Color-Blindness in Swedish Media?
– A Comparative Study of Media’s Portrayal of Syrian and Ukrainian Refugees

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1. Introduction

In 2014, the then Swedish Minister of Integration, Erik Ullenhag (FP), claimed that racism is built upon the false perception that humans can be divided into different biological races, and therefore the erasing of existing racial terminology is necessary in combating racism. In the same article we can see comments from Zakaria Zouhir, head of the Afro-Swedish Association, criticizing the removal of the term. Zouhir argued that the term race is important in highlighting the systematic oppression that exists, meaning that erasing the term is problematic and contributes to the minimization of how racism manifests and how it negatively affects the victims of racial discrimination. This shows that the debate around race as a concept as well as race as a term is still ongoing in Sweden (SVT, 2014). Tobias Hübinette, one of the most prominent Swedish researchers on race and whiteness, argues that the erasure of racial terminology will lead to racism not being acknowledged rather than the erasure of racism itself. Legally, one cannot receive justification for being discriminated against one’s presumed race, if the race itself does not exist (Hübinette, 2021). Hübinette and Zouhir are not alone in their opinions. In March 2019, Leila Ali Elmi (MP), an Eritrea-born, Swedish member of parliament, took to the stand in Riksdagen. Ali Elmi was advocating for the inclusion of race in inequality data in Sweden. Ali Elmi means that race should be registered and used as a legitimate categorization for combating inequality in Sweden. She was met with a wave of criticism on social media. The criticism came from the anti-racial movement advocating for color-blindness as means to a more equal and non-racialized society. Elmi was compared to Nazi Germany and Communist China for proclaiming that equality data with a category for racial belonging (rasregister) was necessary (Wikström & Hübinette, 2021).

Growing up in Sweden, surrounded by this notion of ‘race’, I am not surprised that this was the reaction that Elmi received for her statements. Even now, writing the word ‘rasregister’ gives me a sensation of unease and discomfort. The notion of not using racial terms in describing humans is deeply rooted. Growing up in the Swedish, white, upper middle-class context, the term race was always considered inappropriate when talking about groups of people, with the argument that we are all the same race – i.e. the human race. The history of the Swedish eugenics movement is being taught in Swedish schools, and we have seen what racial categorization can end with – for example the actions of Nazi Germany during the second world war. Using the term to describe individuals or groups of people was not only refrained from, but in the social context it was simply not allowed. Using ‘ras’ when referring to humans was considered, from the context of where I grew up, blatantly inappropriate and racist. Now, in studying the master’s program of Ethnic and Migration Studies at
Linköping University, I have through my studies been granted a different conception of the term, where race as a social construct, based on phenotypical, cultural, religious, and linguistic differences between individuals and groups of people – founded in 500 (and counting) years of colonialism – have real consequences, since it is instrumental in the constructing and maintaining of social hierarchies and inequal structures of power.

I will investigate media coverage on two different influxes of refugees coming to Sweden during two time-periods, and from two different parts of the world. The examples used will be the influx of refugees from the Syria in 2015 and how the media portrayed these groups, while comparing it to how the same media portrayed the groups of Ukrainian refugees coming in 2022. The reason why I choose these cases to compare is that ever since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, I wanted to investigate if there was a difference between how Ukrainian refugees was portrayed in Swedish media in comparison to how Syrian refugees were portrayed. The Syrian refugee reception was still rather fresh in my mind, and from my own perspective, I remember it as quite the toxic debate, with anti-migrant sentiments being very prevalent, which was very different from how I experienced the Ukrainian refugee reception.

The concept of the color-blind discourse is described by Bessone (2020), who states that racism is fundamentally intrinsic into the construction of the nation-state, even though race is not acknowledged by said nation-state. Bessone describes color-blindness in France, but the same can also be applied to the Swedish context, as we can see with the outlashes against Ali Elmi (MP) after her statement. Bessone describes the anti-racial discourse in France as advocating that a color-blind discourse is necessary for a non-racist society to emerge, and that existing racism is maintained by ignorant individuals and groups, and that it is not part of a larger structure of power. These sentiments were echoed by the Swedish Minister of Integration, Erik Ullenhag (FP), in the aforementioned interview with the Swedish Television Network in 2014 (SVT, 2014). Bessone (2020), however, argues that this reasoning is insufficient and incorrect, and that race does indeed exist, not as a biological entity, but rather as a social concept founded in centuries of oppression. The epistemology of ignorance that advocates for color-blindness is maintaining racial structures of power instead of challenging them (Bessone, 2020).

In an article written by Rodrigo Bueno Lacy and Henk van Houtum (2022), they argue that the argument of proximity – namely that the European Union activated the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukraine because of the geographical proximity to the Union – is used as a smokescreen to hide underlying reasons for this. Ukraine’s geographical proximity to the European Union in comparison to for example Syria is according to Bueno Lacy and van Houtum used as an excuse to conceal the differentiation of people. The argument of geographical proximity is insufficient in
several ways. Mainly, because the Refugee Convention to which the European Union is bound has a universal geographical scope, meaning that geographical proximity to member states is irrelevant. According to Bueno Lacy and van Houtum (2022), the argument of proximity is an “attempt to rationalize obvious discrimination as geographical common-sense” – arguing that the reason behind the differentiation of migrants – is based on discrimination, and not proximity (Bueno Lacy & van Houtum, 2022).

