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## **“The Citizen Should Come First.” Argumentative and Rhetorical Strategies in the Public Consultation Process on Refugee Rights**

*Abstract:* Public consultations have become an important forum for negotiating policies towards immigrants and refugees in Poland. This article analyses the public consultations conducted in 2025 around two proposed amendments to the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens. 332 people took part in the procedure. The article shows the main arguments related to the participation of foreigners in the institutions of the welfare state, including the criteria for deserving benefits. In many aspects, they coincide with the typology formulated by Wim van Oorschot (2000). Deservingness is assessed according to the criteria of identity (primarily based on citizenship), recipients' responsibility for their situation, the level of their needs, their gratitude, and reciprocity. In addition, the analysis of the narratives revealed one more criterion of deservingness: this is the criterion of financial burden. Namely, the argument that people in need for a short period of time are more accepted than those in need for a longer period of time resonates strongly in the consultations, and the high burden of assistance on the state budget is cited as an argument against social transfers. The public debate on benefits for Ukrainians has deeper significance than being a politicized dispute over welfare benefits for a group within the refugee community. It may be important in determining what welfare state model is accepted in Poland.

*Keywords:* immigration to Poland, public consultation, Ukrainian refugees, migrant deservingness, welfare benefits, welfare deservingness, ethos-pathos-logos, rhetorical triad

### **Introduction**

The drive to increase citizen participation in the exercise of political power has led to the development of research on various forms of direct democracy, deliberative democracy processes, and civil society activism. Interest in issues of public consultation has also grown out of these trends. Consultations allow different needs and divergent interests to be articulated publicly, build a sense of belonging to a political community and mutual trust between authorities and residents, and thus strengthen social ties (Zielińska, Kraszewski 2019: 8, 22). Also for these reasons, they are particularly important at a time of extensive demographic and social changes associated with increasing immigration to Poland. The article has both empirical and theoretical goals. On the empirical level, the aim of the article is to analyze the arguments and attitudes expressed by those active in the procedure of consulting laws on migration issues. I am interested in both substantive and rhetorical aspects of the argumentation. In the theoretical aspect, the aim of the article is to describe the strategies and dimensions of legitimization and delegitimization of welfare state institutions aimed at helping immigrants in Poland. As

Poland is receiving more and more immigrants, the issues presented are an increasing challenge for Polish social policy. The growing number of different groups of foreigners—those arriving for a short time or circulating between countries, those settling and applying for naturalization, those fleeing war and persecution, those working, studying or coming to reunite with their families—has complicated the welfare system, traditionally based on the financial contributions of working citizens and payments within the same national community and even for the same people at different times in their lives. The analysis presented here will provide a better understanding of the principles and mechanisms that guide people in forming expectations of welfare state interference in the life circumstances of a population group that is of growing demographic, economic and political importance.

In studies on the perception of social benefits, a preference for taking care of people from one's own social, cultural and national group and a scepticism towards the use of welfare state institutions by minorities and migrants have been observed for years (Andersen, Bjørklund 1990; Careja, Harris 2022). Differences in support for immigrants' participation in welfare system were also noted between homogeneous countries and ethno-culturally diverse countries: in the latter, merit seems to play a greater role than equality in the accepted distribution of social benefits among immigrants (Reeskens, Oorschot 2012: 130). Parallel to research describing the attitudes of local residents towards migrants receiving benefits, there is a growing strand investigating whether welfare state policies act as 'welfare magnets', attracting migrants with the offer of attractive social benefits rather than access to the labour market. Some studies in this stream find a clear effect of the generosity of welfare benefits on mobility (Dellinger, Huber 2021; Agersnap, Jensen, Kleven 2020), while others find that they do not have a strong effect on the inflow of foreigners compared to other factors (Giulietti 2014). The following analysis examines perceptions of welfare state support towards immigrants in a country where immigration is a relatively new phenomenon, while traditions of emigration have existed for many decades. Moreover, Polish immigrants in the UK, for example, have also been accused of abusing social benefits with insufficient labour market participation (Blachnicka-Ciacek et al. 2021; Schweyher, Odden, Burrell 2019). This topic generates heated emotions especially during election campaigns, such as the campaign around the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, as well as the pre-election campaign in Poland. This clearly shows that attitudes towards immigration have become a new dimension of political cleavages, mobilizing voters of different political options. Consequently, it is also this feature that makes the residents' declarations on this issue during the election campaign numerous and diverse: they show different perspectives and argumentative strategies, providing a valuable microcosm of views present in contemporary Poland for sociologists.

The analysis will draw on the model of justifying who deserves social assistance and why, formulated by Wim van Oorschot (2000). W. van Oorschot identified five criteria that people use when assessing the deservingness or undeservingness of different groups for welfare benefits, and which are thus fundamental for legitimacy of welfare systems. The criterion of control (responsibility) assumes that people in need are more or less deserving of assistance depending on whether the causes of their situation are beyond their control or responsibility. The criterion of need assumes that those whose needs are greater are more deserving of help. The identity criterion assumes that one's willingness to provide

support is greater the more one identifies with those in need of support (e.g. as a result of similarity of social statuses, life situation). The criterion of attitude assumes that people who show more gratitude towards the support are more deserving of the support. The reciprocity criterion assumes that the more needy people exercise reciprocity, the more deserving they are of support (van Oorschot 2000: 36). The deservingness scale, later formulated from these five criteria, established that these are five distinct dimensions of evaluation depending on socio-demographic variables and political preferences (Meuleman et al. 2020). Polish research has also demonstrated the presence of the criteria described by van Oorschot in the assessment of refugees' deservingness of welfare benefits, except that the analysis focused on social media statements (Theiss 2023). These deservingness criteria have broader relevance in the study of migrants' perceptions, e.g. it has been shown that residents use them when forming opinions about which migrants should be welcomed into the country and settle there (De Coninck et al. 2024). Therefore, it is emphasized that this tool has great theoretical and empirical potential in capturing various nuances of social preferences and attitudes (De Coninck et al. 2024).

