



Mariana Kitsa, PhD.  
Lviv Polytechnic National University  
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication  
Kn. Romana str.3  
Lviv, 79000, Ukraine  
mariana.o.kitsa@lpnu.ua  
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0704-5012

Mariana Kitsa is an Associate Professor, a guarantor of an undergraduate programme of Journalism in the Department of journalism and mass communication, Lviv Polytechnic National University. She is also an expert in NAQA, Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and National Research Foundation of Ukraine as well as Editor-in-Chief of the specialised Ukrainian scientific journal on social communications. She is the author of a monograph entitled *Pathogenic Advertising in the Ukrainian Print Media*, three chapters in collective monographs, and more than 80 scientific articles in the field of communication and two handbooks. Her research interests include disinformation, harmful narratives in media content, influence on public opinion, as well as the image of Ukraine and Ukrainians in different countries during the Russian-Ukrainian war.

# SHAPING PERCEPTIONS: A STUDY OF UKRAINE AND UKRAINIANS IN SLOVAK MEDIA THROUGHOUT TWO YEARS OF WAR

**Mariana KITSÁ**

## **ABSTRACT:**

This article presents the results of quantitative, qualitative and comparative analysis of the portrayal of Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Slovak media, shedding light on the nuanced dynamics of cross-border perceptions and media representations. The main method of research was a content analysis of two Slovak media – Denník N and Hospodárske noviny. The print and online versions of these media were examined for November and December 2022 and 2023, and April 2024. In total, 600 publications were examined in detail (N = 600). The findings reveal a complex and multifaceted picture of how Ukraine and its people are depicted in the Slovak media. The analysis identifies recurring themes of the war in Ukraine from different aspects, such as the situation on the battlefield, the humanitarian crisis, the attitude to the refugees, etc. The typical topics, genres as well as the image of Ukrainians are outlined.

## **KEYWORDS:**

Denník N, Hospodárske noviny, Slovak media, Ukraine, Ukrainians, war

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# 1 Introduction

Journalism has always been a reflection of all important events in society. It is undeniable that the beginning of the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which took place on February 24, 2022, drew the attention of all the world's media to what was happening. Subsequently, they began to mention the invaded country very often in their materials. Foreign media did not omit the topic of the war in Ukraine. The media of the cross-border neighbouring countries, especially the countries of the Visegrad Four, are particularly attentive to the topic of the war in Ukraine. Poland and the Czech Republic have demonstrated their full support for Ukraine from the beginning of the war in Ukraine and are ready to help in all areas. Hungary is known for its Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's close relations with Russia. Upon his arrival at the European Council summit in Brussels on October 26, 2023, he stated that Hungary continues to communicate with Russia "for the sake of peace". Speaking to journalists, Orbán described Budapest's policy in this direction as "very transparent", adding that it "differs from the majority" (Radio Liberty, 2023).

Slovakia's stance on the war in Ukraine, on the other hand, is not so clear. Since the beginning of the full-scale war, the Slovak leadership has expressed its support for Ukraine, helped with weapons and ammunition, and condemned Russia's actions. At the same time, the Slovak magazine *Denník N* published an article entitled "In Slovakia, the desire for Russia to win the war prevails" (Bán, 2022). The survey conducted in July by the sociological service MNFORCE, the PR agency Seesame and the Slovak Academy of Sciences was published in the Slovak media. In addition, Slovaks have the worst attitude towards Ukrainian refugees amongst the V4 countries. According to the survey by the Focus agency, Slovaks (52%) feel the most hostility towards Ukrainian refugees, while Poles (11%), Hungarians (15%) and Czechs (25%) feel the least (Diachuk, 2023). When comparing the four countries, the Slovaks stand out from the others – 68% of them want the "support" for Ukrainians to decrease. In addition, the majority of respondents believe that war refugees from Ukraine should not have access to free medical care and, together with Hungarians, express dissatisfaction with the influx of refugees due to the possible loss of jobs.

Kazaz, researcher at the Centre for Democracy and Sustainability at GLOBSEC, says that one of the reasons for such an attitude is party politics. She believes that this is one of the decisive factors influencing the perception of war refugees. Voters of parties that cultivate hostile rhetoric towards refugees are significantly more likely to perceive the presence of Ukrainians negatively. Parliamentary election was held in Slovakia on September 30, 2023, with the populist SMER-SSD party of former Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico winning the majority of votes (23%). It may therefore have an influence on the attitude of Slovaks towards Ukraine in the coming years. However, the most important instrument for shaping public opinion remains the media, which can spread or refute pro-Russian narratives. As sociologist Michal Vašečka emphasised in an interview with Polish Radio (Polskie Radio, 2024), about half of Slovaks are exposed to disinformation. Therefore, it is important to examine the main topics, genres and mood of publications in the Slovak media and to find out whether the presentation of events in Ukraine and the image of Ukrainian authorities, politics, refugees, etc. has changed.

## 2 Methods and Methodology

During the war in Ukraine, help and support from other countries has been crucial. Some of the countries that are helping Ukraine the most are the four Visegrad countries. Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary have taken in many Ukrainian refugees, and Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia continue to help Ukraine militarily, economically and socially. Examining the image of Ukraine in the Slovak media can provide insights into perceptions, coverage and narratives about Ukraine in Slovakia. Below are some points that were considered in such an investigation: news coverage, narratives and framing, political context, social and cultural factors.