1.1 Aim and research question

The aim of this study is to examine how Swedish media report on different groups of refugees. To achieve this aim, I compare media portrayals of two groups of refugees in Sweden – Syrians and Ukrainian. I will examine a sample of articles from the Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet*. I have identified key periods for each group of refugees and focus on newspaper articles from 2015 for the Syrian case, and 2022 for the Ukrainian.

The study seeks to address the following research questions:

1) What themes can be identified across the articles about Syrian and Ukrainian refugees?
2) Are there any differences in how these themes were addressed when the media reported on these two cases?
3) If there are, how can these potential differences be understood?

The next chapter will present the historical background surrounding these cases, as well as an historical background on racism and the racial terminology in recent Swedish history, and the rise of color-blindness in the Swedish context.
2. Historical background

This chapter will present a short historical background regarding the cases that will be investigated for this study. The civil war in Syria that resulted in what has often been referred to as the “refugee crisis” in 2015, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that resulted in an influx of Ukrainian refugees to the EU and to Sweden. We will also see the history of racism in Sweden through Sweden’s part in the global eugenics movement in the early twentieth century and how that movement evolved through time, and the heritage that it has left behind.

2.1 Syrian civil war

The Syrian civil war started out with protests targeting the authoritarian al-Assad regime in 2011, much affected by the Arab spring that had overthrown regimes in for example Tunisia and Egypt previously that same year. These protests evolved into a civil war in 2012. The al-Assad regime came into power in 1971 with Hafiz al-Assad becoming the nation’s president, and later passing the power on to his son Bashar al-Assad by the turn of the millennium. When the uprisings started in 2011, Bashar al-Assad was still the president, using violence to strike down and suppress the pro-democracy rebels (Britannica, 2013).

The movement was partly religiously motivated, because the majority of the Syrian population identified as Sunni, whereas al-Assad and the hierarchical power-structures was in large part ruled by the Alawite minority – however there were people from many different sectarian groups that were part of the higher echelons of this hierarchy, and many Alawites belonged to the working- and the middle-class, and was neither contributing nor profiting of the regime’s totalitarian and violent ways. These sectarian motivations for the protests were used by al-Assad to portray the rebels as religious extremists, comparing them to Al-Qaeda to justify his resistance. The regime started by carrying out violent actions against communities of the Sunni majority, which further escalated the conflict. As early as June 2011, the fighting between the regime and the opposition sent thousands of refugees over the border to Turkey. Fighting continued, and on the 16th of September 2013 the UN released a report that confirmed that chemical weapons containing the nerve gas serin had been used in large attacks on the 21st of August but cannot with certainty claim what side was responsible for the attack. As the war continued, ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) had reportedly made progress into the northern areas in Syria, announcing themselves as a caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its leader. This made the conflict escalate even further, and by September 2014 the United States expanded their aerial campaign against ISIL together with a collaboration of Arab countries and their air forces. Later that same month Russian air forces made their first airstrike at
targets in Syria. The war rages on for several years and has not been resolved to the writing of this study. Russia, Turkey, the United States, Kurdish forces, ISIL, Syrian forces supported by Hezbollah, and anti al-Assad rebels, have all had a hand in making Syria a war-torn nation with several regions of the country being sacked by artillery (Britannica, 2023).

According to UNHCR, the United Nations’ refugee agency, more than 14 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes since the start of the conflict in 2011, resulting in Syrians being the largest currently displaced group in the world. Almost half of all Syrian refugees, 6.8 million, are still residing in Syria, and it is estimated that about 5.5 million refugees are currently in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey, the neighboring countries to Syria. Additionally, 70% of the Syrian population are in need of humanitarian aid, and 90% live below the poverty line (UNHCR, 2023a). According to Migrationsinfo, a Swedish research forum established by the liberal thinktank Fores, 51338 Syrian nationals applied for asylum in Sweden in the year 2015 (Migrationsinfo, 2021). According to Nicole Ostrand (2015), Sweden alongside Germany were the countries that received the largest reception of Syrian refugees outside of Syria’s immediate geographical proximity. Comparing the numbers presented by Ostrand (2015) and Migrationsinfo (2021), we can see that in the timespan of 2012 – 2014 there were as many Syrians applying for asylum in Sweden as it was in 2015 alone, approximately 50 thousand.

2.2 Russo-Ukrainian War

On the 24th of February 2022, Russia launched a military offensive against Ukraine, violating its sovereign borders. Russian forces quickly attacked the Ukrainian capital Kyiv in an attempt to overthrow the Ukrainian government led by Volodymyr Zelenskyj but was met with hard resistance from the Ukrainian defenses and after a few weeks of fighting, Russian forces were seen retreating east. The coming months, the regions of Luhansk and Donbas saw large scales of clashes between Ukrainian and Russian forces, resulting in many casualties, in a Russian attempt to seize control of the Ukrainian coastline, to create a passageway between mainland Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula that was annexed by Russia in 2014. This annexation in 2014 was arguably the start of the conflict, and tensions between Ukraine and Russia was high for several years in between. During the first months of the conflict, there were much evidence supporting accusations that Russian forces was committing war-crimes in Ukraine. The town of Bucha was occupied by Russian forces, and during their retreat in March of 2022, when Ukrainian forces re-entered the town, it was discovered that the Russian military had systematically executed civilians in the dozens, which prompted Russia to be investigated for crimes against humanity. This along with other accusations prompted the

More than a year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, the Russo-Ukrainian war is still raging. According to UNHCR, more than 8 million Ukrainians have been recorded fleeing to other European countries, and more than 5 million have applied for temporary protection in Europe (UNHCR, 2023b). Sweden, among many other western countries have given large amounts of aid to Ukraine in the form of military equipment and humanitarian aid, both from private actors as well as governmental. Artillery and infantry weaponry from Sweden has been used in the war (Regeringen, 2023).

