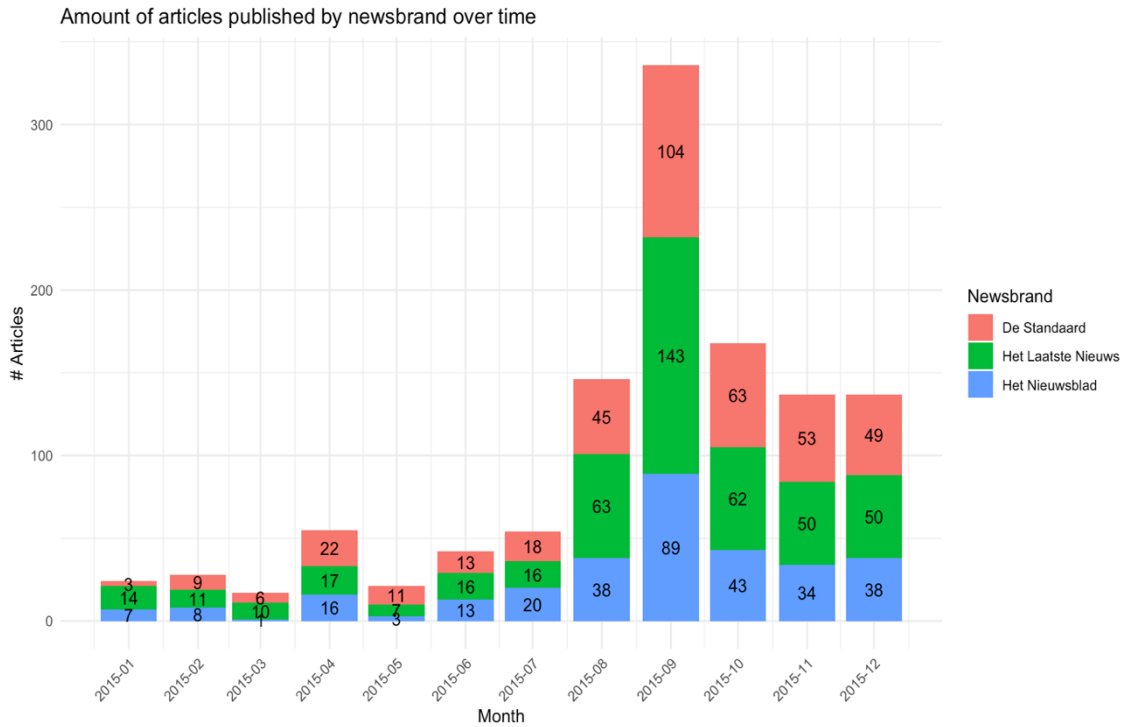


Figure 1: monthly articles overview, Syrian sample

The RobBERT algorithm provided sentiment scores on a sentence-level. After the weighting and aggregation of these scores, a mean sentiment score per article was derived. This score is represented by a number in the range $[-1,1]$. Please refer to Table 2 for a visual representation of the central tendency measures. Note that the median and mean sentiment is negative, and 75% of all observations have a sentiment score of lower than 0.136. The remaining 25% of observations have a sentiment score that is higher than 0.136. The spread between the lowest and highest sentiment is substantial. As quartile 2 and quartile 3 lay around 0, most articles have been categorized as neutral.

# Articles	Minimum sentiment	Q1 sentiment	Median sentiment	Mean sentiment	Q3 sentiment	Max sentiment
1165	-0.994	-0.238	-0.056	-0.05	0.136	0.98

Table 2: central tendency measures Syrian sample

When delving deeper into the distribution of the sentiment scores over the news brands that were observed (Table 3), one can notice some differences between the brands. *Het Nieuwsblad* generally has a more neutral and positive leaning sentiment score, with 75% of the observations scoring below 0.213, and the mean sentiment being almost neutral,

leaning towards positive, at 0.007. Compared to *Het Laatste Nieuws*, which scores a five times lower mean sentiment score, and *De Standaard* scoring a 15 times lower mean sentiment. That last one's maximum sentiment is by far the lowest, at 0.554 compared to the overall maximum being 0.98.

News brand	#Articles	Minimum sentiment	Q1 sentiment	Median sentiment	Mean sentiment	Q3 sentiment	Max sentiment
Het Nieuwsblad	310	-0.994	-0.183	0.019	0.007	0.213	0.921
Het Laatste Nieuws	459	-0.921	-0.238	-0.042	-0.041	0.164	0.980
De Standaard	396	0.976	-0.254	-0.103	-0.105	0.046	0.554

Table 3: central tendency measures by news brand, Syrian sample

It is important to know that sentiment scores can be influenced by many factors and thus might be influenced by the presence of certain negative words in a neutral or positive context and vice-versa. That is why the term frequencies are an interesting dimension to consider when talking about the overall sentiment that news articles portray. Firstly, different terms (such as migrant or refugee) to refer to the focus group of this research were checked for frequency (Figure 2). It appears that *De Standaard*, scoring lowest on sentiment scores, uses the terms migrant(s) and immigrant more than the other news brands. *Het Laatste Nieuws* uses the terms asylumseeker(s) and refugee(s) most out of all news brands. The obvious most prevalent term used in the observed articles is refugee(s). *Het Laatste Nieuws* uses the most terms overall, but this can be caused by the fact that

they have the highest amount of published articles in the sample. What is noticeable on a macro-level, is that the plurals are used significantly more than singular terms.

To understand in which sense the different terms were used, a bi-gram analysis was performed. This analysis looks at the words preceding and following the selected keywords (refugee, asylum seeker, migrant, immigrant). The words that followed our keywords were deemed insignificant by the researcher as they were mostly ‘who’, ‘which’, ‘and’... The precedents yielded more interesting results. Noticeable bi-grams are: asylum seeker(s) being preceded by Syrian (22 times), immigrants being preceded by illegal (4 times), migrant being preceded by illegal (2 times) or economic (2 times) or Syrian (3 times), migrants being preceded by economic (30 times) and refugee(s) being preceded by Syrian (40 + 298 times for plural).

The last step in the sentiment analysis shows which words were used most often in the sampled articles (Table 4). This selection of words was obtained after filtering out filler words through a pre-existing stopword dictionary, which removes all non-descriptive words from a text.