By examining the image of Ukraine in the Slovak media through these different lenses, we can gain a deeper understanding of how Ukraine is portrayed, perceived and discussed in the Slovak media landscape. The image of Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Slovak media can shape public opinion and influence further support for Ukraine. The following research methods were used: the theoretical method (an overview of the scientific literature on the topic of the media landscape in Slovakia and the attitudes of the Slovakian population towards Ukraine and Ukrainians based on the surveys was provided), the search method (this method was used to search the archives of media content, especially by keywords), content analysis (to answer the question of whether the Russian-Ukrainian war is covered in the Slovakian media or not), the systematic method (to highlight and systematise topics about the war in Slovak online and print media), the framing method (how the information is structured and presented in a narrative and how it can be interpreted), and the comparative method (the number of publications in 2022 and 2023 in online and print versions was compared).

Two Slovakian media were selected for the content analysis – Denník N and Hospodárske noviny. According to the Brand Trust Scores, these two media are among the 10 most reliable and trustworthy media in Slovakia. Denník N has 37% trust level amongst the audience, and Hospodárske noviny 48% (Chlebcová Hečková & Smith, 2023). Both media have online and print versions. In the online versions, news content is usually prioritised, while analytical or opinion-based material can be published more often in the print newspapers. Therefore, both the online and print versions of Denník N and Hospodárske noviny were analysed. The time frame for the study was November and December of 2022 and 2023 and the first half of April 2024. These periods were selected for political reasons. On September 30, 2023, parliamentary election was held in Slovakia, in which the populist party SMER-SSD under the leadership of former Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico won the majority of votes (23%) (Csányi, 2023). Robert Fico is known for his pro-Russian stance, so it was important to investigate whether the coverage in the Slovakian media had changed compared to the same period last year. In addition, the second round of the presidential election in Slovakia took place on April 6, in which the pro-Russian candidate Pellegrini won. Therefore, it was useful to analyse the rhetoric in selected Slovak media before and one week after the election. The research questions were as follows:

*RQ 1: What is the trend in the number, genres and topics of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians published in Denník N and Hospodárske noviny during the chosen period?*

*RQ 2: What influence did the elections in Slovakia have on the topics, scope and tone of journalistic content in the selected media?*

*RQ 3: What are the typical images of Ukraine and Ukrainians in the Slovak media based on their representation in the media texts?*

For the content analyses of the print versions of the media, the archives of the newspaper Hospodárske noviny for the months of November and December 2022 and 2023 were evaluated. The April issues of the newspaper were observed daily. Since the archive of Denník N was not available in the library, a Club N subscription to this media was purchased, which provided access to all print issues of this media. Thus, the Denník N newspaper was analysed online as a pdf of the print version.

For the online search of archive material, the link for the search on the media's website was used. Although not every date on the media's website was highlighted, an online programme Wayback Machine was also used. It provided the ability to monitor all publications published in November and December of the years 2022 and 2023. The content of the online media in April was created by monitoring the websites of the selected media on a daily basis. The next step was to analyse the content of the publications on the specified dates on the topic of Ukraine and Ukrainians. In this case, the search option on the website with the key words Ukraine and Ukrainian (in Slovak "Ukrajina", "ukrajinjčina") was used. These words were selected as a result of monitoring media websites in April

2024. The publications on the topic of Ukraine and Ukrainians were outlined and therefore the common words and their forms found in these media materials were selected.

To check the reliability of the search for keywords on the website, a software called Screaming Frog was also used, which searched publications for the keywords for us. The results were mixed, and the software had selected more publications than were listed on the website. The publications displayed by the software were therefore analysed in detail and divided into the following categories: topic of the publication, genre, volume, connotation in relation to Ukraine and Ukrainians, balance and evidential value of the material. A total of 600 online publications and publications in print newspapers were analysed in detail. Amongst them were 380 publications in Denník N (319 in the online version and 61 in the print version) and 220 in Hospodárske noviny (176 in the online version and 44 in the print version). The total number of publications in printed and online versions in November and December of the years 2022 and 2023 for each examined media is presented in Figure 1 and Figure 3. The typical roles of Ukrainians in the analysed media content are singled out and illustrated in Figures 2 and 4. Only those publications were pointed where the main focus was on Ukrainians, apart from materials about the external policy, financial help of other countries, conversations about the future of Ukraine, etc. There were 287 such publications in Denník N (online and print versions) and 200 in Hospodárske noviny (online and print versions as well).

### 3 Results

Public knowledge of foreign events, including wars and international crises, depends heavily on the mass media. Citizens have the right, indeed the duty, to participate in political life. To do so effectively, they must have complete and accurate information, and a clear understanding of the issues involved (Taylor, 2003). The rapid spread of information across countries can be seen as a result of globalisation. Flew (2007) points out that one of the trends of globalisation is international politics, relations and the movement of people (as immigrants, guest workers, refugees, etc.). It is therefore obvious that the situation during the war in Ukraine cannot be excluded from Slovak media coverage. The events on the battlefield, economic and military support for Ukraine, and social and humanitarian problems have been typical topics in the European media since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Another, more sensitive topic is refugees. According to Danijela Popovic-Efendic, the head of the UNHCR office in Slovakia, more than 5.8 million refugees from Ukraine were registered in Europe in September 2023, out of a total of 6.2 million Ukrainian refugees worldwide. To date, more than 1.6 million Ukrainians and some third-country nationals in need of international protection have crossed the border into Slovakia (Memo 98, 2023).