According to the Swedish Radio Network, by the time of 13th of January 2023 approximately 50 thousand Ukrainians had fled to Sweden since the Russian invasion the year prior, and some had even started to leave Sweden, either for other EU countries or to go back to Ukraine (SVR, 2023). This is almost identical to the number of Syrians that applied for asylum in Sweden in 2015. Ukrainian citizens are allowed to stay for 90 days in any Schengen country without a visa before they need to apply for a residence permit, according to the Temporary Protection Directive enforced by the European Union after the invasion (Migrationsverket, 2023a).

There was a decrease in the Swedish refugee reception after 2015, and the rights that asylum seekers received in terms of welfare was diminished. This was to put pressure on other European countries to increase their responsibility, to make the reception more equally divided within Europe, by Sweden not having a higher standard in their reception (Hagelund, 2020). This was different for Ukrainian refugees in 2022 because of the Temporary Protection Directive that was activated little more than a week after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This meant that Ukrainian citizens had the right to get temporary protection in all member-states in the European Union, including Sweden. According to the Swedish Migration Agency, Ukrainian asylum holders in Sweden have the same rights as other asylum holders (Migrationsverket, 2023b).

2.3 ‘Race’ in Swedish history

The State Institute for Racial Biology in Uppsala, which was one of the leading eugenics institutes in Europe, was founded in 1922 by eugenicist Herman Lundborg. Lundborg was the first leader of the institute and critical in its founding. He is considered the father of the Swedish eugenics’ movement. The eugenics movement in Sweden was, in symbiosis with the global eugenics movement, dedicated to the pseudoscientific theory of dividing people into races based on biology, and made assumptions that these races had different physical, moral, and cognitive traits. They believed that in order for
Sweden to be a highly functioning society, a division between these races was necessary and they should be kept separate and not reproduce inter racially. Forced sterilization of people considered to be of a “lower” standing race, as well as forced sterilization of people who were considered to have cognitive deficiencies, was a common practice. The institute was actively performing this ideological pseudoscience to try and create a “pure” Swedish race. Sami, Roma, Finnish, and many other groups of people were branded as unwanted through this practice, and even before the institute was established, Lundborg was one of the managers of a nation-wide tour of an at the time multi-media exhibition where photographs, plaster figurines, and artifacts were used to try and spread a public interest in the eugenics movement, which was very successful. Alongside the support that Lundborg received, he also had his fair share of critics. Some influential critics, as high up as the Swedish parliament, considered eugenics as nothing more than ideology pretending to be science. They meant that the eugenics movement had no scientific proof that what they did was actually scientific, making eugenics an ideologically motivated pseudoscience (Larsmo, 2022).

There is a common misconception that the Institute for Racial Biology in Uppsala, founded in 1922, was the first institute for eugenics in the world, but that is not true. Albeit that the Swedish eugenics movement was indeed founded early on, only four years after the movement in Germany was founded, there were several institutes funded by private actors as well as states, that was established before Lundborg’s in Uppsala. The first registered eugenics institute was none other than Francis Galton’s Laboratory for the Study of National Eugenics at the University College in London. This was in 1905, and for the following seventeen years several more institutes were founded in Norway, the United States, Germany, and the Soviet Union, all before Lundborg’s institute in Uppsala. Larsmo (2022) describes his interpretation of Lundborg as a self-absorbed narcissist that tried to embody the notion of the misunderstood genius. For this reason, Lundborg portrayed himself and his institute as the first in the world, or at least the first state-funded institute in the world, because he wished to portray himself as superior to his non-Swedish colleagues, and this delusion that Lundborg submitted to have left remnants in the form of misinformation to this day. Even though Sweden was a strong and influential actor in the global eugenics’ movement, they were not the first (Larsmo, 2022).

In the 1930’s there was a vivid internal political debate within the board of the institute. By 1935 Lundborg was ready to retire and wanted the institute to be handed to his protégée Torsten Sjögren. By this time, NSDAP had risen to power in Germany, turning eugenics into the governing ideology in Nazi Germany, and several Swedish eugenicists affiliated with the institute showed open support to the Nazis. There were several active members in the institute in Uppsala that wanted to cut the unofficial ties the institute had to Nazi Germany, and so Gunnar Dahlberg, an active social
democrat, was instead appointed as the new head for the institute after the backing of several influential social democratic members of parliaments. Dahlberg had worked for several years at the institute but left some years prior because he did not agree with Lundborg. This shift happened at a time where the global eugenics movement was in a crisis, much because of the actions of Nazi Germany. The movement was criticized by the scientific community, and so-called reform eugenicists started to take over to deconstruct the view on race that for example Lundborg had, because they considered it to be unscientific. Dahlberg was one of them, and in a piece published in 1940 he brands antisemitism as idiocy, and that forced sterilization was not a valid way to improve genetics. Dahlberg also brands the framework that Lundborg used, that different races would have better and worse cognitive and moral abilities, as something unscientific. He does however believe that sterilization could and should be used on individuals that were, in his opinion, not fit to be parents (Larsmo, 2022). Despite the shift in view on the concept of race, racial minorities were still large parts of the targeted groups of the institution’s sterilizations, which will be investigating further in chapter three.