The welfare state can take various forms, depending on the national historical background and the relationship between the social welfare system and the market. For example, Esping-Andersen proposed a typology of liberal countries (e.g. the US), conservative countries (Germany, France), and social-democratic countries (e.g. Norway). In a liberal system, the market is of key importance. Society is individualistic, benefits mostly come from private insurance (commodification), and state support is minimal, often leading to stigmatization of beneficiaries. The second type (conservative) links social security to contributions and emphasizes the role of the family. The third system (social-democratic) is the most egalitarian and offers broad access to social benefits, which are provided by the state and are largely independent of contributions (Esping-Andersen 1990). Over the years, similar or specific types of welfare regimes have been found in other countries (Fenger 2007; Golinowska 2009). A new type of welfare state developed in Central and Eastern European countries (e.g., Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia) after the fall of communism (Fenger 2007; Golinowska 2009). Fenger described it as the "post-communist European type." It is similar to the model of Western countries: it is characterized by sustainable economic development, greater egalitarianism than in the former Soviet republics, and a higher level of social welfare than in the former USSR, which is reflected, for example, in average life expectancy (Fenger 2007: 24–25). It was assumed that the specificity of the model developed in Central and Eastern Europe would gradually disappear and that welfare regimes in Europe would become more similar (Golinowska 2009). Indeed, since the first decade of the 21st century, there have been significant changes in the Polish model: during the conservative party's rule since 2015, state welfare benefits for families have increased. Among other things, in 2016, the "Family 500 plus" program (now "Family 800 plus") was implemented, which provides an additional monthly benefit for each child in the family, regardless of the number of children and family income. Its aim was both to reduce poverty in Polish families and to increase the birth rate and prevent a demographic crisis (Gromada 2018). The program underwent significant changes during its implementation, but these mainly consisted of greater generosity on the part of the state towards families with children: initially, it covered only families with two children, and

later also families with one child; initially, the benefit was 500 PLN, but it was increased to 800 PLN per child in 2024. The changes to the program reflect the transformation of the Polish welfare state over the last decade and the changes in Poles' attitudes and expectations towards welfare institutions: this transformation is influenced both by Poland's economic development and (especially after 2022) by the increase in the number of immigrants.

Foreigners and their rights to social benefits are becoming an increasingly frequent topic in debates about the welfare state in Poland. Immigrants are eligible for these benefits regardless of their country of origin, once they have obtained the appropriate status (e.g., refugee). However, due to the prevalence of Ukrainians among immigrants in Poland (and among benefit recipients), debates on granting benefits to foreigners focus on arguments concerning the Ukrainian context and people from Ukraine. A substantive debate on this topic is hampered by the fact that data on benefits for foreigners are scattered, concern different periods, and some institutions do not publish complete data, but only provide selected statistics as press releases. According to data from the Central Statistical Office (GUS), in 2023, the state spent PLN 210 million on family benefits for refugees from Ukraine (PLN 80 million more than in 2022); this accounted for 1.7% of total state expenditure on family benefits. The forms of support included disability benefits (44% of benefits paid to Ukrainians), family allowances with supplements (35%), parental benefits (20%), and childbirth allowances (slightly over 1%) (GUS 2024: 1–2). Migrants also use the public healthcare system and free education: according to data from the National Health Fund (NFZ), the cost of treating migrants from Ukraine in 2022 amounted to PLN 515 million, and a budget of PLN 828 million is planned for 2023 (BGK 2025: 19). According to the most recent data, in the first half of 2025, foreigners received over PLN 1.6 billion in payments under the “Family 800 plus” program: the largest groups of beneficiaries were Ukrainians (305,000 people—PLN 1.4 billion), Belarusians (24,700 people—PLN 117.5 million), Romanians (7,000 people—PLN 26.1 million), Russians (4,000 people—PLN 18.5 million), Indians (2,800 people—PLN 12 million), and Vietnamese (2,700 people—PLN 12.5 million) (Glinka 2025).

In recent decades, as Polish society has become wealthier, the state has gradually increased the generosity of social benefits (as can be seen in the transformations of the 500+ and 800+ benefits). Paradoxically, the period in which poverty in Poland declined was associated with greater acceptance of social transfers from the state. A dramatic increase in extreme poverty occurred in 2023 (Szarfenberg 2024), and around the same time the number of migrants, including refugees, increased significantly in Poland. During this period, there was a reversal in the trend: support for austerity measures in welfare provision increased. In 2024, a higher percentage of Poles than before supported cuts in social assistance and family benefits (CBOS 2024: 4). Political initiatives to reduce benefits for certain groups became increasingly visible, as exemplified by the draft laws discussed here.

### **The Public Consultation Procedure for Laws: Origins and Social Relevance**

The topic of public consultation is analyzed in Polish research mainly from the perspective of the activity of residents and other stakeholders in local governments (e.g. Zielińska,

Kraszewski 2019; Czopek, Żołnierczyk 2017; Romaniuk 2021). However, consultation is also possible at the central level. The procedure for such public consultations is regulated by the Act of 7 July 2005 on lobbying activities in the law-making process. Pursuant to Article 9a of this act, which was added in 2024, public consultations of the draft law may be carried out after it has been submitted to the Sejm (lower house of the Polish parliament). They consist in submitting comments on the draft according to a detailed questionnaire (containing both closed questions and the possibility to speak freely).

A subsequent change introduced by the rules of procedure of the lower house of parliament was crucial for the intensification of public activism in the consultation of draft laws. On 31 October 2024, the amendment to the Rules of Procedure of the Lower House of the Parliament of 26 July 2024 came into force, which clarified an online procedure for public consultation of legal acts. Pursuant to Article 34a(1) of the Rules of Procedure, it is mandatory to carry out public consultations of legal acts submitted by MPs and by a group of at least 100,000 citizens in accordance with a legislative initiative pursuant to Article 118(2) of the Constitution. As a rule, the consultation procedure is not initiated when a legislative initiative is put forward by the Senate, the President or the Council of Ministers. However, the Speaker of the Lower House of the Parliament may also order public consultations before a legal act brought by the Senate or the President is referred to the first reading (Article 34a(2) of the Rules of Procedure). Participants in the consultation have 30 days to submit comments, but this deadline may be shortened in justified cases (Rule 34a(4) and (5)).

