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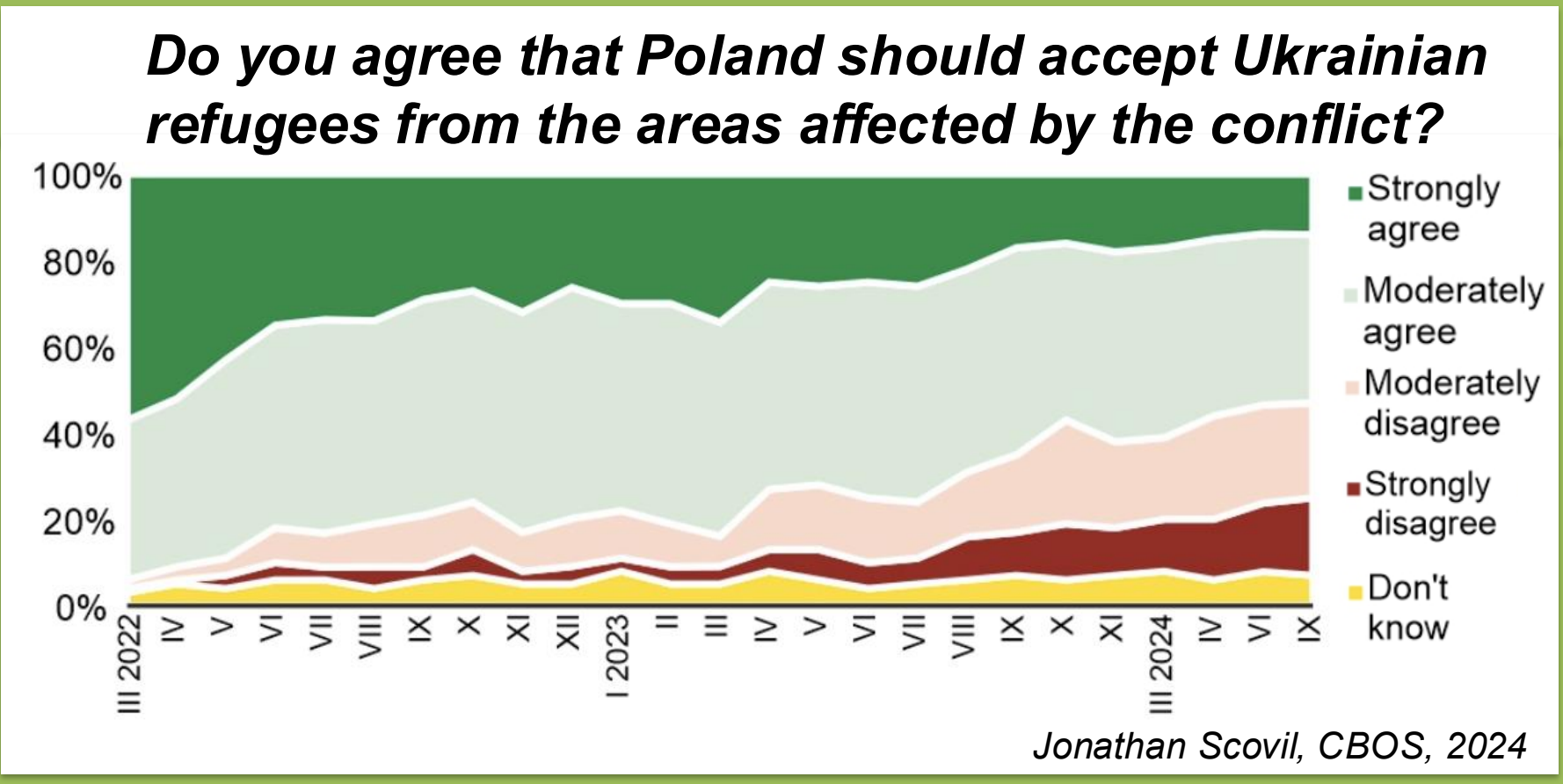
Polish Public Opinion on Ukrainian Refugees in the Age of Russian Disinformation