The treatment that racial minorities suffered at the hands of the eugenics institute in Uppsala and the Swedish state have created long lasting scars. Despite the institute being disbanded and reformed, the heritage that the institute in Uppsala and the blatantly racist policies that the state enforced for decades, and even centuries before that is still felt. There are generations still alive that can testify to the maltreatment of Sami in state institutions and schools, where the Sami cultural linguistic traditions were systematically suppressed, and similar treatments continue still. As late as February 2023, the Swedish taxation agency (Skatteverket) burned down a Sami woman’s kåta, a traditional Sami building, for the fifth time. The burning was done because the building was built too close to water, thus violating Swedish law. The burning happened without notifying the owner, and it was done on the Sápmi National Day, 6th of February 2023 (SVT, 2023). While stories like this continuously emerge, Sami artists are simultaneously using the archives in Uppsala to create artwork signifying the generational pain that this treatment have caused. Larsmo (2022) describes these artworks as a way for the Sami to retake ownership of their history and to publicly display the harm that the Swedish eugenics movement have created, as representatives of the Swedish state.

The term for race in Swedish law has successively been removed starting from the late 1990’s and culminating in the new discrimination-law implemented in 2008, where race no longer was mentioned as grounds for discrimination. The removal of the term has been criticized from several different actors. During the time that this shift transpired, both the United Nations and the European Union was actively against this. This means that since race is no longer a basis for discrimination in Sweden, a person that is discriminated against because their physical appearance
does not fit into the phenotypical Swedish stereotype is not being discriminated against according to Swedish law. For example, a person that was adopted as a child that is actively being discriminated against because of their non-Swedish stereotypical appearance will not be able to receive vindication through law, because discrimination based on race is non-existing in Swedish law, and their ethnicity might be Swedish, thus ethnicity is not what is being discriminated against in this example, but rather their appearance (Hübinette, 2021).
3. Previous research

There is an extensive amount of previous research done about race and the discourse of race in the Swedish context. Just like there has been much done on the issue of color-blindness and white ignorance, both in the Swedish context and elsewhere. This chapter will present some of the key previous research on these issues that have been a great source of inspiration, perspectives, and knowledge for this study.

3.1 Color-blindness and white ignorance

As described by the many scholars mentioned, color-blindness is a phenomenon that occurs in several different places in Europe, just as it occurs in Sweden. Color-blindness as in “not seeing race” is wishful thinking, painting oneself and one’s surroundings as part of a utopian society where race does not matter, and the only thing necessary to stop racialization and racial discrimination is to stop talking about it. This form of white ignorance, is a privileged stance to take, refusing to acknowledge both historical and contemporary power structures where race plays a fundamental role in the socio-political hierarchy. To diminish racism to the actions of a small number of individuals is not sufficient in understanding the issue. Racism has, for the past centuries, been institutionalized and is intrinsic into the political power structures on a global context. The color-blind mentality diminishes the responsibility to that of individuals, refusing to acknowledge systemic racism and white supremacy as a structure rather than simply deviating actions of a few individuals and groups, portraying it as a lesser issue than what it is while allowing ignorance to become a tool for achieving a deluded sense of innocence.

In a study by Tobias Hübiniette and Catrin Lundström (2011) written just after the national election of 2010 in Sweden, the authors portray the Swedish narrative of whiteness in relation to Swedishness. They bring forth examples where people are portrayed as immigrants despite them being born and raised in Sweden, emphasizing that it is their assumed racial categorization that dictates this portrayal rather than their ethnic identity. They argue that Swedishness exists largely in correlation to whiteness, and that a Swedish self-image of a post-racial society has evolved, believing that racism is not something institutional, leaving room for a color-blind sentiment to evolve and manifest. Since Swedishness exists in correlation to whiteness, non-whiteness is portrayed as a threat to this sense of Swedishness. The Swedish national identity is often connected to so called Swedish values, a deeply racialized delusion of moral superiority, where non-Swedishness is morally inferior. For example, gender-equality is often used as an argument for the perceived moral superiority, however in 2011 when Hübiniette and Lundström wrote this article, it was clear that Sweden was not
ready for a female prime minister, contrary to for example Chile, Pakistan, Germany, Finland, and Brazil. This hypocrisy manifests also with the argument that Sweden would be a post-racial society, when racialized Swedes are portrayed as migrants in media and public discourse, despite their ethnic belonging, clearly showing that Sweden is indeed not a post-racial society, despite the perceived superiority of so called “Swedish values” (Hübinette & Lundström, 2011).