Pursuant to the Act as amended in 2024 participation in the online consultation procedure is open to natural persons acting on their own behalf or on behalf of a legal person or an entity other than a legal person. This means that the right to submit comments is not limited to Polish citizens. However, when submitting comments in the electronic system, the PESEL number of the person submitting the comments is required, so the natural person (Polish citizen or immigrant) should have this registration number.

The entire communication is in writing. Submitted comments are publicly available on the Parliament's website, in accordance with the principle of transparency in lawmaking (Article 9c(1) of the Act). Public access includes both the comments and the names of participants. If comments are made on behalf of another entity, the name and registered office of that entity shall be made available. Comments are therefore not anonymous, either for those operating the online system on the Sejm's website or for external readers. Submitted comments are, in principle, subject to monitoring and control: comments that contain illegal content (for example, violating personal rights, legally protected secrets or criminal provisions) are not made available (Article 9c(2)).

### **Research Material and Method**

The analysis covers two draft amendments concerning the Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Citizens in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of that Country. The first draft law was submitted by Law and Justice Members of Parliament (RPW/1978/2025) and concerns additional conditions for Ukrainian refugees to receive the upbringing

benefit (“Family 800 plus”), i.e. their employment or self-employment in Poland and their payment of taxes in Poland. The consultation lasted from 21 January 2025 to 20 February 2025, with 109 participants: 32 women and 77 men. The second draft was submitted by the Confederation’s MPs (RPW/2793/2025) and concerns the restriction of access of refugees from Ukraine to certain social benefits and restriction of their academic employment without competitions.<sup>1</sup> Consultations on this draft lasted from 24 January 2025 to 23 February 2025, with 223 participants: 38 women and 185 men.

The comments submitted on the legal acts are available in full to the public (online) on the website of the lower house of the parliament of the Republic of Poland. After an initial reading, comments were coded according to the criteria indicated in the van Oorschot model. In a subsequent step, an additional criterion of deservingness was observed and clearly distinguished in the narratives. Within these criteria, both comments supporting the provision of social benefits to immigrants and comments critical of the provision of benefits and advocating for their reduction were coded. Different deservingness criteria were found in some comments, so extracts were coded into different categories. The content, details and nuances of the argumentation was then analyzed within each criterion, as well as possible deviations from the model. This allowed the identification of universal as well as specific (for the context of Poland as a country of immigration) argumentation structures concerning the legitimacy of the welfare state. In addition, the keywords of each deservingness criterion were distinguished in order to better understand what main concepts, meanings and symbols operate within a given deservingness principle.

Table 1

**Views of consultation participants.**

**Responses to the questionnaire question: in the opinion of the consultation participant, is the adoption of the given law needed? Scale 1–5 (Summary for drafts RPW/1978/2025 and RPW/2793/2025)**

	RPW/2793/2025 female	RPW/2793/2025 male	RPW/1978/2025 female	RPW/1978/2025 male
1 Strongly agree	27	142	18	55
2 Rather agree	—	15	2	4
3 Neutral	—	2	1	2
4 Rather disagree	1	2	1	2
5 Strongly disagree	10	24	10	14

Source: *Sejm 2025*; *Sejm 2025b*.

With not only the ‘for’ or ‘against’ votes available, but also directly the verbatim narratives of individual consultation participants, it is possible to trace their rhetorical strategies. In the individual narratives, elements of the strategies ethos (credibility, speaker’s authority), logos (logic, rationality), and pathos (emotions) were sought, following the division from Aristotle’s ‘Rhetoric’ found in contemporary public discourses (cf. e.g. *Higgins, Walker 2012*). According to Aristotle, the art of persuasion must combine the ability to reason logically with the appropriate understanding of individual characters and human emotions, their origins, and how they are evoked (*Aristotle, Roberts 2004*). Aristotle’s

<sup>1</sup> In Poland, employment in academic positions must be preceded by a competitive recruitment process, but this rule has been waived for Ukrainian academics arriving in Poland after the outbreak of full-scale war.

three rhetorical strategies appear with varying intensity in different debates. Some theorists argue that “ethos” and “pathos” are less valuable means of persuasion because they are based on false impressions and prejudices of the audience, while “logos” is the most excellent method of argumentation (Braet 1992: 308). Other theorists of persuasion consider these methods of argumentation to be equivalent (*ibid.*): this approach, which does not hierarchize different types of rhetoric, has been adopted in this analysis. Taking these aspects into account can enrich knowledge of the rhetorical-argumentative approaches used by civil society activists within various forms of direct democracy.

Two caveats are necessary here. The first is a methodological one. The empirical material analyzed in the article is not based on a representative sample of Polish residents. Anyone can take part in the consultations, but the preponderance of votes in favor of the projects shows that supporters of the parties submitting the projects were the most likely to participate. In numerical terms, the breakdown shown in [Table 1](#) does not claim to be representative. However, the consultations contain content produced by both allies and opponents of the proposed solutions and the proposing parties. In this sense, they are excellent material to show the diversity of views on immigration in Poland. The second caveat concerns terminology. In the analysis, I use the term ‘refugees’ to refer to Ukrainian citizens fleeing the armed conflict on the territory of that country. Although in the legal sense these persons are covered by a separate law and do not seek refugee status in Poland, this situation is mainly due to administrative reasons (thus they can be covered by state assistance more quickly, without the lengthy refugee status procedure). “Refugees” is the most commonly used term in research on the migration of Ukrainians after the outbreak of the full-scale war (e.g. [Szeptycki 2024](#); [Gawel et al. 2024](#); [Dziekońska, Łuczaj, ed. 2024](#), [Luděk et al. 2023](#), and many other works). Ukrainian citizens fleeing a life-threatening war do in practice meet the prerequisites of refugee status, which is also reflected in political and media narratives regarding this group.<sup>2</sup>

## Results

The arguments used by the participants in the public consultation refer to the five categories identified by van Oorschot and to an additional criterion—financial burden—singled out for its frequency of occurrence and the variety of persuasive elements within it. The individual deservingness criteria have their own characteristic keywords that show the most important aspects combined with the criterion. These are summarized in a table. Some keywords are strongly linked to one type of deservingness category (notably the term ‘citizen’, connected with the identity narrative). Some terms were also observed to appear in great numbers in