The conclusions drawn from this sentiment analysis will be discussed in the comparative analysis.

Top	Word	N
1	Vluchtelingen / Refugees	3566
2	Mensen / People	2185
3	Zegt / Says	1581
4	Jaar / Year	1528
5	Syrië / Syria	1518
6	Europa / Europe	1316
7	Land / Country	1225
8	Asielzoekers / Asylum seekers	1104
9	Komen / Coming, come	1028
10	Kinderen / Children	1004

11	Syrische / Syrian	997
12	Europese / European	842
	(Gaat) / Goes	797
	(Gaan) / Go	793
	(Staat) / Stand, State	702
13	Goed / Good	667
14	Leven / Life	656
15	Turkije / Turkiye	644
16	Landen / Countries	642
17	België / Belgium	641
18	Krijgen / Get, receive	617
19	Één / One	596
20	Grote / Big	579

Table 4: 20 most used words, Syrian sample

Keyword	Count
Vluchteling(en) / Refugee(s)	3,900
Asielzoeker(s) / Asylum seeker(s)	1,180
Migrant(en) / Migrant(s)	549
Immigrant(en) / Immigrant(s)	31

Table 5: term frequency related to sample group, Syrian sample

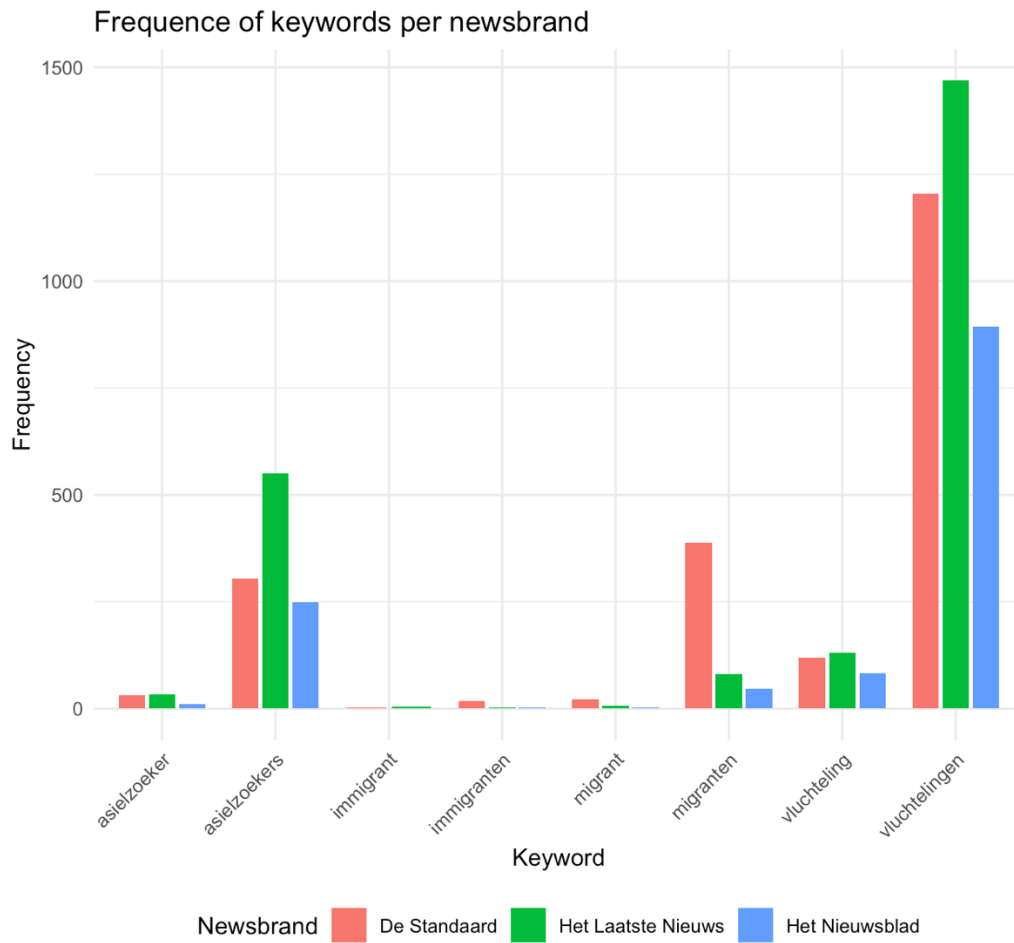


Figure 2: term frequency related to sample group, Syrian sample

Media sentiment: Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers in 2022

The Ukraine sample, containing all relevant articles between February 2022 and December 2022, consists of 5,803 news articles. *Het Nieuwsblad* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* count for the greatest number of articles, whereas *De Standaard* put out approximately 35% of the amount the other news brands produced. Please refer to Table 6 for exact numbers.

Newsbrand	#Articles
Het Nieuwsblad	2499
Het Laatste Nieuws	2408
De Standaard	896

Table 6: amount of articles in sample by newsbrand, Ukrainian sample

The highest number of articles was published in March of 2022, which checks out with the timeline of the start of the war in Ukraine. This boom died down quickly the month after, with less than half of the amount being published. The publications have dropped to a stagnant amount of around 200 articles per month after June of 2022

Delving deeper into the sentiment scores that were attributed to the articles (Table 7), we see an overall tendency of positive numbers. 50% of the sampled articles have a sentiment score of above 0.212. 25% of the articles has a sentiment score lower than -0.032. Sentiment scores range from [-1;1], indicating that the central tendency measures point towards a neutral, slightly positive sentiment with 25% of articles scoring a sentiment score of above or on 0.453.

When looking at the central tendency measures attributed to each news brand (Table 8), one can notice that sentiment is significantly more positive for the news brands with the larger sample sizes, *Het Nieuwsblad* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*. *De Standaard*'s central tendency measures score lower than both other news brands, with a difference in median sentiment score of 0.264 compared to *Het Nieuwsblad*, which has the highest scoring median sentiment. *De Standaard*'s sentiment scores point towards a neutral sentiment. On the other hand, *Het Nieuwsblad* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*' scores, point towards a

neutral positive-leaning sentiment score. Please note however, that the sample size of *De Standaard* is significantly smaller than the other two news brands.