Magali Bessone (2020) gives a pedagogical description of color-blindness as a racist mentality, as well as how it manifests in the French context. According to Bessone, color-blindness advocates for the idea that race does not exist, and that racism is something that exist with a few ignorant people. Advocates for this position also mean that people in positions of power are devoted to protecting people who are discriminated against because of their alleged race. This is contradictory to the critical approach that Bessone herself argues for, namely that race does exist as a social construction founded in centuries of oppression, not as an ethno-biological categorization. Simplifying racism to the actions of a few individuals is inappropriate, since racism is an institutionalized reality, a political structure, and the structures of power cannot intrinsically protect racialized people from this, however they may or may not be able to instrumentally do so. Depending on the racialization mechanism it can either be prevented or facilitated (Bessone, 2020).

Sayaka Osanami Törngren (2015) argues that the terms ethnicity and culture, that are oftentimes used to describe different groups of people in Sweden, are seen as color-blind terms. These terms are mainly used to describe racial minorities and is not used to describe white migrants from for example Germany, Denmark, or Norway, and according to Osanami Törngren, these terms are used because then the user does not need to recognize phenotypical differences in appearance. The term ‘race’ originally emerged in the English language when, during the 16th century, scholars were starting to divide humans into racial groups, just like what was previously done with animals and plants. According to Osanami Törngren, this was initially done without racist intent, but when Social-Darwinism rose as an ideology the study of racial biology and eugenics rose alongside it. Race was later, during the mid-twentieth century established and recognized as a social construct, and there were no biological factors making some groups of people superior or inferior to the other (Osanami Törngren, 2015).

Osanami Törngren describes how historically Sweden was pioneers in the eugenics movement during the early twentieth century, with the State Institute for Racial Biology in Uppsala, and the concept of race as a biological categorization, as well as the idea of a “pure” Scandinavian race, was very present in the Swedish consciousness, manifesting through not only the institute but in art, film, and other forms of esthetics. After UNESCO’s official declaration of condemning race as something biological in 1950, much of the work done in the Institute for Racial Biology in Uppsala,
once a leading institute in the eugenics movement, have been removed and selectively forgotten. This has led to the impression that Sweden was a homogenous society during the previous centuries, which is not true. Osanami Törngren (2015) argues that the usage of the terms culture and ethnicity is insufficient and misleading when addressing the issues of racism, because of the reason that it is not taking appearance into account, which is the reason why these terms are being used in the first place. Discrimination because of one’s appearance must be described using terminology that acknowledge these differences in appearance and that these are the fundamental reasons for the discrimination in question. Even though Osanami Törngren is questioning whether race is that term or not, it is still necessary to use in exchange for culture and ethnicity, that is referring to other ways of categorization, resulting in a necessity for the term race when discussing racism, since racism fundamentally is discrimination and the assumption of race based on one’s appearance (Osanami Törngren, 2015).

3.2 Swedish colonial history and the eugenics movement

Åsa Bharathi Larsson (2016) in her work Colonizing Fever: Race and Media Cultures in Late Nineteenth-Century Sweden explores how the Swedish media included imagery of the colonized world during the late nineteenth century. Medial discourse in Sweden during this time included a lot of portrayals of assumed cultural everyday life of colonized groups, giving the public access to these imageries as well as wax museums that portrayed similar assumptions. Racial stereotypes were thus more than common in different forms of art and media during the late nineteenth century Sweden. Larsson also describes the Vanadis expedition, an ambitious expedition set out to retrieve ethnographical material for an ethnographical museum and photographs for the creation of a racial archive (Larsson, 2016).

This Expedition was conducted 1883-1885, and was not only contributing, but also pioneering the discourse on colonialism in Sweden. The Expedition was conducted to bring back material and photographs of indigenous peoples to create an ethnographical museum as well as racial archives. This enforced colonial sentiments in Sweden, creating an uncivilized other juxtaposing the self-image of Sweden as a civilized superior. This expedition and these mentalities edged into Swedish consciousness, and resulted in grand enthusiasm from the public and made them participants in the European colonization project (Larsson, 2016).

Despite Sweden participating directly to European imperialism with their colonies in Africa, Northern America, and Asia, Larsson (2016) argues that the indirect form of colonialism manifested by the Vanadis Expedition leaves room for a perceived innocence when considering the Swedish role in the European colonizing project. This innocence is a delusion, for several reasons.
Firstly, Sweden did have colonies in the literal sense, even though the scope of Swedish colonialism was small in comparison to for example the French, Dutch, and British. Secondly, these state-sanctioned indirect form of colonialism actively enforced imperialist ideas and a sense of cultural and racial superiority, thus contributing to a colonialist mentality within Sweden, despite not being ‘direct’ colonialism with the explicit participation of the governing body of the nation-state.

The non-recognition of Sweden’s colonial past, both direct and indirect, as well as not realizing to what extent the Swedish eugenics movement played a major role for the movement on a global scale, have contributed to evolving the Swedish self-image of a post-racial society. Looking at the history of the Swedish eugenics’ movement as well as the Swedish forms of colonialism, we can see that Sweden also had a major role to play in the European colonialism project throughout history, making the precepted innocence of Sweden as a non-colonial power a form of delusion, which have affected the Swedish self-image as a nation free of racism, and contributed to color-blindness being a dominant mentality.