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Background

6.74 million Ukrainians have been displaced since Russia's invasion in 2022, the largest mass migration in Europe since World War 2. Currently, just under a million are registered as refugees in Poland. When they first arrived, they were met with a near-unanimous welcome. But polls show that now, only three years later, Polish support for Ukrainian refugees is in steep decline. Now, only 53% of Poles are in favor of accepting Ukrainian refugees, just over half of those (94%) who wanted to accept them in March of 2022. Complementary to this decrease in support is an increase in antagonism, with 40% of Poles now saying that Poland should definitely *not* accept Ukrainian refugees, compared to only 3% in March of 2022. And although the rest of Europe has also seen support for Ukrainians decrease, it has not been nearly as drastic, with 87% of Europeans still in favor of helping Ukrainians. (Eurobarometer)



Research Questions

- How has support for Ukrainian refugees waned so quickly?
- How is half of Poland now rationalizing a turn on Ukrainian refugees, whom they supported three years ago?
- Where do anti-Ukrainian narratives originate?
- What is the relative impact of Russian disinformation?

Methodology

37 semi-structured **street interviews** were conducted with Polish citizens and permanent residents between December 22, 2024, and January 1st, 2025, in Rzeszów, Kraków, and Warsaw. Respondents were asked to supply both their own opinions on Ukrainian refugees in Poland and their observations of wider public opinion. The interview transcripts were reviewed and coded thematically to establish the Poles' main concerns regarding the presence of Ukrainian refugees in their country.

Street interview methodology was chosen to explore the intricacies of respondents' rationalization processes and gauge the specific degrees of concern about Ukrainian refugees. The responses are not meant to be a universally representative sample of Poles, but an indication of the presence of narratives, like a litmus test. Questions were open-ended and contained no references to any refugee narratives, which means that all topics beneath the 'Ukrainian refugee' umbrella arose organically.

A separate review was conducted of all the **fact-checking articles** published by the top eight fact-checking organizations in Poland from January 1st, 2022, to March 1st, 2025. All those pertaining to disinformation about Ukrainian refugees were coded thematically. While these articles do not constitute the entirety of anti-Ukrainian disinformation present in Polish mediascapes since the invasion, they represent the most common and viral narratives. The status of false narratives as Russian disinformation is established through open-source intelligence evaluation of the story's source, in addition to comparison of the narrative's dissemination with the hallmarks of Russian disinformation.

The eight fact-checking organizations used were chosen based on their prominence among all Polish fact-checking bodies and the availability of their articles, organized in chronological order.