The locals may think that their government is spending too much money on the refugees. But the head of the UNHCR office in Slovakia explains that this is not true in reality. To illustrate this, let us consider the report from the Institute of Finance under the Ministry of Finance. In 2022, the Slovak government spent 0.3% of GDP on refugees from Ukraine, while refugees contributed by 0.1% of GDP to the Slovak economy through the taxes they paid and the services and goods they purchased. The projection for 2023 was that the government will spend 0.3% of GDP, while refugees will contribute 0.3% of GDP, through further employment, taxes, consumption, and purchases. Additionally in the years after 2023, refugees' contributions will exceed the money the government has to spend on them. Popovic-Efendic explains that these are the clear economic benefits of the refugee presence in Slovakia. This must be recognised, because often it is emphasised how expensive the refugees are, how much they cost, but if we look at the facts, it turns out to be different, as she explained (Memo 98, 2023). These and other issues can and should be carefully explained by the media. Therefore, it was important to conduct a content analysis of the most reliable Slovak media that have an influence on civil society. As already mentioned in the methodology section, the Slovak media Denník N and Hospodarske Noviny were selected for the content analysis.

Denník N is the first Slovakian online daily newspaper that generates most of its revenue from subscribers. It positions itself as a financially and journalistically independent medium from political, economic or advertising

interests. In fact, Project N was founded at the end of 2014 by journalists who did not agree with the entry of the Penta financial group into the ownership structure of the Petit Press publishing house (publisher of the SME daily newspaper) (Godársky & Mračka, 2023).

Since its foundation, Denník N has been one of the most influential media outlets in Slovakia, dealing with social issues and providing high-quality investigative journalism. Every year it is one of the most awarded Slovak media in the competition for the Journalism Prize. Denník N tries to draw attention to the real problems of Slovakia. Denník N has slightly different preferences when it comes to prioritising topics, as it mainly provides journalistic contributions from the fields of domestic and foreign policy, culture, science and healthcare (Višňovský & Schmögerová, 2018). It writes about cases of corruption, problems related to health, education and judicial systems, opaque government purchases, undeliverable highways, excessive bureaucracy and complicated economic conditions for entrepreneurs. The medium also addresses the issue of human rights, the climate crisis and draws attention to cases of the abuse of power against minorities. The print version of Denník N has a distinctive graphic design. 16 pages are published every weekday, on Fridays an extended weekend edition of 24 pages is published (Dragomir, 2020). The Dennikn.sk portal is one of the largest news websites in Slovakia and focuses on investigative and quality journalism. It also takes the form of an application. The printed and online versions differ significantly in terms of sections, genres and topics of publications.

In November 2022, there were 16 publications about Ukraine in the print daily Denník N. The most frequent topic was the situation on the battlefield in Ukraine, as well as journalistic and analytical material on Russian and Ukrainian strategies in the war and a forecast of future actions. It is noteworthy that there were 2 extended publications – an interview with the family of a prisoner of war from Azovstal about his return home and a report from the liberated Ukrainian city of Kherson. These publications were accompanied by large photographic illustrations and commentary from the scene.

During the next month – December 2022 – there were 20 publications about Ukraine in the Denník N newspaper. The main topic remained the same – the situation on the battlefield and Ukraine's military needs. But a lot of attention was also paid to the harsh winter in Ukraine. A major reportage was published from Kyiv without electricity, from Zaporizhia, and about how difficult it is to live in Eastern Ukraine. A conversation with a Ukrainian volunteer was published in the form of an interview on a full page of the newspaper. Analyses and journalistic materials were also printed. They discussed Putin's imperialism, the Russian world, etc. Of particular interest was a publication about the Slovak people who helped Ukrainians in 2022. In addition, the entire issue of December 21, 2022 was dedicated to Ukraine and the country's struggle. The war in Ukraine was described as the event of the year.

The number of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians over the next year and at the same time halved. In November 2023, there were only 8 publications dedicated to Ukraine. The main topics were the situation in Avdiivka, problems with dwindling US support, the situation on the battlefield. The new topic that emerged this month was corruption in Ukraine. In December 2023, the number of publications about the situation in Ukraine increased compared to November 2023 but decreased in comparison with December 2022 (12 publications). Informational materials about the situation on the battlefield and forecasts for future action were published. A large reportage was also dedicated to the Ukrainian warriors fighting in the "zero position". This publication conveyed a positive image of Ukrainian fighters and reminded readers of the problems faced by the Ukrainian military. There was also an analytical text that presented the psychological problems of Ukrainian refugee children.

In the first half of April 2024, 5 materials related to Ukraine were published. They dealt with the situation of Ukrainian fighters and Putin's accusations against Ukraine for the terrorist attack in Moscow. There was also a publication on the topic of culture – about a new book on the war written by Ukrainian writer Artem Chech.