Much of the research done regarding the Swedish eugenics’ movement is descriptive, giving a historical narrative of the institute and the people affected by their pseudoscientific assaults. However, there is also research done to establish the connections between the institutionalized racism that the movement conducted and Sweden as a welfare state, and what ideologies that played a part in the establishing and maintaining of the institution. The Institute for Racial Biology in Uppsala, as the culmination of the Swedish eugenics movement, is well described by Larsmo (2022) as an ideologically motivated institute, founded and long run by eugenicist Herman Lundborg. The institute worked under the pseudoscience of racial biology and racial hygiene, trying to create a “pure” Scandinavian race. The institute was for decades conducting the infamous skull-measuring to categorize people based on a biological race, while also forcing sterilization to try and improve genetics. The institute was led by Herman Lundborg up until just before the second world war, when internal political struggles as well as political pressure from parliament wished for the institute to cut the unofficial ties they had to Nazi Germany. This provided an ideological and scientific paradigm shift, where forced sterilization to improve genetics was no longer considered valid, and that the dividing of better and worse races was now considered to be unscientific. However, this paradigm instead supported a social perspective on the same issues, believing that attributes considered to be unwanted was socially hereditary (Larsmo, 2022., Spektorowski & Mizrachi, 2004).

A large part of the work that the institute in Uppsala conducted was the offences they committed against the Sami. Lundborg made several trips all around Sápmi, even before the establishment of the institute in 1922. During these trips, Sami children as well as adults were forced to be examined and photographed in the nude. The bulk of the archives in Uppsala was consisting of
the photographs and field notes taken while the eugenicists, sent from a state institution, investigated the Sami ‘race’. Lundborg wished to investigate what he called the “degeneration” of the Sami people, believing that they were inferior to the rest of Sweden in terms of development. Through the eugenicist movements extensive lobbying, the political atmosphere regarding the Sami were moving in a similar direction. The Sami were made poor and maintained poor under the Swedish welfare state, and policy were introduced to prevent the Sami from being allowed to sustain themselves. Through economic and social neglect, the Sami people were not allowed to keep their linguistic and religious traditions, they were not allowed the same education as ‘Swedes’, and they were actively oppressed and suppressed by the Swedish state (Larsmo, 2022).

There was also a perspective of productivity to the genetics movement in Sweden. The social democratic party was actively enforcing sterilizations of people that was considered unproductive and unwanted, in the name of the welfare state. Physically healthy individuals, mainly women, were sterilized for reasons such as social behavior that was considered anti-social, people that were considered a financial burden to the welfare state, and those not adherent to what was considered the social norm. One example of how this especially affected racial minorities, regardless of how race as a hereditary categorization for cognitive and moral function had mostly been discarded, is the case of what was called tattare. I personally consider this term to be an unacceptable racial slur today. This term was meant to describe Romas, who were considered to have a bad moral positioning as well as bad productivity, while also having phenotypically dark characteristics. If someone could be associated with these traits, they were automatically assumed to be a member of the Roma population, and the sterilization act of 1941 – which was ratified when social democratic Gunnar Dahlberg was the head of the institute – that was brought forward by the social democrats, was seen as a “solution” to the tattare issue. (Spektorowski & Mizrachi, 2004). This clearly shows that despite the shift in view on race as a biological concept and sterilizations as a tool to improve genetics, racial minorities were still targeted in Sweden during Gunnar Dahlberg’s time as the leader of the institute. Since the shift in leadership was a political decision and Dahlberg was an active social democrat, the Swedish eugenics movement was still conducting their systematic assaults on racial minorities, simply with a different argument for justifying their work. Dahlberg’s institute used a, by eugenicists, reformative agenda to cater to the social democrats’ utopian view of a homogenous welfare state, conducting similar work as his mainline predecessor Herman Lundborg, despite using a different discourse as justification.
### 3.3 Swedish refugee reception – 2015 until now

Nicole Ostrand (2015) did a comparative study where she compared the response to the Syrian refugee situation by Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. There, she describes how the European Union gave more than 3.5 billion USD in humanitarian aid and financial support to internally displaced Syrians and to Syrian refugees in the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan. These neighboring countries saw the largest influx of Syrians and, by January 2015 when this aid was decided on, provided protection to a large part of the Syrian diaspora (Ostrand, 2015, p. 265).

According to Ostrand, Sweden and Germany are the two countries outside of Syria’s immediate geographical proximity that received the largest number of Syrian asylum applications. Between 2012 and 2014, Sweden received 55,210 asylum applications from Syrians, and granted asylum to 31,771 of those cases, while Germany received 61,885 applications and granted asylum to 39,965. The United Kingdom and the United States received little more than 5,000 applications each. In comparison, Sweden and Germany were the largest reception hubs for Syrian refugees, according to the numbers (Ostrand, 2015). Sweden thus had a large number of Syrian refugees both applying for and being granted asylum in comparison to other countries outside of Syria’s geographic region. The only European country with more asylum seekers from Syria was Germany. According to Ostrand, Sweden had the reputation to be a “safe haven” among Syrian refugees which might be one of the reasons why the number of Syrian’s applying for asylum in Sweden was so large (Ostrand, 2015, p 272). The numbers presented above was the number of Syrian refugees that came to Sweden in 2015, not the total amount of asylum seekers. The total amount of asylum seekers in 2015 was around 160 thousand, meaning that Syrians alone made up of approximately a third of the total reception of refugees that year – making Syrian’s the largest nationality in the application process that year (Migrationsinfo, 2021).