# Articles	Minimum sentiment	Q1 Sentiment	Median sentiment	Mean sentiment	Q3 sentiment	Maximum sentiment
5803	-0.998	-0.032	0.212	0.208	0.453	0.999

Table 7: central tendency measures, Ukrainian sample

Newsbrand	# Articles	Minimum sentiment	Q1 sentiment	Median sentiment	Mean sentiment	Q3 sentiment	Maximum sentiment
Het Nieuwsblad	2499	-0.998	0.036	0.282	0.263	0.489	0.999
Het Laatste Nieuws	2408	-0.996	-0.029	0.227	0.214	0.471	0.998
De Standaard	896	-0.994	-0.152	0.018	0.037	0.195	0.986

Table 8: central tendency measures by newsbrand, Ukrainian sample

As previously mentioned, relying on solely sentiment scores is only one aspect by which one can draw conclusions on the narrative that was put out by the different news brands. That is why the keywords, related to the sample group such as refugee or migrant, are analyzed as well. The usage of the different keywords and its possible implication is discussed in the results section.

The most frequently used term to refer to the sample group, is Refugee(s) with *Het Nieuwsblad* using the term the most. The word frequencies in Figure 3 show that *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad* are the biggest users of the keywords, but this is attributed to the fact that they have the highest amount of articles in the sample. All three newsbrands, however, use the term ‘refugees’ the most with the singular version coming in second, but at a much lower frequency. *De Standaard* is the most frequent user of the terms ‘migrants’ and ‘asylum seekers’. As one saw in the Syrian sample as well as in this sample, the usage of plural forms is much more common than the usage the singular form.

The most common bigrams for these keywords (refugee, asylum seeker, migrant, immigrant), meaning the most common combinations of two words where one of them is

keyword, are the following for the preceding terms (thus meaning the words with a number frequency, precede the keyword): asylum seekers and asylum (67) and asylum center (24) and rejected (10) and candidate (10), migrants and refugees (14), refugee and Ukrainian (102) and every (25), refugees and Ukrainian (5997) and asylum (328) and first (178) and number (115). The most common bigrams for the following terms (meaning the words with a number are following the keyword) are: asylum seekers and street (17) and catch (15) and must (11) and asylum (10) and building (10), refugee and Belgium (13) and house (11), refugees and Ukraine (978) and catch (490) and sheltered/taken in (280), shelter/take in (262) and we (165). Keywords for which bigrams had a frequency of less than 10 were eliminated from this overview for ease of reading.

Keyword	Count
Vluchteling(en) / Refugee(s)	12,656
Asielzoeker(s) / Asylum seeker(s)	625
Migrant(en) / Migrant(s)	342
Immigrant(en) / Immigrant(s)	15