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<sup>2</sup> Some experts emphasize that refugees from Ukraine are more accepted in Poland than refugees from non-European countries, which is influenced by their whiteness and Christian roots ([Balogun 2023: 1565, 1573](#)). However, the issue seems more complicated: over the years, Poland has accepted groups of refugees from countries attacked by authoritarian Russia, including Ukrainians (often secularized) and Chechens who profess Islam. An important factor reinforcing the positive perception of particular refugee groups seems to be the geopolitical context: the fact that refugees belong to nations that are victims of Russian aggression, regardless of their denomination, religiousness, and European or non-European origin. This (more or less lasting) empathy stems largely from a sense of shared threats, fears of Russia’s expansionist policy, and armed conflict in Poland. This topic requires further in-depth research.

the arguments of the participants in the consultation, but accompanying different categories of deservingness (notably the important but variously understood term ‘equality’). Equality is important for all, but for those in favour of limiting social benefits, it is associated with the elimination of benefits perceived as privileging, while for those in favour of maintaining current assistance to refugees, it is associated with the same treatment of children from Polish and Ukrainian families. Using notions of equality or justice also allows one to root one’s position in ethical argumentation: this gives a moral advantage in the debate and therefore has a strong potential to legitimize/delegitimize policy proposals.

Table 2

**Keywords of each narrative type and their frequency  
(ranked in order from most frequent in the core material)**

Keywords (in brackets link to type(s) of deservingness narrative)	Number of references RPW/1978/2025		Number of references RPW/2793/2025		References (total)	
	Core material	Additional material	Core material	Additional material	Core material	Additional material
Citizen / citizenship ( <i>identity</i> )	27	24	60	23	87	47
Work / work ( <i>control, reciprocity</i> )	35	41	23	13	58	54
Children / child ( <i>needs, control</i> )	53	63	1	5	54	68
Equality, equal ( <i>identity, reciprocity, needs</i> )	8	7	19	5	27	12
Economy / economic ( <i>costs, reciprocity</i> )	11	12	5	9	16	21
Justice ( <i>identity, reciprocity</i> )	1	6	12	3	13	9
Employment/self-employment ( <i>control, reciprocity</i> )	9	22	2	1	11	23
War/war ( <i>needs, control, reciprocity</i> )	3	1	7	1	10	2
Budget ( <i>costs, reciprocity</i> )	8	17	1	5	9	22

Own elaboration (Core material = comments to the law as a whole. Additional material = comments to the remaining survey questions and specific articles of the draft law).

The rhetorical triad in the form of ethos, pathos and logos was clearly visible in the arguments within each of van Oorschot’s categories: it complemented the substantive arguments and strengthened their persuasiveness. Elements of pathos-type rhetoric took the form of references to compassion and empathy towards the victims of war fleeing Ukraine, references to patriotic and pro-state values. There was also an element based on emotions and values (pathos) in calls for decency in public debate and for not fuelling social conflicts during the war in the neighboring country and the election campaign in Poland. The second key rhetorical strategy was the logos model: rational and logical arguments supported by the citation of numerical data, referring to the complex relationship between the welfare role of the state and demography, defence, integration of migrants. In a way, the rhetorical aspect of ethos was problematic: it did not refer to public authorities or representatives of authorities. Instead, the ethos element, i.e. enhancing credibility, included references to the personal experiences of the participants in the consultation, their interactions with refugees and the beliefs they developed about Ukrainian citizens in Poland. An element of ethos-type rhetoric was also anchoring one’s argumentation in

constitutional norms and direct references to the Constitution, in particular references to the principles of non-discrimination, justice and equality. An interesting element of ethos rhetoric was also to support the draft law while distancing oneself from the political party proposing the changes (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no. 10702). This can be understood as a persuasive strategy by self-presenting oneself as a 'neutral observer' who wants to convince people from both sides of a polarized political debate.

### **Identity**

A sense of community is a fundamental point of reference in understanding who should be supported within the welfare state and why. The identity argumentation focuses on citizenship as a criterion of belonging and deservingness. Thus, the formal legal bond between the state and its residents is shown as the most important one from the perspective of participation in the welfare benefits system. Participants in the consultation do not refer to such criteria as ethnicity, multi-generational presence or cultural identification.

A country, as a political unit, has a pool of citizens who belong here. Towards these citizens the country, and its public institutions, have special obligations. The state must first and foremost care for its citizens, their wellbeing, and only after that about third country nationals (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 10769)

Unequal treatment. The citizen should come first. If the government suddenly finds money to [support] immigrants, that means that it could have helped Poles before (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 11615)

I think Ukrainian citizens should get help from our state, but certainly not the same amount as a Polish citizen (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10702)

This kind of act is by all means necessary, because there are no reasons whatsoever to treat foreign persons in the same way, or even better than our own citizens (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 13813)

Within the identity argumentation, there are claims of a sense of injustice and privileging of one group. The argumentation also makes strong references to the principles of equality and justice. In the rhetorical dimension, there is an overlap between elements of persuasion of the logos type (the law as an expression of the desire for social cohesion, sustainable development) and pathos (emphasizing emotions such as trust in the state, a sense of being wronged).

Long-term maintenance of the privileged status of one national group may lead to sense of injustice among Polish citizens and other immigrant groups. The law assumes that all citizens regardless of national identity [narodowości] should be treated equally. This equality encompasses access to social benefits, healthcare, education, and other public services. The draft law aims at ensuring that Polish citizens will not be treated as second category citizens in their own country. Implementing equal conditions of use of welfare system and public system is fundamental to maintaining social cohesion and citizens' trust to state institutions. Evening out conditions of usage of welfare system will allow a more effective management of public resources and fair allocation of resources among all those in need. It will also prevent potential abuses of the welfare system by individuals who take advantage of privileges in an unfair manner. Summing up, the proposed draft law aims at reinstating justice and fairness in access to social benefits, which is necessary to maintain social cohesion and sustainable growth of the Republic of Poland (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 10749).

No other social group from another country should have privileges in Poland in comparison to Polish citizens (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 14551).

Privileging citizens of third countries in relation to Polish citizens in any extent is unjustified and unfair (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 11029).