In the years following 2015, there was a shift away from the humanitarian standpoint that the Swedish government previously had. The Swedish government reasoning for worsening the conditions for refugees arriving in Sweden was that in order to force other countries within the European Union to take a larger share of the responsibility, Sweden could not provide better conditions than any other (Hagelund, 2020). Through this reasoning Sweden would no longer be a “safe haven” as Ostrand (2015) described Sweden’s reputation to be. One of the main things that Sweden did was restraining the access that migrants had to the Swedish welfare system. The argument presented at the time was that the Swedish welfare system was strained because of the influx of refugees in 2015, making it necessary to prevent access to some non-citizen groups. According to Hagelund (2020), this was the argument that was presented, which accumulated in a press-conference
in November 2015 with Prime Minister Stefan Löfven (S) and his Deputy Prime Minister Åsa Romson (MP) where they presented enforced border controls, limiting resident rights for refugees, enforced stricter self-sufficiency demands, and shifted from permanent to temporary residence for asylum-holders. According to Hagelund (2020), this was not a sign of change of heart, but rather a change of methods. Deputy Prime Minister Åsa Romson (MP) was in tears during the press-conference, and the decision was described by the government as an especially difficult one to make, saying that did not want to, but rather they felt it necessary (Hagelund, 2020, p. 8-10). After 2015, the refugee reception in Sweden was restricted in certain ways. This can be seen in the total amount of asylum seekers applying for asylum in Sweden. According to Migrationsinfo (2021) the numbers reduced from more than 150 thousand asylum seekers in total in 2015 to just over 26 thousand in 2016.

Considering that the conflict in Ukraine is relatively recent in history, the previous research on Ukrainian refugee reception in Sweden is very small so far. What we do know is that according to the Swedish Migration Agency, everyone that is encompassed by the Temporary Protection Directive have the same fundamental rights as all asylum-holders have. This means that Ukrainian refugees have the same access to the Swedish welfare state – school for children, healthcare, etc. – as all asylum holders from other countries also have in Sweden (Migrationsverket, 2023b).
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that will be taken into consideration for this thesis will be Critical Race Theory and the concept of the Racial Contract. These frameworks provide a theoretical foundation in what role the categorization of race plays in society and the common consciousness, irrefutably visible, yet also hidden and subtle.

4.1 Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory as described by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2017) is a critical framework that is based on the acknowledgement that race is a fundamental categorization of people that have, and continues to, form the social standing of individuals as well as groups in a global hierarchy based on centuries of oppression. Race actively affects one’s social, political, and financial opportunities where whiteness has been dominant. There has been a political structure of white supremacy that was established through colonization and have transcended into the post-colonial era, being still present in a global political power structure (Delgado et al., 2017). White supremacy as the ruling political structure has resulted in the assumption of whiteness as being the norm, meaning that non-whiteness is treated as deviating from the norm. This often manifests in a subtle form, oftentimes so intrinsic into the fabric of society that most people who are considered as white and thus belonging to this norm does not realize that it is there because it often goes unseen (Delgado et al., 2017., Wekker, 2016). For this reason, Critical Race Theory serves a purpose in highlighting these norms and social structures.

The concept of color-blindness in the racial discourse, claiming that simply “not seeing” race is the answer to prevent racialization and discrimination based on race. According to Critical Race Theory, this is problematic. The very concept of color-blindness and not seeing race actively neglects and refuses to acknowledge the experiences of both groups and individuals in how they have been racialized and experienced discrimination based on their race, just as it refutes that whiteness as a norm is the ruling doctrine, globally (Delgado et al., 2017., Osanami Törngren, 2015). Without race, there can be no racism, and thus color-blindness in the discourse of race subconsciously deflects that racism exists and is a real living issue. (Delgado et al., 2017).

“Race is socio-political rather than biological, but it is nonetheless real.” (Mills, 1997, p. 126).
4.2 The Racial Contract

The Racial Contract is a concept articulated by contemporary philosopher Charles W. Mills (1997). Mills presents a critical take on the social contract as it has been conceptualized by the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rosseau. Mills expresses a critical point of view on the social contract, meaning that it is Eurocentric, white normative, and an inaccurate reflection of reality. Mills, instead argues that the social contract should be viewed as a racial contract, and that it instead of being a contract regarding social rights based on societal belonging, it is rather based on racial belonging. Mills uses the critical thought of whiteness as the norm and further elaborates it into that whiteness is the ruling political theory on a global scale. White privilege is fundamentally intrinsic into the global power structure. With whiteness being dominant in the global hierarchies of power, Mills argues that everyone and everything that is not categorized as white is therefore considered to be non-white, while also acknowledging the intersectional approach arguing that intersecting identities and categorizations overlap, resulting in a more complex social hierarchy than that of two categorizations (Mills, 1997).

According to Mills’ conception of the Racial Contract, there is a European cognition that for something to exist as completely human, it must first be recognized by Europe, and thus by whiteness. The notion that European colonizers “discovered” already inhabited land is a firm example of this. Land that is already inhabited by humans, can of course not be discovered for humanity, since humanity is already there, but because of the inhabitants being considered non-white it was not considered to really be inhabited in the eyes of Europe. Being white has historically meant being completely human, resulting in non-white meant being seen as non-human or not fully human. This conception of race has historical roots, but is nonetheless still present in the contemporary world, where one’s presumed racial belonging dictates if one is to be classified as fully human or not, according to the Racial Contract (Mills, 1997).