To summarise the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the newspaper Denník N for the selected period, we can state the following. The first point is that the number of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians halved in 2023 compared to 2022 (Figure 1). The main reasons for this are likely to be the political situation in Slovakia, parliamentary and presidential elections, the war in Gaza, fatigue from the war in Ukraine, and corruption scandals in Ukraine. The main topics were the situation on the battlefield, predictions for the war, the support of Ukraine by

the EU, NATO and the USA, the characterisation of Putin as an imperialist, murderer, and terrorist. Social and cultural issues about Ukraine and Ukrainians were rarely covered. The typical genres of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians were reportages, news, analytical articles and opinion-based materials. The image of Ukraine and Ukrainians was rather positive. The main roles of Ukrainians were fighters, volunteers, military prisoners, and victims. Social roles such as refugees, businessmen, workers, parents, on the other hand, were rarely portrayed.

The online version of Denník N had more pieces about Ukraine and Ukrainians than the print newspaper. In November 2022, there were 96 such items, in December 2022, 87. First, every day there was a section about the situation on the battlefield. It was short news piece presenting the current situation in the crisis areas. Other texts took the form of reportages, interviews and analytical articles. The main topics were foreign politics due to aid to Ukraine, the humanitarian crisis in Bahmut, and the return to Kherson. At the same time, social issues were also highlighted. For example, an interview with a Ukrainian volunteer who was injured, as well as harsh stories about the torture, harassment and cruelty of the Russians in Bukha and Kherson. These stories were accompanied by large photographic illustrations of the destroyed places. In 2022, there were also some publications about Hitler and National Socialism as part of a comparison with Putin.

The number of publications in the online version of Denník N about Ukraine and Ukrainians decreased in 2023 when compared with 2022. In November, there were 62 materials on this topic, in December 51 (Figure 1). The section about the day on the battlefield in Ukraine remained, but the number of analytical and opinion-based materials was lower. There were reportages about volunteers bringing ambulances across the border, stories about Ukrainian refugees and the European coalition against Russia. In December 2023, reportages were published from the border where Ukrainian truck drivers were blocked. Analytical texts also appeared stating that the refusal of aid to Ukraine would not affect the Slovakian economy. Some articles were devoted to the policy of the European Union and NATO in relation to military and financial aid to Ukraine. A text written in the form of a letter from a British journalist to the Ukrainian people and authorities attracted particular attention. In it, he apologises for the indifference of Europeans and the United States to the war and the subsequent fate of Ukraine due to their selfish and mercantile attitude towards the world.

In the first half of April 2024, there were 23 journalistic items about Ukraine and Ukrainians in the online version of Denník N. In addition to the daily information about the situation on the battlefield, there were interviews about how the Russians are forcing the Ukrainian population to cooperate with them through threats to harm their relatives. Another article dealt with the topic of culture – how the Ukrainian military captured a rare musical instrument in Bahmut.

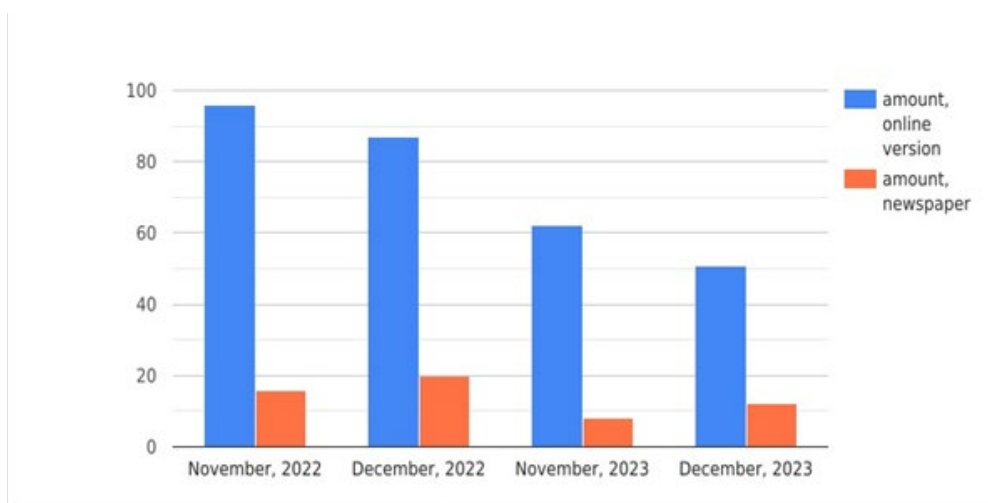


Figure 1. The Number of journalistic texts about Ukraine and Ukrainians in Denník N (online and print versions)  
Source: own processing, 2024

When comparing the online and print versions of Denník N, we noticed the following. The number of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians was five times greater in the online version than in the print one (Figure 1). This can be explained by the daily section on the situation on the battlefield, which remained in the online content until April 2024 (the end of our investigation). In addition, the online version has unlimited space.

The main topics in both the online and print versions were devoted to the fighting, weapons, military and financial support for Ukraine. But in the online version there were more articles on social issues than in the print version. Amongst them were interviews with refugees, volunteers, female medics and widows.