Identity motivation is also sometimes cited as an argument for granting benefits to Ukrainian citizens. From the perspective of this narrative, the presence of migrants is necessary for the development of the country, but requires a stratification. Within the hierarchy of usefulness, migrants from a neighboring Slavic country are preferred because they will more easily assimilate the local culture, above all the language. The narrative draws attention to the expectation of assimilation as a consequence of staying in the host country, which is a common expectation for foreigners coming to Poland (Scovil 2025).

Ukrainian workforce is a better alternative than people from Arab or African countries, even due to easier acquisition of Polish language skills than people from more distant countries, and also because of easier assimilation with the Polish society (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 10830).

Identity is a key criterion of deservingness in the arguments of those consulting on the two draft laws. This is even evidenced by the frequency of reference to the concept of citizenship in the narratives (the most frequent key word in RPW/2793/2025 and the third most frequent in RPW/1978/2025). The numerous references to the criterion of identity show the great importance of symbolic divisions, a sense of social cohesion and political community defined by legal ties (citizenship status).

### Needs

The argumentation referring to needs presupposes the selectivity of welfare state assistance, within which the level of income is of great importance. According to the argumentation below, people with lower incomes are more deserving of benefits regardless of their citizenship, i.e. their status as a Polish citizen or a foreigner. Although different deservingness criteria coexist in the various comments of the consultees, sometimes the opposite is the case: a focus on one argument with a parallel exclusion of another deservingness criterion as irrelevant. This is in line with the observations of Maria Theiss, who, when examining debates about refugees' use of social benefits in Poland, emphasized that the deservingness criteria adopted by Poles are diverse and sometimes contradictory (Theiss 2023: 971). In the following case, one can observe a combination of the needs argument (low income) and the attitudes argument (according to the consultant's opinion, benefit recipients assume that 'the state will give them'), and at the same time a separation of the identity criterion and the needs criterion is visible: needs as a deservingness criterion are taken into account separately from citizenship. The author of the commentary postulates that the income criterion should be applied to both Ukrainian and Polish citizens.

Generally the program should be restricted, not only for Ukrainian citizens, there are people who do not work at all and had a possibility [to receive benefits] because they assume that the state will give them and I have it for my expenses, personally I know a case and probably there are more, a working individual works precisely for such people. It is best to restrict 'benefits' by introducing income criterion, the lowest minimal wage, give it to those most in need, the fact that one person in a family works is rather not [a good criterion] because most people work and one person can earn more than for example two (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 10753).

In some narratives, the criterion of need appears as an argument for the possibility for people from Ukraine to benefit from social benefits. In particular, the consultants draw attention to the problems of single mothers whose partners remained in Ukraine due to military mobilization. The category of need is understood through the prism of a difficult personal situation and the conditions of the host country, i.e. difficulties on the labor market in the new place of residence.

Taking away benefits from single mothers whose partners fight in the frontline, or who lost their jobs for different reasons (injury that makes it impossible to work) is not a good idea (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 10830).

Many single mothers do not have access to the labor market due to lack of systemic solutions that enable flexible employment, part-time jobs, or access to kindergartens and daycare centers (questionnaire no 10839, RPW/1978/2025).

Ukrainian citizens who are in Poland as parent of children raised here, cannot be deprived of the benefit only because they are not employed or self-employed. For example, should mothers of disabled children, who require help that makes employment impossible, be deprived of 800+ benefit? (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 11450).

Arguments about need can be part of the argumentative strategy of proponents of broad welfare benefits for refugees as well as proponents of reducing support. The surveyed cases of the consulted laws show both situations. The argumentative strategies refer both to the participants' own experiences ('I personally know such a case myself') and to generalizations ('many mothers'). The positions presented by the consultees under the needs criterion refer to economic aspects (income criterion), family aspects (single mothers or large families), systemic aspects (availability of employment), medical aspects (disability, illness).

## Reciprocity

The criterion of reciprocity is also fundamental in the assessments formulated during the public consultation. Previous analyses have indicated that it is primarily a sense of reciprocity, rather than altruism, that determines positive attitudes toward immigrants' social rights, and residents strongly oppose social assistance if they believe that beneficiaries are abusing the welfare system principles (Reeskens, van Oorschot 2012: 132–133; Alesina et al. 2001: 227). The comments made during public consultations show that the perceived lack of reciprocity, in particular the non-payment of taxes or social security contributions, leads to a sense of social injustice and weakens solidarity. The image of a refugee victimized by war is being replaced by that of a person abusing social welfare benefits:

Since healthcare is financed from contributions, it seems only fair that all beneficiaries bear costs (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 14295).

It will reduce state spending for Ukrainians, who anyway do not support Polish economy by paying taxes (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 10825).

The law is very important in the context of reducing social [benefits] for non-working Ukrainian citizens (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10807).

The record state debt does not allow Poles who pay taxes to suffer from scarcity, providing livelihood for Ukrainians who mostly return to their homes and support Ukrainian economy with this money because they spend them there (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 10867).

An element of the logos rhetoric in the reciprocity narratives is the comparison with the welfare policies of other countries and their consequences (quoted below). However, this is a comparison with a high degree of generality and without specific examples. Advocates of the benefit capping project refer to the experience of other countries that have been receiving immigrants for longer than Poland, and to migration for benefits rather than for work. It can be assumed that the comments of the participants in the consultation are influenced not so much by research findings on the concept of welfare magnets, but by the increasingly widespread media coverage in Poland, focusing on Germany as a destination country for migrants using and abusing welfare state institutions. As the consultations show, in matters of social policy, the Western European state has gone from being a role model that Poland should ‘catch up with’ to being a model cautionary tale—fraught with weaknesses to be avoided in policy. In the narrative below, the category of reciprocity is combined with the category of need: foreigners who ‘really need support’ and ‘contribute to development’ deserve help. The narrative also shows how the initiation of a discussion about refugees from Ukraine—who are affected by the law and the draft amendment—gradually leads to an expansion of this debate to other groups of foreigners (the commentary refers to immigrants in general, without mentioning refugees and without specifying the country of origin).