Table 9: term frequency in reference to the sample group, Ukrainian sample

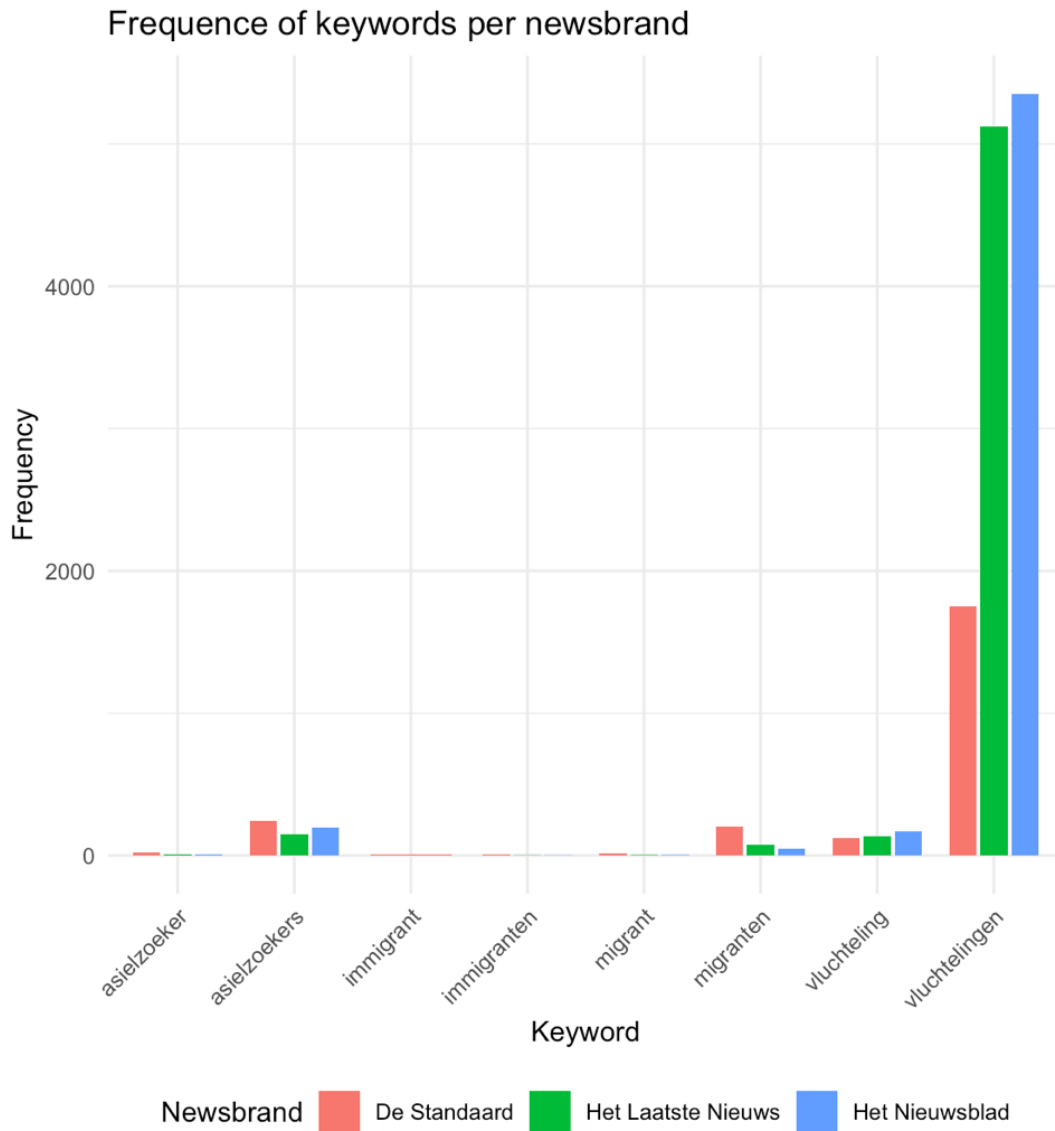


Figure 3: term frequency in reference to the sample group, Ukrainian sample

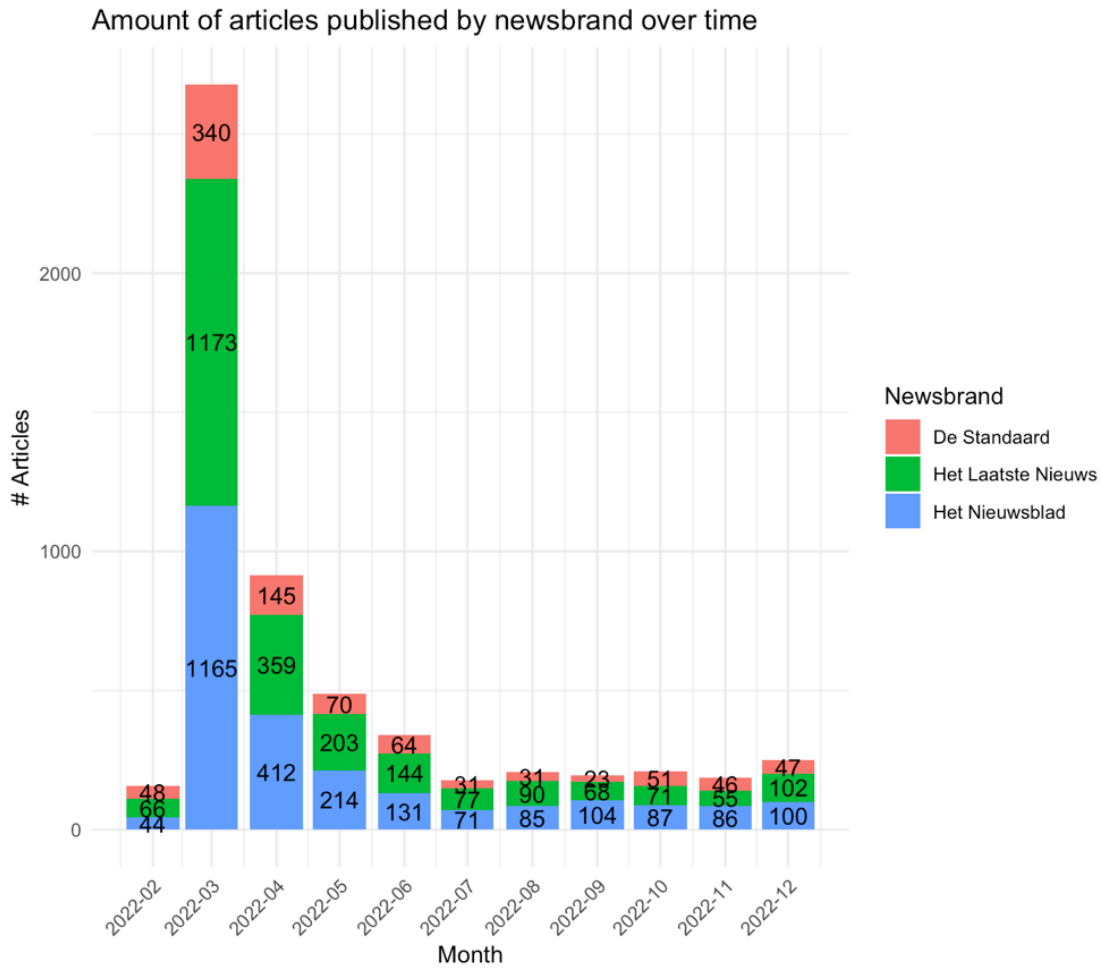


Figure 4: monthly articles overview, Ukrainian sample

The overall most frequently used words over all news articles are shown in Table 10. It is worth noticing that the words ‘people’ and ‘children’ are in this top 20. Another noticeable term is the presence of the word ‘good’, almost 3000 times.

Top	Word	N
1	Vluchtelingen / Refugees	12223
2	Oekraïne / Ukraine	11041
3	Oekraïense / Ukrainian	10528
4	Mensen / People	9061
5	Zegt / Says	7016
6	Oorlog / War	5367
7	Jaar / Year	4767
8	Kinderen / Children	4681
9	Land / Country	4431
10	Russische / Russian	4174
11	Stad / City	3810
12	Rusland / Russia	3513
13	Gaat / Go	3499
14	Gaan / Go	3438
15	Okraïners / Ukrainians	3143
16	Komen / Come	3103
17	Opvang / Shelter / Asylum	3044
18	Goed / Good	2772
19	België / Belgium	2585
20	Euro / Euro	2483

Table 10: 20 most used words, Ukrainian sample

Comparative analysis

After analyzing both sample groups separately, it is useful to show the results in comparison to each other in order to support the answer to the research question.

Looking again at the amount of articles that were published and the overall mean sentiment scores attributed (Table 11), we notice a clear difference. Almost five times as many articles were published about Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers than about Syrian refugees and asylum seekers.

The sentiment scores show a clear distinction between both observed groups; The mean and median sentiment for the Syrian sample are in the negatives, while the mean and median sentiment for the Ukrainian sample are positive. The closeness of the mean and median in both samples show that there are no extreme outliers present, meaning that extreme sentiment scores (high or low) are not skewing the results. This is also represented in Figure 5, where the bell shape for the Syrian group lies lower than that of the Ukrainian group. The Ukrainian violin plot (Figure 5 again) also shows more volume around the very positive sentiment scores, meaning that there are more observations with these scores, whereas the Syrian violin does not have that many observations in the higher sentiment scores, and it has more volume in the low/negative scores than the Ukrainian violin. In summary, that means that positive sentiment is more prevalent in the news articles about Ukrainian refugees and that negative sentiment is more prevalent in the news articles about Syrian refugees.