In both the online and print versions, there were news and opinions about Ukraine and Ukrainians, in particular reportages, interviews, and analytical articles. The image of Ukraine and Ukrainians was positive. But unlike in the print version, there were more representations of Ukrainian women online as wives of military men, widows, paramedics, warriors rather than as fighters, volunteers, military prisoners, victims, persons of culture and arts (Figure 2).

Hospodárske noviny (abbr. HN, translated as “Business News”) is a daily newspaper in Slovakia that was founded in Bratislava in 1993. The newspaper has a circulation of around 17,000 copies a day. Its publisher is MAFRA Slovakia, Inc. (formerly ECOPRESS, Inc.), which is currently owned by a Czech millionaire from Slovakia, Andrej Babiš (Dragomir, 2020). HN is a member of the European Business Press Federation. Of all Slovakian dailies, Hospodárske noviny devotes the most attention to Slovakian and foreign business. Every day there is a second section “Business and Finance”, which presents current information about business entities and important segments of the domestic and global market. Peter Vavro has been the editor-in-chief of Hospodárske noviny since March 2008. Since October 2014, Marcela Šimková has been in charge of the editorial team and took over as editor-in-chief at the beginning of 2015. Hospodárske noviny also has an online version, which is called HN online.

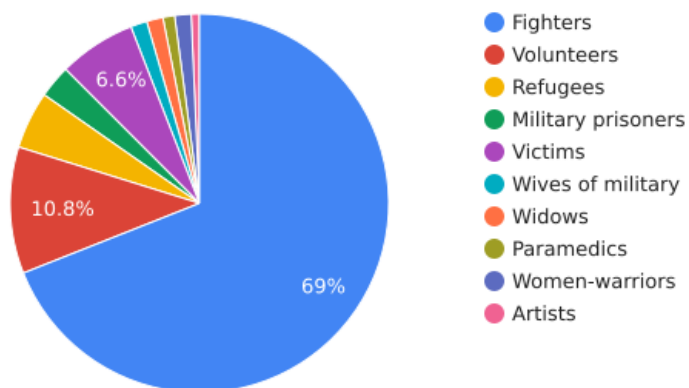


Figure 2. The typical roles of Ukrainians in media content of Denník N (in online and print versions summarily)  
Source: own processing, 2024

The print and online versions differ in many sections, headlines and genres of the news and opinions. The print newspaper for the months of November and December during 2022 and 2023 was analysed using manual content analysis. Articles mentioning Ukraine or Ukrainians were taken into account.

The first month analysed was November 2022, during which there were 14 publications about Ukraine or Ukrainians. The topics and genres of these materials were diverse. There was news about the decline in aid to Ukraine from the US, about the companies still doing business with Russia, and about military aid to Ukraine from Slovakia as mutually beneficial cooperation. There were also analytical articles about what awaits Ukrainians in



winter, about new train connections with Ukraine and about the illegality of Russia's annexation of the temporarily occupied territories.

In December 2022, there were 16 journalistic items about Ukraine and Ukrainians in the newspaper *Hospodárske noviny*. The main topics were economic and concerned about the help for Ukraine from the USA, about Russian gas, and the first money Slovakia received from the EU for the help provided to Ukraine. Also, there was a long interview with the mayor of Mariupol, wherein he explained the current situation. Two articles were dedicated to social problems: difficulties with the integration of Ukrainian pupils and the decrease in help for refugees from Ukraine.

During November 2023, there were six publications about Ukraine. The typical topic was the decrease in help for Ukraine in light of the conflict in Gaza, especially from the USA, but the high level of support from the Czech Republic. Also, there was an analytical article about Ukrainian refugees. They were depicted in a positive way, as well-educated people who, however, are employed in Slovakia as manual workers, cleaners, etc.

As of December 2023, there were 7 materials that were dedicated to Ukraine. The topics were the situation on the battlefield, the danger for Ukraine during the winter, the discussion on Ukrainian questions at the Summit in Brussels, the need for the European Union to make fast decisions about the help for Ukraine, and the situation on the border, in Slovak village Vyšné Nemecké. The typical genres of articles were short news (5 publications) and analytical pieces (2 publications). The connotations and tone of mood of the content were positive for Ukraine and directed towards help for Ukraine. For example, in the publication under the heading "EU should show concrete decisions", it is said that either a tranche of 50 billion euros for Ukraine or an invitation to be a member of the European Union are justified because they will show the strength and power of the EU. Another article called "The Struggle of Ukraine is on the Top, from where there is no way back", is dedicated to the postponement of financial and military help for Ukraine from the USA. In the text, it is said that soon Ukrainian warriors will have only courage with which to defeat Russia, and that this is as useful for soldiers fighting for their motherland, as a bow and arrow for the Native-American/indigenous people in the fight against the colonists of the Wild West, armed with Winchesters and Colts.

In the first half of April 2024, there was only one publication that touched on the situation in Ukraine, but only in the framework of the political promises of the candidate for the second round of the presidential election in Slovakia.

In general, the number of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians in the newspaper *Hospodárske noviny* decreased more than twice in 2023 in comparison with 2022 (Figure 2). The typical topics of articles were the military and economic frameworks, though there were single pieces about volunteers and refugees from Ukraine. In the print version of *Hospodárske noviny*, there is no rubric. During the war in Ukraine, the journalistic content about Ukraine and Ukrainians the most often were published under the headings Analytics, Review and Analysis, Opinions, News.