Analysis of experiences of other countries shows that uncontrolled giveaways of social benefits may lead to inflow of immigrants who are not interested in professional activities, but only using social systems. Introducing aforementioned conditions will allow us to avoid such problems and ensure that help will effectively support those who really need assistance, and contribute to economic and social development of the Republic of Poland (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10662).

Not all participants interpret the principle of reciprocity solely through the prism of taxes and contributions to the Social Security Institution. In some narratives, the argument about the deteriorating demographic situation in Poland comes to the fore. Participants emphasize the need to pay social benefits as part of attracting immigrants with young children to the country who will be active in the local labor market in the future, thereby improving the performance of the social benefits system.

In the situation of a dramatic demographic decline the only real solution is complementing the emerging population shortage with help of citizens from other states, in the best possible option from neighboring states such as Ukraine and Belarus. Among those citizens of Ukraine who stay in Poland, ca. 80% work and pay taxes (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10743).

If a state wants to encourage persons from Ukraine and their children who actually will grow up here (they will not be children forever) and will become members of the Polish society who pay taxes, and Polish citizens, to remain here, spend money here, and work for the Polish GDP. One should also note how low share of Ukrainian people who live here do not work and do not pay taxes here, such data are available and it is not a secret that it is almost a non-existent problem (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 10830).

The very fact that Ukrainian children are raised in Poland, attend Polish schools, learn Polish language and maybe will start working here one day—justifies sufficiently equal treatment with Polish children. This is an investment

in the future in the face of demographic catastrophe which threatens Poland (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 11450).

In the time of drastically decreasing fertility rate all projects that may discourage from having, raising, settling in Poland with children are simply harmful for us all. In a long-term perspective, they can generate more social problems than benefits (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10833).

Another aspect of reciprocity raised by those supporting social benefits for Ukrainian citizens is the role of Ukraine in defending Europe against Putin's military aggression. From this perspective, the payment of social benefits is seen as an adequate repayment for the actions of the Ukrainian military, which contribute to Poland's security.

The law does not take into account the strategic significance for Poland of any kind of help for Ukrainian fight. In my opinion, [the draft law] in the current shape represents Russian interests and aims at weakening Polish-Ukrainian alliance. It is harmful for the Polish national interest (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 11428).

The principle of reciprocity is used both to emphasize that, through social benefits, Poland indirectly supports the Ukrainian military in their fight, and to point out that reciprocity in the form of military defence is not sufficient. The presence of Ukrainian men of conscription age in Poland is cited as an argument for reducing support for Ukrainian refugees from the welfare state:

Many young men are in our country and they should be in Ukraine fighting for their country (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10702).

A transactional perspective is common in the public consultation, but the equivalence of benefits is not always understood solely in financial terms. An analysis of the arguments about reciprocity shows that it is interpreted in various ways, and may have different meanings for individual participants. An important function is the traditional understanding of reciprocity as contributions and payments from the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) and the fulfilment of tax obligations. But this is not the only argument within the broad narrative of reciprocity, or mutual benefit. Another way in which reciprocity is understood is in terms of improving demographics by foreigners in order to guarantee the future functioning of Social Security. Moreover, reciprocity is also interpreted through the prism of the defensive function of the Ukrainian military and social benefits as an element of reciprocity. The various arguments formulated under this criterion, demonstrate that the principle of reciprocity is used to justify both positions in favour of social benefits for Ukrainian citizens and views about limiting such benefits.

### **Control**

The criterion of control implies, it is worth helping mainly those benefit recipients who are disadvantaged against their will. Referring to this criterion implies an assumption that this is not always the case. According to this approach, the state should promote desirable qualities such as agency, diligence, independence, striving for self-reliance, thereby promoting livelihoods without relying on social benefits. For opponents of the payment of social

benefits, a key topos is the image of a refugee from Ukraine who can work but intentionally does not take up employment. This is the type of argument also noted in other European countries, where the stereotype of the lazy, passive refugee has been politically linked to calls for the introduction of compulsory work (Scheibelhofer 2017: 105).

We cannot afford providing for people who do not want to work. Social benefits should be for working people, if they are capable of [work] (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 10845).

Three years is sufficient time to become independent in Poland and be the subject to the same law as everyone, or go somewhere else (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 15856).

The control criterion is also referred to by those who support the payment of social benefits to refugees. They point out that the purpose of the 800 plus benefit is to financially support minors in the family and that children should not be punished for the behavior of adults or suffer financial consequences as a result of their parents' status. In the light of the control criterion, children deserve benefits especially because they are dependent on their parents and cannot support themselves or make their own decisions.

Children should not bear the consequences of a professional status of their parents, or their parents' citizenship: every child has an equal right to support and decent conditions of life and education. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in art. 24 emphasizes that 'Children shall have the right to such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being.' and that 'In all actions relating to children, whether taken by the Union institutions and bodies, or those of the Member States, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration.' A decision to restrict benefits for some families will lead to serious social problems, which will have to be solved by the state in a longer perspective. Poland does not currently have any effective tool to dislocate people on the territory of Ukraine, where the war still continues. In practice it means that families with children will stay in Poland, but without the support which allowed them to survive and lead a normal life. As a result, lack of means of subsistence and for children's education will lead to growing social inequalities, marginalization and exclusion, and consequently to higher costs of social intervention in the future (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10839).

It is pointed out that not only children, but also those adult refugee women who have been left alone in Poland, without a partner remaining in Ukraine, are less able to control their own situation. The consultation material seems to confirm the findings of Knotz et al. (2022), according to which the assessment of the deservingness also takes into account the efforts of the benefits recipients to be socially useful, e.g., the willingness of the unemployed to take up employment and seek work (regardless of the outcome).

Isn't the fact of non-employment the consequence of lack of possibility to leave children with the second parent (because he is currently defending his country)? It is an exceptional situation. Let's be humans because we would expect help too if we were in the same situation. Maybe each case should be examined individually. Examine why somebody is not employed. The same for Polish citizens (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10747).

The reference to the control criterion leads some of the consultees to formulate demands for a better policy for the professional activation of parents (regardless of their citizenship).