	Interview Narrative	Russian Narrative	Factual Situation
Ukrainianization	Ukrainians are being made into a privileged class in Poland, as Poles become second-class citizens. Poland will be ideologically, and then territorially, overtaken by Ukraine.	Ukrainians are participating in a grassroots effort to take over Poland. Co-opted by Konfederacja's #StopUkrainizacjiPolski was promoted aggressively by Russian bot accounts.	Non-falsifiable conspiracy theory. Described as the "little sister of Judeopolonia," a conspiracy theory that accused Jews of plotting to create a Jewish state on the Vistula.
Ukrainians are Preferred: Benefits	It is dangerously unsustainable for Poland's economy to continue giving benefits to Ukrainian refugees. Ukrainians get everything for free, and they still ask for more.	Ukrainian refugees enrich themselves by exploiting the Polish benefit system: They collect benefits on 'tours' before leaving, they receive 5,000 PLN a month in pocket money, and Polish citizens' benefits are defunded.	Registered Ukrainian refugees are eligible for limited benefits that barely cover the cost of living. Almost half have never claimed any. The tax revenue collected from the aggregate economic activities of refugees more than offsets public refugee expenditure (Deloitte and UNHCR).
Ukrainians are Preferred: Healthcare	Ukrainians have access to better medical treatment in hospitals. They jump the line to get a doctor's appointment, and make Poles wait longer.	Polish children were thrown out of oncology wards to make space for Ukrainian children. Ukrainians cut the queue for services and make Poles wait longer. Ukrainians come to Poland, get free treatment, and then go home.	Long queues for treatment have long been a problem in Poland. Ukrainian refugees have free access to Polish healthcare systems "under the same rules and in the same scope as persons covered by obligatory or voluntary health insurance in Poland." (Lewtak.)
Bandera, Historical Tensions, and Nazism	Poles wonder about Ukrainians' support for Stepan Bandera. The Volhynian massacre is generating discussion again, with the old and young alike. Ukrainians try to deny Volhyn or even celebrate it. Extreme version: Ukrainians are infecting Poland with their Banderite-Nazi ideology, and they still see Poles as their enemy.	Ukrainian refugees are ideological neo-Nazis who praise Stepan Bandera and Hitler. They celebrate the Volhynian massacre of Poles in 1943. They deface Polish monuments with nazi graffiti, burn the Polish flag, and desecrate sites dedicated to Polish victims of the killings. Zelenskyy is often accused of being a Nazi, and Putin used this outright to justify the invasion.	Stepan Bandera has a complicated legacy in Ukraine that is misunderstood even by Ukrainians. He did collaborate with Nazis, and his UPA committed the Volhynian massacre of 100,000 Poles in German-occupied Poland. He also championed Ukrainian sovereignty, and his history was posthumously whitewashed. (ZIOS) Many Ukrainians approve of Bandera without any awareness of his war crimes. Additionally, as in the US, there is an extremely small faction of Ukrainian ultra-nationalists who co-opted Nazi insignias and antisemitic rhetoric. They are politically insignificant and in no way representative of Ukraine. (ADL)
Crime: Increasing Crime Rates	Crime rates in Poland are increasing, with more murders and robberies. The majority of Ukrainians in Poland act criminally.	Ukrainians have made Poland the criminal capital of the European Union. Ukrainian gangs have increased crime by 46%, committing crimes including drug trafficking, child trafficking and murder.	Nominal robbery rates fell during the influx of refugees and continued to fall in 2023. Total confirmed criminal offenses have been falling since before the invasion, despite the million-strong population increase. Murder fell 20% from 2021-2022. (Policja)
Crime: Hate Crimes	Ukrainians commit hate crimes against Polish people. A surge of coordinated violence against Poles is occurring because of Banderist ideology.	Ukrainian refugees attack vulnerable Poles, force them to shout pro-Ukrainian or pro-Banderist slogans, and attack them because of historical tensions.	Hate crimes increased after the influx of Ukrainian refugees because of an increase in motivated anti-Ukrainian violence. 47% of the hate crimes reported by Polish civil society in 2022 were committed against Ukrainians, compared to 18% in 2021. (OSCE)
Lawlessness and Lower Culture	Ukrainians do not respect the rule of law in Poland, believing that it does not apply to them. Extreme versions say that Ukrainians are from a lower culture that is less civilized, and they are an inferior race to Poles.	Ukrainian children brutally attack and bully Polish children in schools, suggesting a predisposition for violence and recklessness. Ukrainians are predisposed to crime, violence, and brutality.	Ukrainian refugees have a lower criminality rate than Polish nationals. (Policja) Ukrainian children are more likely to be attacked or bullied than they are to be the perpetrators. (OSCE) 'Inferior race' and 'lower civilization' narratives are non-falsifiable claims meant to dehumanize Ukrainians.
Gendered Narratives: Men, Draft Dodging	Ukrainian men come to Poland to avoid fighting for their country. They stay at home all day, drinking and hiding. They are dangerous because they have nothing to lose and act irrationally.	Forged document claiming that Poland will deport Ukrainian men back to Ukraine. Fact-checking organization: Konkret24	It is very difficult for Ukrainian men to avoid the draft, and dodgers rarely escape the country. If they flee illegally, they are not eligible for temporary protection. Men already comprise a small percentage of Ukrainian refugees, and of male refugees, it is estimated that at maximum 2.5% dodged the draft to leave (BBC Eye, Eurostat). The majority were legally eligible for an exemption or are not of conscript age.
Gendered Narratives: Women	Ukrainian women care a lot about their looks. They spend a lot of money, or Poland's money, on makeup and clothes. Accounts of seeing Ukrainian women and girls called derogatory sexual names.	Ukrainian women are hypersexual and immoral. They steal men, undermine religious values, and exploit benefits. Ukrainian mothers receive more money than Polish mothers, participating in benefit tourism.	Accusations of benefit exploitation and tourism are impossible under Polish distribution system, which requires residency. Accusations against the character of Ukrainian women are non-falsifiable stereotypes.
Job Competition	Ukrainians are taking jobs away from Poles and are coming only to take advantage of the economic situation in Poland (rather than escaping violence).	Ukrainian refugees are automatically given jobs they are not qualified for, and Poles are fired to make room for them.	Ukrainians ameliorate Poland's extreme worker shortages, as they are more likely to accept unappealing jobs. Their positive overall economic contribution (Deloitte) promotes job creation.
Language Barrier	The language barrier can make communication difficult and can be frustrating.	None. Russian narratives use the Ukrainian and Russian languages only as an indicator of Ukrainian status when propagating other narratives.	In May of 2022, 46% of refugees reported little to no Polish knowledge; by November, 21%. As Slavic-language speakers, they have an easier time learning Polish than past refugee groups. However, language remains the largest reported barrier to integration. (UNHCR)
Linguistic Ukrainianization	It's annoying to hear Ukrainian all the time in Poland. In extreme cases: The presence of Ukrainian writing and signage is insulting to Poles, who don't feel at home in Poland anymore.	The growing amount of Ukrainian in public spaces displays the Ukrainian takeover of the Polish government. Polish organizations cater their programming to non-Polish speaking Ukrainians at the expense of Poles.	Hate crimes against Ukrainians often begin when the victim is overheard speaking. (OSCE). Specific cases of discrimination against Polish speakers in favor of Ukrainians were debunked.