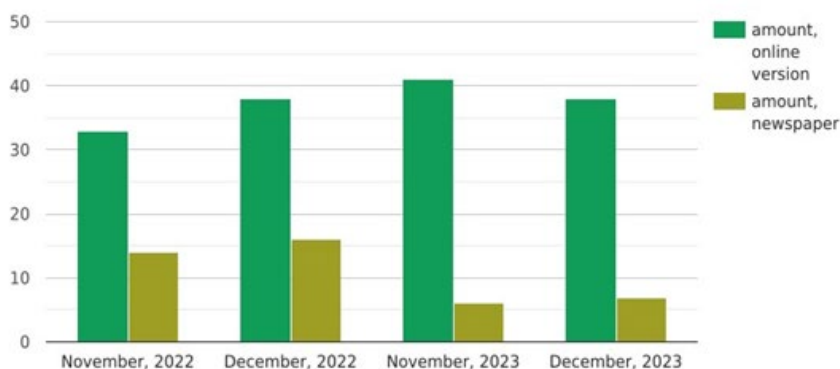
The image of Ukraine and Ukrainians in the newspaper is positive. In the publications the representatives of the Ukrainian President, authorities, and business were mainly depicted, while the other roles of Ukrainians in the analysed publications were fighters, volunteers, and refugees. The online version of *Hospodárske noviny* has a separate rubric, which is called "The War in Ukraine". The archive of all online publications in this rubric is available on the website.

In November 2022, there were 33 publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians published online. The main topics were news from the battlefield and the help of the European Union for Ukraine. Except for information about the war situation and military help, there were two analytical texts with a positive connotation. The first is that the war changed the attitude of Slovaks towards migration. In the article, it is written that Slovak people became more eager to help Ukrainians because they saw a lot of similarities between their nations and shared a common history and values. The next analytical article was published under the heading "The number of employed refugees from Ukraine is growing". However, Slovaks are not being pushed out of the labour market. In the text, it is said that Ukrainian refugees mostly work as cleaners and manual workers. There was also a comment from Minister of Social Affairs Milan Krajniak, who said in July that there is no danger that refugees would displace Slovaks from the labour

market. The unemployment rate in Slovakia has been decreasing since February of this year, reaching 6.28% in July. Such a presentation of the information is justified and makes the material well balanced and soothing.

The amount, genres, and topics of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians did not significantly change over the next month, in December 2022. There were 38 publications focused on Ukraine. Three publications were about Ukrainian refugees, in particular, about opening the new centres for Ukrainian refugees in the United Kingdom, the general number of refugees from Ukraine in V4 countries, and the sharp evaluation of Ukrainian refugees by the German politician.

In November 2023, the number of articles about Ukraine in *Hospodárske noviny* was higher than a year before. There were 41 items about Ukraine and Ukrainians, while in December there were 38 such texts. The typical genre was short news. Also in November, there were six analytical articles focusing on diverse problems related to war in Ukraine. Amongst them are the perspective of demographic problems in Ukraine, the help of the Czech Republic to Ukrainians, and the education of Ukrainian children in Slovak schools. The general mood of the articles was positive. The main emphasis was on understanding the problems of Ukrainians and providing psychological help for them. Two analytical items were dedicated to the strategy of Ukraine on the battlefield and the need for the European Union and the USA to unite their efforts to help Ukraine. One piece of news had a more pessimistic mood. The material was built on the basis of comments by the Chair of NATO. “Ukraine is in a critical situation. Let us prepare for bad news from the battlefield,” said Jens Stoltenberg, cited by the media. Despite the pessimism that can be felt in this article, the evaluation of affairs on the battlefield at that time was expedient and could lead to initiating new decisions.



*Figure 3. The Number of Publications about the Ukraine and Ukrainians in Hospodárske noviny (online and print versions)*

*Source: own processing, 2024*

During the first half of April 2024, in *Hospodárske noviny*, there were 26 materials published about Ukraine. Very often, there were articles about Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian factories as well as the need for military and economic help for Ukraine from NATO, the European Union, and the USA. These journalistic items were mostly news. But there were also some articles about refugees, for example, a journalistic piece entitled “Almost 339,000 Ukrainians live in the Czech Republic, and more than 120,000 of them work”. “The others returned” focused on the situation with Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic as well as on the attempts of the Czech government to reintegrate Ukrainian people and give them the opportunity to stay in the Czech Republic for a long time. While the other articles shows some negative attitudes of Slovak people towards Ukrainian refugees, the material under the heading “The teacher of the Slovak church school urged the Ukrainian children to come back”

depicts some anxiety amongst Slovak entrepreneurs and hotel owners because, from the first of April to the end of June, legal entities will receive a single sum for both adults and children, in the amount of six euros per night of stay. The tone of this publication is rather negative, not only to the refugees but also to the Slovak government. While there was one more analytical item on April 2 under the heading “Bad Recipe, how we squander Ukrainian potential” (Karásek, 2024) had a totally positive connotation for Ukrainians and blamed the governmental policy for the evaluation of Ukrainian medical diplomas:

We lack 16,000 nurses, but we could not recognise the education of any of them from Ukraine. It is a country’s trouble if it creates problems even where there should not be any. Conservatives, liberals, and socialists agree because the solution is obvious, and the problem cannot be denied. For example, when recruiting workers from Ukraine to our healthcare personnel system.