Instead of restricting support for children who remain in Poland, the government should focus on actual solutions supporting families and pro-family policy. It is necessary to: —develop flexible forms of employment adapted to parents; —possible associating of 800+ with the social security system so that these people have any kind of contract (eg. mandate contract) or unregistered economic activities, or be unemployed—examining if this is a real problem. The proposed changes in 800+ program do not solve demographic problems, but also enhance the social crisis, and even worse, violate the fundamental child's rights and principles of equality enshrined in Polish and

European law. Poland requires a wise, long-term social policy, and not short-sighted decisions, which can lead to catastrophic results (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10839).

The criterion of control is invoked by both supporters and opponents of the payment of social benefits to Ukrainian citizens in Poland. Two vivid stereotypes, of lazy adult refugees and vulnerable innocent refugee children, are confronted as opposite faces of the control narrative. While advocates of benefit capping emphasize the ‘dilly-dallying’ effect of benefits and the reluctance of refugees to apply for work, those supporting the payment of benefits to Ukrainians emphasize the lack of control of children and single mothers over social circumstances. Both types of argument are united by the belief that social benefits deservingness is linked to the ability or inability to shape one’s own destiny.

### Attitudes

A peripheral theme in the narratives is the attitudes of those in need towards the support they receive. According to van Oorschot’s model, attitudes of gratitude foster a willingness to help and views of deserving help. However, references to this issue are rare in the sample and, when they do appear, they are side and complementary, accompanying other more important arguments:

I understand the indignation of some people because of the attitudes of some Ukrainian citizens who think that ‘they just deserve it’ (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10747).

As with the other narratives, the topos of attitudes appears both in the narratives of those opting for social support for Ukrainian citizens and those opposing the provision of such support. The latter protest against the generalization of individual cases of inappropriate behavior by refugees to the entire Ukrainian community, arguing that such generalizations are hurtful. They stress that the problem for the Ukrainian community is that the example of a few individuals leads to the construction of a harmful negative stereotype that has nothing to do with the actual Ukrainian community. In the following example, the argumentation is reinforced with rhetorical questions and reference to the personal experiences of the participant in the consultation. It also uses analogy to evoke empathy and compassion in the audience (pathos strategy).

There is a problem because Polish people are upset when they see individuals from Ukraine who are fraudsters or who are rude for them, and the generalize it over everyone. Instead of escalating the topic the politicians should maybe present actual data about who takes money and tone down emotions and explain to people that one case is not the same as a wave of cases. If a Pole goes abroad and drinks, and a local sees him, should they think that all Poles are drunkards? Do we have to assume that an eye for an eye and if Poles used to be deemed drunkards then now Ukrainians should be called names? I have Ukrainian friends and they are decent and they are not fraudsters (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 11010).

Such statements defending the Ukrainian community do not deny the value of the criterion of migrants’ attitudes towards the host society for assessing their deservingness, but negate the fact that this assessment is hastily formulated as negative.

An interesting element of the debate within the category of attitudes of benefit recipients is the argument about the reinforcement of attitudes of distrust and the conflation of

different social groups when benefits are withdrawn. This is an argument in which the belief in the negative role of the state (benefit withdrawal) is linked to the intensification of hostile attitudes of refugees (who have had their benefits withdrawn).

The law sets a precedent for taking away benefits from Polish families and antagonizes in an unnecessary way citizens of Ukraine coming to Poland. It threatens to create a base for terrorist attacks in the future. And activities in the [draft law] are in my opinion harmful for the future and development of Poland (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 13647).

The above narrative is an example of emotional persuasion (pathos), based on the intentional induction of fear: after the withdrawal of benefits from Ukrainian citizens, the time will come to withdraw benefits from Polish citizens. In addition, as the author argues, the withdrawal of benefits (and, as one can guess, the consequent pauperization) is supposed to contribute to the creation of a ‘base for terrorist attacks.’

### **Financial Burden**

In addition to the typology proposed by van Oorschot, a type of argumentation strongly present in many narratives is the issue of the costs of payments to foreigners. Reference to this characteristic implies that some migrants or groups of migrants need higher or longer-lasting social benefit payments, while others expect only short-term, point-in-time financial support. Under the financial burden criterion, aspects such as the amount of benefits, their regular recurrent nature and their long-term duration are raised. The cost criterion furthermore influences the evaluation of other criteria: it assumes that deservingness in the form of reciprocity, group identity, control and attitudes is most positive when the support does not generate high costs and is not very taxing on the budget. However, the higher the perceived cost to the state, the lower the acceptance of helping a group: smaller groups are helped more readily than larger groups; low-value help is given more readily than higher-value help, and short-term help is more accepted than long-term help.

The participants of public consultations emphasize that the provisions enabling the transfer of social benefits to Ukrainian citizens have been in place since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the influx of refugees into Poland, and therefore need updating and adapting to the new social situation after three years. While at the beginning state assistance to Ukrainians was very positively evaluated, the longevity of the provision of benefits from the state budget has started to provoke criticism, in particular the experience of Polish residents with the crowded public health service leads to this criticism:

The war started over 3 years ago, the shock it caused justified help, but the situation is different now, everyone I know has financial problems. Public healthcare became so overloaded that in practice nobody can use it in case of health problems (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 10845).

I hope that this issue will be regulated. During the Law and Justice government it was the same and they said nothing, they encouraged us to solidarity, and now they see that the costs for the state are too big. This situation is because of them, and now they woke up to a bad situation (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10702).

It is necessary, it will relieve the burden on ZUS [Polish Security Institution] (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 11545).

Participants of the consultations also highlight other important expenditures from the state budget, which lead them to conclude that social benefits for Ukrainian citizens should be limited. Within the criterion of financial burden, a detailed calculation and comparison of the costs of various expenditures as part of an argumentative and rhetorical strategy appealing to logic and unbiased data (logos strategy) is also characteristic.

Taking into account the projected deficit and the urgent state needs, such as modernizing the energetic infrastructure, it is necessary to introduce savings (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 14295).

Currently (data from I-X'24 ZUS) totally 2,4 billion zlotys were paid to Ukrainian citizens as a family benefit 800+. Citizens wait to doctors in very long queues (according to the last NFZ report, 1572 to cure neurotic disorders) Taking into account insufficient financing of the healthcare system, and deficit of the National Healthcare Fund, designed in 2025 at 289 billion zlotys, it is justified to withdraw 800+ benefit from Ukrainian citizens and transfer these funds to healthcare (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10664).