Literature Existing frameworks for refugee preference in Poland

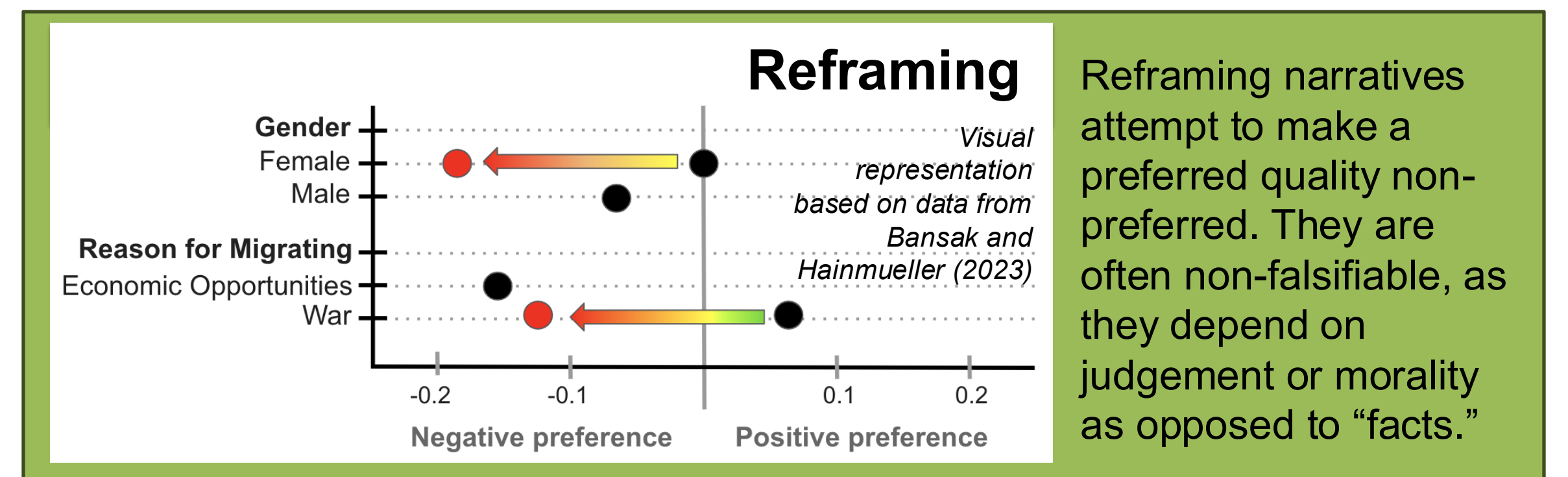
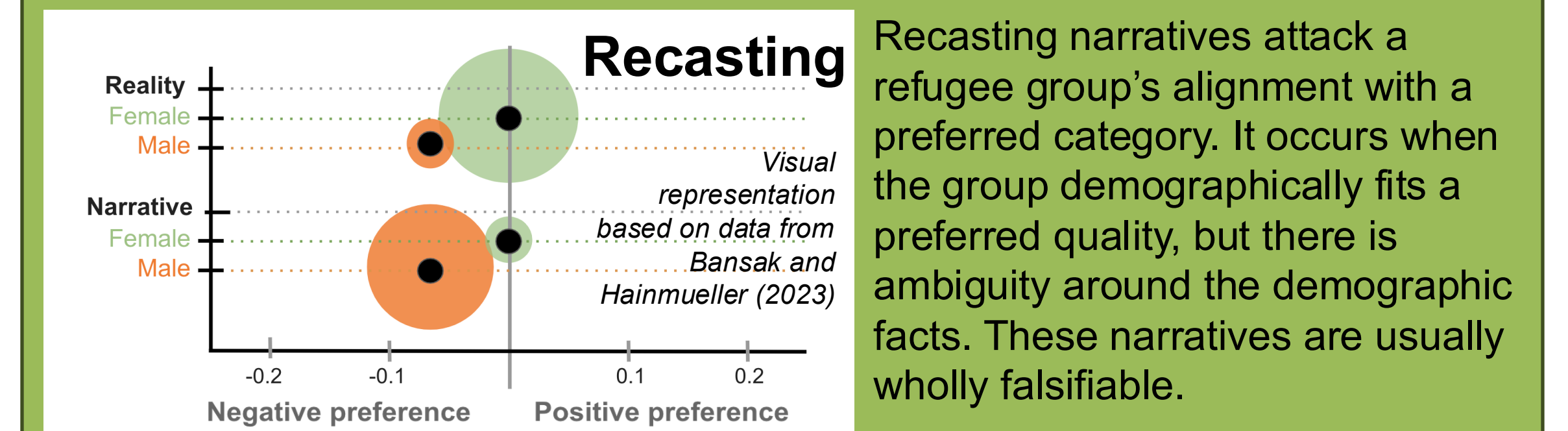
Kirk Bansak and Jens Hainmüller found that Europeans have stable preferences for refugees' level of education, potential for positive economic contribution, religion, gender, age, motivations, and perceived vulnerability of the refugee. These criteria determine the likelihood that a refugee group will be accepted. Ukrainian refugees fit the preferred traits better than other groups, and therefore received a warmer welcome (Bansak et al., 2023)