So, if we compare the print and online versions of *Hospodárske noviny*, it is evident that the number of publications about Ukraine and Ukrainians in the online version did not change significantly, while in the newspaper edition it halved. While comparing the number of publications in online and print versions, it differs more than four times (Figure 2). Typical topics in the online version were the situation on the battlefield, the help for Ukraine, and how it is decreasing because of the conflict in Gaza. In the online version, there is a daily rubric about the war in Ukraine, which informs about current affairs, while social topics were presented more rarely in the comparison of the whole number of articles about Ukraine or Ukrainians. The prevailing genre is news, although reportages, analytical articles, and interviews were also presented, but in a clearly perceptible amount. It can be explained by the rubric War in Ukraine, which is present in the online version and absent in print. The image of Ukraine and Ukrainians was mostly positive. But at the end of 2023, pessimistic forecasts for Ukraine in the war were published, as well as one article dedicated to corruption, which created a negative image of Ukraine, and one about the need for Ukrainian refugees to return home. The typical roles of Ukrainians in online and print versions did not change significantly; they were fighters, volunteers, refugees, and highly educated people (Figure 4).

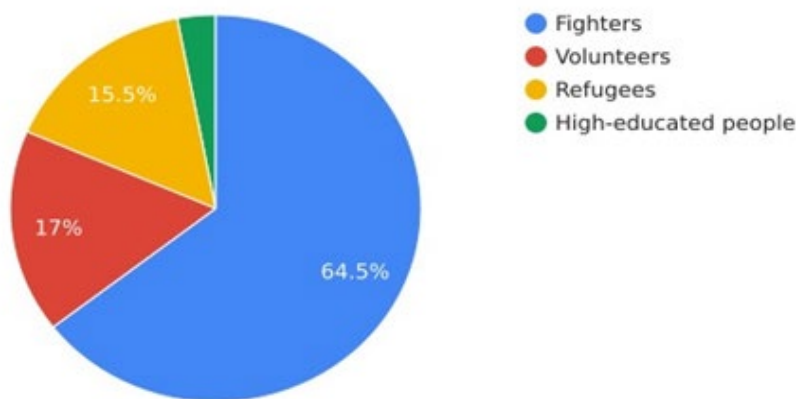


Figure 4. The typical roles of Ukrainians in media content of *Hospodárske noviny* (in online and print versions summarily)

Source: own processing, 2024

## 4 Discussion

The public relies on the media, to use Walter Lippmann's phrase, to form the picture inside their heads and help them make sense of a complex and confusing world. In turn, governments want to ensure that those pictures are of such a nature that the public support for their policies will follow (Cottle, 2003). In late modern society and the media landscape, there are some external influences that can mould the media landscape and form public opinion amongst internal but also external audiences. According to the results of monitoring, which were published by the authoritative Ukrainian organisation on media monitoring, Detector Media, in the set of journalistic articles from Slovakia, the most common accusations of NATO were that the bloc facilitates the killing of civilians and helps Ukraine to the detriment of its own interests. The characteristics of Ukrainians in the publications included in the sample of Slovak media fit the image created by Russian propaganda: "uncultured refugees", "puppets of the West", "Nazis", and "life is better in territories liberated from the Nazis" (Pivtorak & Chudish, 2023).

The data presented by Lintner et al. (2023) shows that the invasion dramatically changed political discourse in Slovakia, with the domestic coalition-opposition struggles losing prominence amongst the invasion-related topics. The content of the discourse at the beginning of the invasion was mostly supportive of the Ukrainian case; however, a large amount of discourse echoed Russian state propaganda's narratives. The differences between the results of research vary depending on the object of the research. The investigations of Detector Media and Lintner et al. mentioned above, were made based on social media such as Facebook, Messenger, Telegram, and activist media, while the presented research was conducted on the basis of quality Slovakian media, Denník N and Hospodárske noviny. On the one hand, the spread of pro-Russian narratives and disinformation forms public opinion, and it is reflected in elections (Markowitz, 2023). But on the other hand, there is still a part of the audience that filters information and is not susceptible to fake news. Wenzel et al. (2024), after examining the penetration of Russian disinformation related to the war in Ukraine in terms of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, declares that the use of social media as a source of news contributes to disinformation, but the effect is weak. In all three societies, there is a strong and significant influence of individuals' degree of education and economic situation. Respondents with post-secondary education and those who consider themselves well off are less vulnerable to disinformation, regardless of their media consumption.

The spread of Russian narratives in the media led to a strong polarisation of Slovakian society. Čeněk et al. (2024) outlined two of the most popular slogans, which were spread in Slovakia: "Cooperation with aggressive Russia is very dangerous" (anti-Russian) and "We stand with Russia, not with the USA" (pro-Russian, anti-Western). So, actually, the media are the first line that influences the image of Ukraine and Ukrainians, as well as the help for Ukraine from Slovakia. Spreading pro-Russian narratives through social media forms the attitude of the local audience not only to the war in Ukraine but also to their parties and candidates before elections. In turn, Ogrodnik and Źornaczuk (2023) point out that Slovak support for Ukraine during the war with Russia results from the attitude of the authorities and not from cross-party or social consensus. Specifically, the party announced the suspension of military and political support for Ukraine. This is in line with the pro-Russian sympathies of a large part of society. In turn, the owners of the media can also have a significant influence on the media content and, as a result, on public opinion.