Arguments relating to financial burden also arise among supporters of paying social benefits to Ukrainian citizens. As the author of the following commentary points out, these expenses are small from the perspective of the entire state budget, and their reduction will not contribute to improving the state finances, although it will reinforce social divisions and animosities. It is characteristic to refer to the social responsibility of politicians and other stakeholders, and to state values, i.e. the Polish *raison d'état* (pathos strategy).

Real influence of the law on the costs of 800+ program is minimal, it is just a populist, potentially tragic in consequences, element of pushing away Ukrainian citizens from Poland. The designers of this law looking no further than one day ahead, do not foresee negative consequences of their actions, and even more so they do not propose solutions to the problems which this law can cause. Dramatically bad and harmful project which should be fully rejected by any pro-state person who thinks realistically and logically (RPW/1978/2025, questionnaire no 10743).

Another comment highlights the administrative costs of increasing scrutiny of who receives benefits.

Nobody should be deprived of unconditional social help. Introducing conditions to reception of help will increase the bureaucratic costs. Providing help only to those who work will increase the gap between those who found a job and those who cannot find it, and it will further worsen the situation of the latter (RPW/2793/2025, questionnaire no 11240).

The financial burden criterion is mainly justified by economic, financial and budgetary arguments, and there are often elements of justification based on the duration of the regulation and the length of the state assistance.

## Discussion

Public consultations have become an important forum for negotiating migrant and refugee policy. The analysis of the material from the public consultations concerning the amendments to the Law on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine has shown the main arguments and challenges related to the participation of foreigners in the institutions of the welfare state. To a large extent, they coincide with the typology formulated by van Oorschot (2000): the criteria of responsibility of welfare clients for their life, the level of their needs, identification with aid recipients

and reciprocity are deeply embedded in the debate on the participation of Ukrainian refugees in welfare system. In addition, an analysis of the narratives makes it possible to distinguish one more criterion of deservingness: this is the criterion of financial burden, i.e. the argument that those in need of assistance for a short time are more accepted than those in need of assistance for a longer time resonates strongly in the opinions presented in the consultations for the law, and the strong burden of assistance on the state budget is cited as an argument against social transfers. The Polish case study confirms earlier findings that only a small percentage of host country residents accept unconditional access to welfare benefits for foreigners, but that the majority of people support the usage of social welfare system by immigrants on the basis of reciprocity and mutual benefit (Reeskens, van Oorschot 2012: 132).

Beliefs about the fairness of social transfers, attitudes towards social benefits and risk-sharing principles are part of the legitimacy of the welfare state. Arguments about deservingness criteria do not operate in isolation, but are part of more elaborate narrative grids. Legitimization/delegitimization strategies are often based on narrative structures within which certain deservingness criteria co-occur. In a legitimization strategy, focused on caring, the criteria of need and control co-occur: it emphasizes the characteristics of the recipients and the nature of the barriers and discrimination experienced. The other main legitimacy strategy, described here as communitarian, co-occurs with the criteria of identity, reciprocity and cost: it focuses on the characteristics of the community understood as a system of relations and dependencies in which elements (individuals, institutions) draw on each other in various periods and life stages. However, these are not the only models: other networks of co-occurring arguments are also possible, as the detailed analysis has demonstrated.

Persuasiveness of the pathos, logos and ethos type was commonly used by both supporters and opponents of the draft laws under consultation. The research material demonstrates the universality of these rhetorical strategies in discussions about contemporary politics. The manipulation of emotions and the mood of the audience (pathos) is not reserved for politicians, it is also used by citizens expressing themselves within the official channels of communication with the authorities. However, it is not justified to treat residents, citizens and voters as unconditionally subject to emotions in politics: rhetoric of the logos type, referring to facts and figures, is strongly present in the commentaries, demonstrating the seriousness of such rhetorical strategies and their influence.

## Conclusion

The public debate on benefits for Ukrainians has much deeper roots and significance than being a politicized dispute over welfare benefits for a segment within the refugee community. It may be important in determining what welfare state model is accepted and implemented in Poland. On the one hand, the current model may be moving towards a conservative state (as defined by Esping-Andersen), based on a close link between benefits and social security contributions, as well as a sense of community and ethnic solidarity. On the other hand, universal access to social welfare and the relative independence of benefits from an individual's contributions to the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) would be a step towards a model described in Esping-Andersen's typology as a "social democratic

type,” providing more egalitarian and universal access to benefits. The public debate on deservingness, and the strategies of legitimizing deservingness indicated by participants show that there is greater preference of the former model. This type of welfare state rewards reciprocity and activity in the labor market. This preference is also due to the country’s economic situation: the social democratic model is found in the wealthy Scandinavian countries, where prosperity indicators are higher than in Poland. Moreover, the liberal discourse prevalent in Polish politics and media since the 1990s has emphasized the need for Poles to work hard and make sacrifices to achieve economic development and a better life for future generations, as well as to ‘catch up’ with the West. This discourse also contributes to Poles’ distrust of more egalitarian and generous welfare models.

In a country undergoing a profound demographic transition (the influx of refugees and the changing demographic structure of the country), the public debate about the legitimacy of the ways in which the welfare state acts towards foreigners is particularly important. It shows the transformation of notions of community, solidarity and socially desirable values under conditions of increasing social diversity. Attitudes towards the migrants’ welfare participation are a gauge of social cohesion and the processes of symbolic boundary formation in contemporary communities. In this sense, the public consultation concerning the issue of social benefits for people from Ukraine is a manifestation of the broader view of Poles on the phenomenon of immigration, the rules of immigrants’ presence in the host country, the approved mechanisms of relationship-building, social attachment and participation of immigrant groups in social well-being. The lively response during the public consultation of the draft laws, as well as the frequent media coverage of welfare benefits for immigrants, show that immigration issues have become one of the key themes in Polish politics, reflecting political cleavages between different political options. They have the potential to influence citizens’ voting behaviors because they trigger emotions, are highly engaging and are deeply embedded in opposing political narratives.

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