Researchers from Jagiellonian University suggested that unprecedented level of social support and material assistance were due to a feeling of "closeness" towards Ukrainian refugees, anticipation and fear of a Russian invasion, and the development of help-giving as a social norm (Kossowska et al., 2023)

The Overseas Development Institute found that dominant refugee narratives in Polish mainstream media distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' refugee groups. 'Good' refugees, usually from Eastern Europe, are characterized as vulnerable and deserving of support. Alternatively, 'bad' refugees, usually those arriving from the Middle East and Africa, are described as economically opportunistic, antagonistic, and dangerous to society (Hargrave et al., 2023).

Results

Poles cited a recurring set of narratives to justify their shift in support for Ukrainian refugees in Poland. When falsifiable, these narratives were often aligned not with the factual situation of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, but with the thematic content of specific Russian disinformation targeted against them (see table). This content was not random, but instead had been engineered to directly undermine the qualities of Ukrainians that initially rendered them a preferred refugee group—Their demographic characteristics, their commonalities with Poles, their reasons for fleeing, and their capacity to contribute economically—using the strategies of 'Recasting' and 'Reframing' (see below). Russian disinformation has been successful in disseminating and exacerbating narratives in Poland that erode the once-positive image of Ukrainian refugees, contributing significantly to the rapid decrease in Polish attitudes towards them.



Significance

- Demonstration of Russian disinformation's ability to shape international public opinion.
- Illustration of how specific disinformation is targeted to achieve its objectives with Recast and Reframe paradigm
- Explanation of growing Polish dissatisfaction with Ukrainian refugees and how Russian disinformation has contributed

By targeting Poles with disinformation campaigns, Russia poses a threat to democratic integrity, autonomy, and Polish foreign relations. Dissemination channels, once established, are extremely difficult to reverse, meaning that the more the Polish public turns to disinformation now, the greater access Russia will have for future sabotage campaigns. These are serious threats to democratic integrity.