Group	#Articles	Mean sentiment	Median sentiment	Standard deviation	IQR
Syria	1165	-0.050	-0.056	0.294	0.374
Ukraine	5803	0.208	0.212	0.347	0.485

Table 11: comparative central tendency of sentiment scores

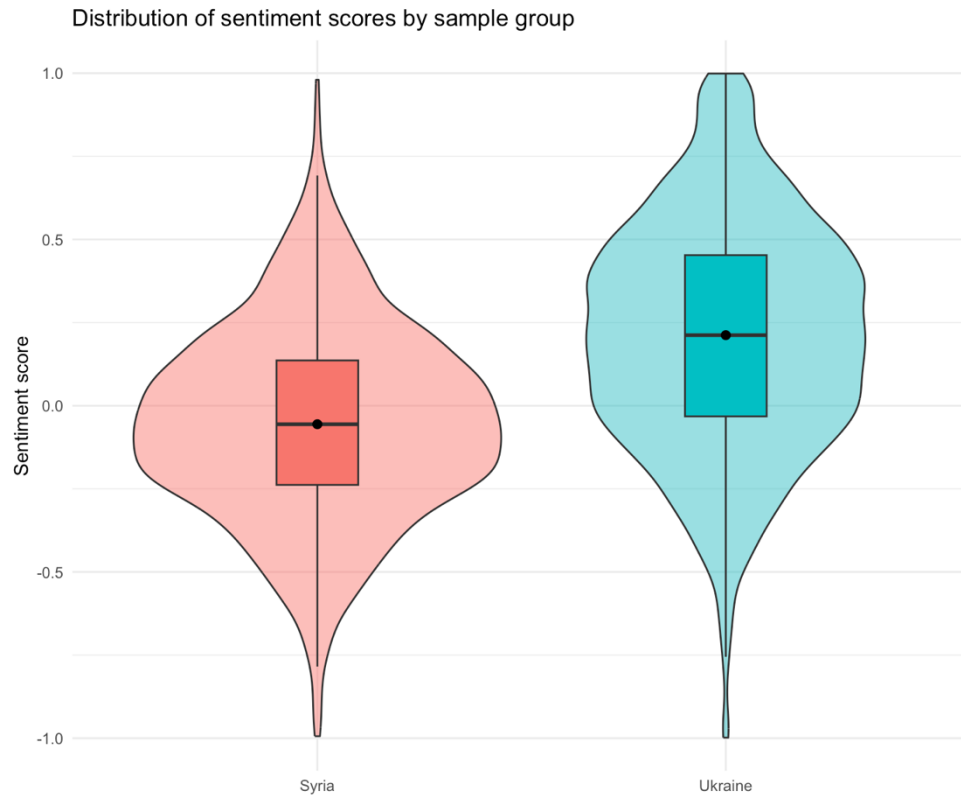


Figure 5: comparative violin plot

The Wilcoxon's rank-sum test was used to statistically support the claim that there is a difference in the mean sentiment score between the Syrian and Ukrainian sample. This test can be used because we do not have a normal distribution of sentiment scores, but we do have independent samples and sufficiently similar variance. The test shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the central tendency of both samples, meaning that the sentiment scores in the Ukrainian sample are structurally higher than the sentiment scores in the Syrian sample.

Besides the sentiment scores, the term frequency of keywords (refugee(s), migrant(s), immigrant(s), asylum seeker(s)) has been assessed for both samples, and is visualized in figure 6. There is a clear preference for the term vluchtelingen (refugees), especially in the Ukraine sample, however it is also the most frequently used term for the Syrian sample. It is noticeable that the terms migranten (migrants) and asielzoekers (asylum seekers) are used more in the news articles about the Syrian refugee crisis than it is used for the Ukrainian sample. The terms migrant, immigrant(en) (immigrant(s)) and asielzoeker (asylum seeker) are not frequently used.

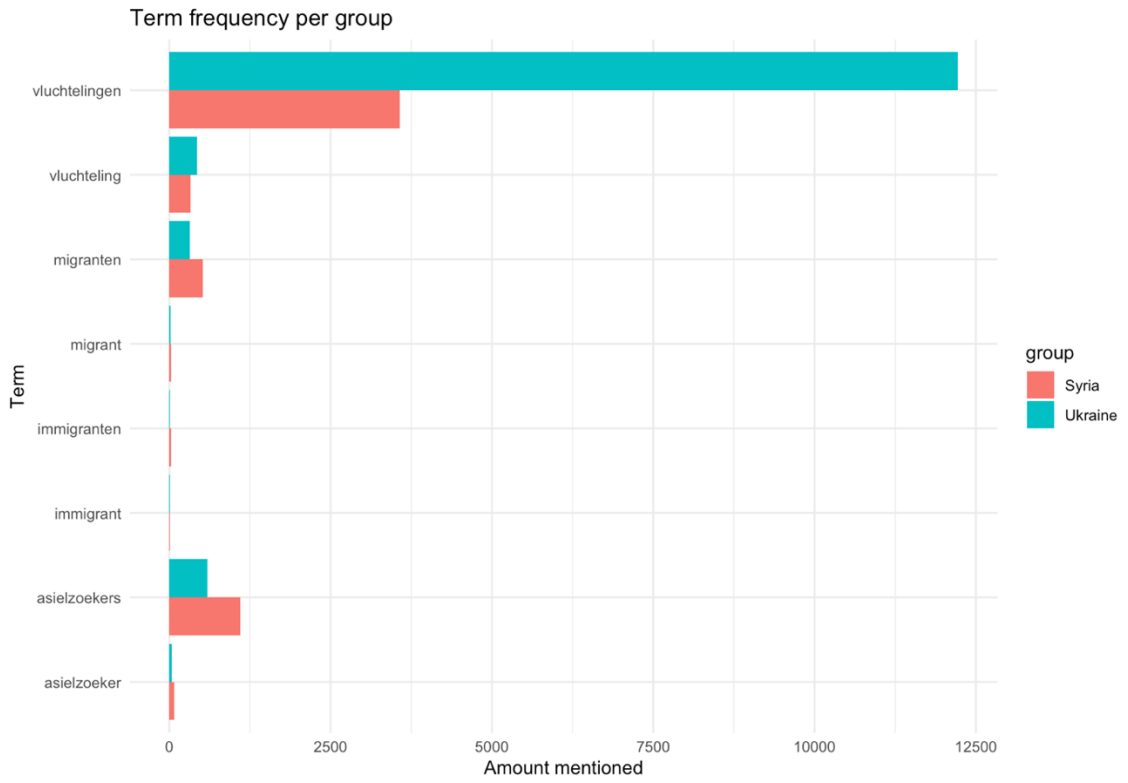


Figure 6: comparative term frequencies

Policy analysis

Having assessed the quantitative sentiment scores for each sample, it is important to look at integration policy for both time periods in order to put the results into context. Whether integration policy, which is decided on the Flemish level for Flanders, is more stringent or not and whether, and which, special measures were taken for these exceptional crises will be laid out in this section.