Sönmez (2023) noticed that it is seen that media entrepreneurs in Slovakia have close relations with the government, and thus some of them take advantage of the relationships they build with the officers from the government, though Boshnakova and Dankova (2023) declare that media in Slovakia have a light level of polarisation. So, to sum up, the image of Ukraine and Ukrainians in the content of Slovak media can serve as an indicator of the political sympathies, involvement, and Russian influence on mass or social media. The quality and trusted media, such as Denník N and Hospodárske noviny, try to be objective and adhere to journalistic standards. They publish analytical materials, conduct reportage from the place of events, and, in such a way, form pro-democratic public opinion.

## 5 Conclusion

The conducted research made it possible to draw the following conclusions: Despite the win of the pro-Russian party in the parliamentary election, the topic of Ukraine is still present on the pages and sites of Slovakian trusted media, though the number of publications in 2023 significantly decreased, and such a tendency remains in 2024. The comparison was made based on two consecutive months of the year and the first half of April 2024 (the last month of the research). It was especially important to cover the last months of the year (November and December 2022 and 2023), because it is obvious that interest in the war's beginning (February 2022) would be higher, and at the end of the year, people as well as journalists will have a calmer attitude towards this situation. While April was the last month of the research, the research related to the first half of this month gave us an opportunity to outline the most recent trends in 2024. The genres, topics, and tone of mood of the text did not significantly change, though in *Hospodárske noviny* in December 2023 content with a more negative connotation appeared. These were topics about the corruption in Ukraine, the need for Ukrainian refugees to return home, and pessimistic forecasts for Ukraine about the end of the war. While in *Denník N*, the rhetoric did not change. So, it is hard to explain whether the number of articles decreased because of the change in political leadership or for other reasons. The cause of this situation can be explained as fatigue from the war in Ukraine as well as the beginning of another war conflict in Gaza. This point was the most perceptible in the newspaper *Denník N*, where the number of articles about Ukraine and Ukrainians in 2023 decreased twofold, while news from Gaza was published almost in every issue of this media in November and December 2023. The main genres of articles depicting Ukraine and Ukrainians were news, analytic articles, and interviews. It can be outlined in nine key roles of Ukrainians, which were described in the analysed media as follows: fighters, military personnel, victims, volunteers, refugees, wives, widows, paramedics, and qualified specialists. It is also worth noticing that the image of Ukrainians in *Denník N* and *Hospodárske noviny* differed. *Denník N*, except for news from the battlefield, preferred to cover more humanitarian topics and produce interviews with volunteers, refugees, widows, and military persons. While *Hospodárske noviny* described Ukrainians as well-educated people, refugees who did not influence the budget of Slovakia, and professionals (interviews with the mayor of Mariupol, with a start-up developer, etc.), this can be explained by the different thematic orientations of the analysed media: *Denník N* is socio-political, while *Hospodárske noviny* is more economy-oriented. The results of the research made it possible to draw more extensive and global conclusions about the media landscape in Slovakia.

The media influence public opinion, especially when it comes to external policy and affairs in other countries. Slovakia, as a country sharing a border with Ukraine, has always been a reliable partner and good neighbour, and the media plays a key role in the continuation of these relationships. Fatigue from the war, new global conflicts, internal policy, and inflation divert attention from the current situation in Ukraine. Moreover, the information-psychological operations of Russia are influencing the media and society all over the world, so it is hard not to succumb to the manipulations. Groups and messengers on social media as well as alternative media, which are supported by populists or pro-Russian oligarchs, are playing a crucial role in the media landscape. That is why, on the one hand, it is extremely important to increase the level of media literacy of Slovakian society, paying attention to the level of media literacy of seniors who use media and digital technologies in their lives and are thus exposed to their positive and negative effects (Prostínáková Hossová, 2023).

On the other hand, quality and reliable media that adhere to journalistic standards should stay on the side of truth and justice and promote democratic values. In particular, this applies to the situation in Ukraine. So, to leave Ukraine in the agenda-setting quality Slovakian media can depict Ukraine and Ukrainians in new roles—as military specialists, businessmen, and unbreakable people. It can be highlighted in topics about how Ukrainian pupils study in Ukraine during the war, how they react to danger alerts and what their order of action is, what new anti-bombing shelters in Ukraine look like, which new start-ups the Ukrainian military has made during this war, what new businesses were started by Ukrainians in foreign countries, and how much tax income it brings to those countries. This can attract the attention of readers and depict Ukrainians in a new, positive, and prospective image. One more

topic that is totally underrepresented in the analysed Slovak media is ecological problems. The war influences the quality of the air and water; the ground and sea are mined, and these mines can drift into neighbouring countries; the active ballistic rocket attacks can lead to changes in the lithosphere and cause new earthquakes, etc. Covering this topic can give the audience an understanding that the war in Ukraine is not an isolated conflict but a tragedy that can lead to diseases in other, not-involved countries.

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