A policy note and the integration and naturalization legislature from both crisis periods was analyzed in order to evaluate for its integration policy. This policy area is the focus, as it is the one of the only areas concerning migration, on which the Flemish government can create policy by itself. One policy document for the 2015 refugee and asylum crisis was analyzed. This document is a policy note outlining integration policy for 2016. In 2022, the Flemish Government published a decree outlining all measures that were taken to support Ukrainians during that period. For both periods, the Flemish decree on integration and naturalization policy was analyzed as well.

Integration policy in 2015-2016

A policy note (Beleidsbrief Integratie En Inburgering, 2015) by the vice-prime minister of the Flemish government, Liesbeth Homans, outlines the integration and naturalization policy that the parliament will focus on in the – then – upcoming legislation period. This policy note was published in October of 2015 for the following year. All measures mentioned in the following paragraphs, are retrieved from that policy document. Following issues are highlighted: the employment rate of the population with non-European heritage, prejudice towards people with foreign origin, knowledge of the Dutch language, and budgetary measures for local integration policy.

The solutions for these issues, and thus the integration and naturalization initiatives that are outlined are focused on the key areas of language, prevention of radicalization and the closing of the digital divide. More specifically, attestations of naturalization are awarded to those, and only those, who passed civil orientation and ‘Dutch as A Second Language’ courses.

Additionally, local municipalities will receive funding, previously classified under ‘integration subsidies’, now classified as ‘regular means’, eliminating required reporting

on the spending of these means. The aim of this measure is to ‘implement policies that are maximally adjusted to the local needs’.

Another measure that was taken, is the ‘customized integration for low literacy women with young children’. This again emphasizes the focus on the Dutch language as a necessary factor for integration. Programs for ‘e-inclusion’ are run in some provinces to close the digital chasm that exists within weaker groups.

There is also a focus on the Islamic religion; integration trajectories especially made for imams were introduced. There is special mention of ‘radicalization prevention’. This would happen mainly through the monitoring of school attendance and the additional freed up budget for initiatives such as youth organizations, sports and mosque associations.

Legislative obligations, in the form of the Flemish decree of integration and naturalization, were adjusted in February of 2016, and it is the oldest available version. It states that each person has the right to participate in an integration trajectory, but certain groups are obliged. Syrian refugees and asylum seekers fall into a category in which they would be obliged to, for example, when they are no citizen of a member of EU+ or the EER. They are thus obliged to sign up at an integration agency within three months after the integration trajectory (obligation) has started. There is also the obligation to follow a ‘formation program’ for which either the objectives have to be attained or for which regular participation is required. This program consists of civil orientation and a Dutch course, and is discussed with each participant to be made to measure. The aim of these initiatives is to increase independence in a short time through education on Flanders’ society and values as well as through the development of some competences necessary to develop independence in Flanders. After the completion of this integration trajectory, a follow-up trajectory is offered but not obligatory.

Integration policy in 2022

The Flemish government published a report titled ‘*Flanders helps Ukraine*’ (Rekeningdecreet: Vlaanderen Helpt Oekraïne Terugblik Op 2022, n.d.), covering all measures that were taken by the established taskforce that dealt with the crisis at the time. The measures that are described in this report cover 10 fields: administrative matters, domestic administration, Digital Flanders, facility, integration, education, reception

capacity, welfare, housing and lastly, employment. The 125-page document contains information about the measures taken, the current state of affairs as well as budgetary reports. Seen as this thesis aims to conclude on integration policy, this is the policy area that will be analyzed.

There are 17 integration measures covered in the *Flanders helps Ukraine* taskforce report. Five of them are concerning translation; budget for translation costs was freed up, volunteers were recruited as ‘crisis translators’, short track courses were set up for crisis translation and a *crisis information translation* application was developed and partly repurposed from a COVID app. One legal measure increased the capacity of legal aid, hiring 1.5 full time equivalent (FTE) lawyers.

Some Flemish citizens provided asylum for Ukrainians. In the context of that initiative, a telephone helpline was established where both Flemish citizens and Ukrainians could find support on matters such as temporary protection, practical and financial queries or psychological support.

Another supportive measure is the assistance for Ukrainian refugees through diverse, existing, agencies. This could now happen without formalities and complicated bureaucratic processes. 7.813 individual support instances were set up through this measure in 2022. Next to that, information sessions to introduce Flanders and essential rights and obligations, values and morals were organized by the government. 8,373 individuals signed up for these information sessions.

The agency for *integration and naturalization* was temporarily reinforced to organize intakes for Dutch as a Second Language (DSL). 13,115 Ukrainians were directed towards the DSL courses. Regional coordinators were appointed to support and guide citizen initiatives aiming to support Ukrainians in their integration process and to build their network in Flanders. 5000 volunteers were active on February 2023.

Naturalization on the medium to long term was discussed with the agency *integration and naturalization*. The measures that were decided are undisclosed in this document but were prolonged into 2023.

To realize all these measures, temporary personnel had to be appointed in HR, payroll, ICT, finance and facility departments. The amount of FTE that were hired are undisclosed in the document.

Legislative obligations in 2022 contain an obligatory integration process made up out of four pillars. This process is mandatory for people in certain circumstances, including Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers as they are not part of the EU or the EER. The four pillars of the integration process are: education of civil orientation, education of Dutch as a second language, registration at the Flemish employment service (for people at the legal age of employment) and participation in a network trajectory.

The civil orientation education has the aim to inform the participators about rights and obligations in Flanders, as well as the values it adheres, to improve independence. The second pillar about language education states that a level A2 in Dutch must be attained at one of the recognized institutions. Thirdly, every person eligible to work must either register at the Flemish employment service or prove that they will be employed within sixty days after signing the integration contract, with the aim to establish economic independence. The last pillar, participating in a network trajectory, aims to increase participation and integration by establishing a network in Flanders. This participation can take three different forms, forty hours of participation- and networking activities, working or studying at the signing of the integration contract or during the contract period.

Discussion

The results produced in this thesis consist of two parts, the sentiment analysis and the analysis of two policy documents and Flemish legislation regarding integration policy in Flanders. This section will interpret the produced results from both analyses, provide an answer to the research questions, as well as highlight its implications and limitations.

The two-pronged approach to answer the research questions consists of the sentiment analysis on one side, and the policy document analysis on the other. The sentiment analysis is the main instrument to conclude on the sentiment, and thus the narrative, that is projected by media in Flanders.

The sample for the sentiment analysis contains 1165 articles for the Syrian sample, published between 01/01/2015 and 31/12/2015. For the Ukrainian sample, 5803 articles were present in the sample, published between 01/02/2022 and 31/12/2022. That is almost five times as many articles than the Syrian sample contains. It is however important to contextualize these numbers; Belgium received 35.476 asylum requests in 2015 (Asielstatistieken Maandverslag December 2015, 2016). On the other hand, approximately 63.000 Ukrainians received a temporary protection certificate in Belgium in 2022 (“Gevolgen van de Oorlog in Oekraïne: Uitzonderlijke Bevolkingsgroei in België in 2022 En Onzekerheden Op Middellange Termijn,” 2023). The Ukrainian refugee crisis was thus bigger in numbers of reception in Belgium, which might partly explain the amount of media attention the crisis received.

When looking at the results of the sentiment analysis for each sample separately, one can conclude that the sentiment scores for the Syrian sample lie close to zero with 50% of the sampled articles having a negative sentiment score. This is not necessarily reflected in the most frequently used terms, which contain little descriptive adjectives but do contain words like *refugees*, *children* and *good*. The sentiment scores for the Ukrainian sample are significantly higher, with a positive mean and median score of approximately 0.2. The most frequently used words of the Ukrainian sample are similar to those of the Syrian sample, containing words like *people*, *children*, *war*, *shelter* and *good*.

Not only the sentiment scores were considered in the analysis, so were the terms that were used to refer to the sample group of refugees and asylum seekers. In the research of Baker

et al. (2008), a collocation of the terms refugee, asylum seeker, immigrant and migrant (RASIM) was studied, finding that the term migrant has a positive connotation, more so than the other terms. The isolated results of the Syrian sample in this research, show a clear preference for the use of refugees and, secondly, asylum seekers. This seems to be consistent with the findings of Baker et al. (2008), where both these terms were also found to be significantly overlapping. The use of the more 'positive' term, migrant(s), seems to be not as prevalent in the isolated Syrian sample, however, in the comparative analysis, the Syrian sample contains almost double the amount of mentions of *migrants* than in the Ukrainian sample. Ukrainians are referred to most as refugees and asylum seekers, which are both accurate terms according to Amnesty International ("Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants," n.d.). It is thus safe to conclude that the majority of news articles used the correct terms to refer to the refugees and asylum seekers.

The ideological background of newspapers is an important factor to consider when looking at the results of this sentiment analysis, considering the political nature of migration, the political-philosophical origins of the different newspapers is essential. *De Standaard* originates from a catholic background, while *Het Laatste Nieuws* is historically liberal (Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2014). *Het Nieuwsblad* is part of the same brand group as *De Standaard* (Mediahuis) (Luykx, 1975), and will thus be considered of the same ideological background. Considering the results of the Syrian sample, where *De Standaard* scored the lowest sentiment scores, it is notable to see that its counterpart, *Het Nieuwsblad*, scores the highest sentiment scores. *Het Laatste Nieuws*, with the assumption that it is a liberal newspaper, scores an overall mean sentiment that is neutral to slightly negative. For the Ukrainian sample, it is equally *De Standaard* who scores the lowest sentiment scores and its counterpart *Het Nieuwsblad* scoring the highest, which is in line with the results yielded by the Syrian sample. The results of the sentiment analysis are thus insufficiently consistent to draw a direct connection with the newspaper's ideological background.

The comparative analysis shows statistical significance for the fact that the sentiment score for the Ukrainian sample is higher than the sentiment score for the Syrian sample. That means that, based on the numbers and only that, Syrian refugees and asylum seekers were portrayed in a more negative way than Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers were.

In order to assess whether the integration policy follows the sentiment analysis' conclusions, two policy documents were analyzed, one for each sample period. The policy documents contain integration measures for each crisis. For the Syrian refugee crisis, there was no document outlining exceptional measures taken to deal with the refugee and asylum seeker crisis. In 2022 however, a specific document was published, outlining exceptional measures for Ukrainian refugees. In 2015, there is a clear mention of religion and radicalization, which is taken into account in the integration policy. In 2022, there is no mention of religion or radicalization specifically for Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers. Both documents emphasize the importance of learning Dutch as a second language, participation and independence.

Legislative obligations in both periods differ significantly. In 2016, there were little to no obligations tied to the mandatory integration contract. A Dutch course and civil orientation were the only obliged activities, without mention of the level of Dutch that should be achieved after following the course. In 2022, this policy is expanded, obliging participation in four pillars, each containing mandatory presence and participation, and the obligation to attain level A2 in Dutch before completion of the integration contract.

It thus seems that there has been an opposite development between *supportive* integration measures and *obliged* integration measures. In 2015, there were little to no supportive integration measures like there were in 2022. However, in 2015, integration policy did not contain many obliged activities for the refugee and asylum seeker. Adding to that the significantly more negative framing of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, policy does not seem to completely follow the media sentiment's tendencies. It is however notable that *supportive* integration measures and initiatives were present for the same target group as for which a more positive media sentiment existed, being Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers. Another layer of nuance is the presence of previous research on factors that influence public- and media sentiment about refugees and asylum seekers, such as cultural proximity and (economic) security. It might be possible that that explains the more positive sentiment for Ukrainians and thus the more supportive initiatives that were taken, given that Flemish people experience Ukrainians as more culturally alike or 'secure' than Syrians. Please note that no conclusion can be drawn regarding the correlation or causation of these factors and Flemish media sentiment.

Circling back to the main research question this thesis aims to answer:

RQ *“In what way has the sentiment of Flemish written media towards Syrian and Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers, differed?”*

Answer: The sentiment of Flemish written media does indeed differ when looking at both groups of refugees and asylum seekers. This is reflected in the sentiment scores that were linked to every news article from Flanders’ most read news sources. Articles about Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in the 2015 period used more negative language than articles about Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers in 2022. The significance of this difference in sentiment was confirmed by statistical testing.

This research question is supported by four sub-questions:

Q1 *“What is the sentiment of Flemish media towards Syrian refugees and asylum seekers?”*

Answer: The mean sentiment of Flemish media towards Syrian refugees is -0.05 in a [-1;1] interval. This could thus be interpreted as neutral or minimally negative.

Q2 *“What is the sentiment of Flemish media towards Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers?”*

Answer: The mean sentiment of Flemish media towards Ukrainian refugees is 0.208 in a [-1;1] interval. This could thus be interpreted as slightly positive.

Q3 *“In what way does written media-sentiment act as an indicator for integration policy in Flanders?”*

Answer: After observing the statistical significance of the written news media reporting more negatively about Syrian refugees and asylum seekers than about Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers, two policy documents were analyzed. In the 2015 time period there was an update in the integration policy, which mentions anti-discrimination as well as the importance of learning the Dutch language and anti-radicalization. In the 2022 time period there is a specific policy document outlining all extra measures that were taken in order to facilitate the influx of Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers through supportive measures. 17 additional integration measures were taken. This is in line with the more positive news reporting that was observed, but causality nor correlation can be proven

through this. It does however, provide additional evidence to the existing literature that discusses the double standard that is upheld in institutional- and media communication as another case study of a region where sentiment discrepancies have occurred. As mentioned in the literature review, media sentiment is an important indicator for public opinion and thus voting behavior, but it can also work the other way around, in which case policy influences media sentiment.

Limitations to this research exist of the limitations of the used algorithms and software packages. When relying on a pre-existing algorithm for sentiment analysis, we must trust that the sentiment that this algorithm has learned through training is accurate for the case we are employing it for. Consideration of the training of this algorithm however limits the risk that the algorithm is unfit for the data that was analyzed. Another limitation is the ambiguity of language, where quantitative analysis can eliminate context and subtext that might be important to understand the true underlying message that is relayed.

The results of this research thus seem to be in line with what previously conducted research has concluded: there is a difference in the way refugee groups are portrayed in the media, which is also the case in Flanders, Belgium. Whether that is caused by the ability of the country's population to identify with the group of refugees and asylum seekers, or by other factors, is an excellent field to explore in future research endeavors.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis is to report on the media sentiment of articles from Flemish news brands in order to investigate whether there is a significant difference in the sentiment when reporting about the Syrian refugee and asylum seeker crisis in 2015 and the Ukrainian refugee and asylum seeker crisis in 2022. The research question to be answered in this thesis is “*In what way has the sentiment of Flemish written media towards Syrian and Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers, differed?*”. The answer was reached through a sentiment analysis performed on the news articles of Flanders’ most popular news brands and the analysis of two policy documents and legislation regarding integration measures for both the 2015 and the 2022 period.

The sentiment of Flemish written media that was analyzed in this thesis differed significantly between the two groups of refugees and asylum seekers. It was observed that the sentiment in 2015, regarding the Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, on average is -0.05 in a [-1;1] interval of sentiment scores. Some top 20 most frequently used terms in the articles for this case were *refugees, asylum seekers, good, people*. Some notable bi-grams that were extracted are *economic migrants* but also *illegal immigrants*. The correct terminology to refer to both Syrian and Ukrainian groups is either refugee or asylum seeker, following Amnesty International’s definition.

The news articles about Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers had a higher average sentiment score of 0.208 in a [-1;1] interval. In the most frequently used words, there are similar terms to the Syrian group such as *refugees, people, children, asylum* and *good*. The bi-gram analysis shows results like *refugees and shelter*, and *asylum center and refugees*.

The analysis of two policy documents yielded surface-level results that could confirm the tendency of the news sentiment. There exists no official document of the Flemish government that outlines special measures to deal with the influx of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers. There does exist an official document outlining special measures to deal with the influx of Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers, outlining 17 temporary integration measures such as the development of a translation app to communicate with Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers and the financial and operational support for citizen initiatives helping Ukrainians with their integration. The document containing

integration policy active in 2015 focuses on learning Dutch as a second language, anti-radicalization measures but also on anti-discrimination. Integration legislation, however, became more demanding in 2022. Four pillars are now obligatory for all signees of the mandatory integration contract. These pillars contain mandatory presence and participation in multiple integratory activities, and the obligation to attain level A2 in Dutch before the completion of the integration contract. In 2015, the four pillars did not exist, and signees were not obliged to reach a certain level of Dutch proficiency after completing a course. They were, however, obliged to participate in a civil orientation program.

These findings lead us to conclude that there is a statistically significant difference in the sentiment of Flemish written media towards Syrian and Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers, the sentiment when reporting on the 2015 refugee and asylum seeker crisis being more negative than when reporting on the 2022 refugee and asylum seeker crisis. Existing literature identified some factors that could explain this difference such as the cultural proximity of Ukraine versus Syria or the religious background of the country of origin. The Flemish policy differed as well, with special integration measures taken in 2022 which were not taken in 2015. Integration legislation did become more demanding in 2022, containing more obligations. However, causality between the media sentiment and integration policy cannot be proven through this. An important future research project could be the investigation on causality or correlation between those two elements in Flanders.

This research contributes to the existing landscape of media sentiment analysis and the research landscape investigating double standards in migration between 2015 and 2022. To the best of our knowledge, no previous sentiment analysis of Flemish news media covering the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee and asylum crisis, as conducted in this thesis, existed at the time of production of this thesis.

Annexes

Annex 1: code in Python and R

The code that was written to conduct the sentiment analysis as well as the scraper to obtain the content of the news articles, can be provided upon request.

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