This is described in detail by Mills with countless examples on when this categorization of people has manifested with extreme consequences for the groups considered to be non-white. The consideration of what is “savage” and what is “civilized” is one example, when for example white Europeans colonized the “virgin lands”, as it was called, from Native Americans. Another example of this non-white non-human dichotomy is that of the holocaust. The systematic murder of millions of Jews by Nazi Germany during the second world war were, with its unimaginable horrors, not the first time a holocaust of this magnitude took place, however it was the first time it took place against Europeans, who could be considered white but at the time was not. The systematic murdering of Jewish people by Nazi Germany is considered the Holocaust, however when looking at the history of European domination, mass-murdering of people who are painted as inferior and unwanted is not the
exception, but rather it is a tendency in European history, despite most of these are not considered to be holocausts because of the victims being non-white (Mills, 1997).

Mills is also disclaiming that ‘white’ has not necessarily always been used to referring to someone with a white skin-color. Whiteness is not only a color but is also a power-relation. An example presented by Mills as one of these exceptions is the Japanese Empire before and during the second world war. The perceived superiority of the “Yamato race”, that we know of because of documents that survived the fall of the Japanese Empire, is an example of where whiteness was considered non-white. The Japanese were planning for a race war that would determine who would be the dominant race, western white or the Japanese Yamato, resulting in what Mills calls “the Yellow Contract” (Mills, 1997, p 127). Another example is the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 where Hutus committed countless murders of the for them inferior Tutsis. There are many examples through history where whiteness has not necessarily been considered white, with the most successful exception being the Japanese Empire, however, none have come close to establishing a global structure of perceived racial supremacy like western whites have, resulting in whiteness still being the norm on a global scale with some local or regional deviations from this hierarchical norm. Another example of how whiteness is a constructed set of power relations, more than just color, is that who is considered white have been and still is a matter of debate and perspective. Irish, Italians, and Finns are some examples of groups of people that was long seen as non-white and thus not included into this power structure because of this, further legitimizing the claim that race is socially constructed, since who is included into this power structures differs with time and place while also showing that whiteness as explained by Mills is far more than just color (Mills, 1997).

“Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations.” (Mills, 1997, p. 127).
5. Methodology

This chapter will present the process of analyzing the material for the study, as well as the method that will be used in gathering said material, restrictions that were necessary to consider during the process, and my reasonings as a researcher on what decisions were made, and why they were made.

5.1 Positionality

The decision to investigate the Swedish context for this study has been a choice made for many reasons. I have for long considered Swedish racism as something that lurks silently in the background, something that sometimes shows itself clear as day, but that most often is hidden. The color-blind discourse is in my opinion the very culmination of this veiled racism, acting as both a symptom and a cause. The term ‘race’ has for my entire life been considered as something unscientific, old, and irrelevant. From my perspective, there has always been a common consensus that dividing human beings into races is unacceptable, and that it is in itself a racist act. It was not until I started my master’s program that I learned of race as a social construct, which has enlightened me. I have during my entire adult life understood the racist attitudes that hides behind this discourse, but receiving this depth of understanding during my studies at Linköping’s University have made it so that I can understand it even deeper, as well as formulate how and where I believe the issues core to be. I grew up hearing this discourse – not from my immediate surroundings, which I am eternally grateful for, since it gave me a critical and constructive mindset, prompting me to always keep going when I find injustice – but rather, it was constantly present in the peripheries. From my point of view, this was considered taboo to acknowledge. The color-blind discourse is rooted very deeply to the point that I am positive that most Swedes that actively engage in such a discourse are unaware of their own biases and how they themselves contribute. This is the reason why I wanted to study this discourse, because it manifests as this ever-present phenomenon, yet I believe the awareness to be frighteningly low.

In doing studies regarding injustice, racism, and differential treatment on an institutional level in general, it is important to acknowledge one’s own experiences. During my entire life in Sweden, I have never experienced any kind of discrimination against my person, nor has any of my family members been receiving any negative differential treatment. I have always been considered white in the Swedish context, meaning that I enjoy the privilege of never having experienced anything like what racialized groups that are considered non-white in the Swedish context experience on an everyday basis, nor do I believe that there is a context today where I would be considered non-white. I am not a minority in any way in Sweden, nor have I ever experienced being a minority. This means that there is no possible way for me to, on a personal level, understand how discriminating treatment
affect a person or a group or how it feels to be discriminated against. I know and acknowledge this. The experience that racialized groups receive through racist treatment is not something that I have, nor have I ever claimed to have it. This means that, even though I have dedicated my academic career to the study of these attitudes, I will never truly understand the extent to which these attitudes can affect people. Studying these attitudes to understand and prevent them is one thing, while experiencing might be completely different, something that I humbly acknowledge. I will always be willing to listen to other’s experiences to further evolve my understanding, even though I will probably never understand these experiences on a personal level. With this study, I am thus not trying to appropriate the lived experiences of people that experience racism on a regular basis, nor do I claim to have the right to these experiences, but rather I wish to reflect upon the discourses that I have witnessed for a long time in Sweden.

In terms of accessibility, the material I have used have all been available to me for free because of my status as a student with Linköping University, meaning that no fiscal resources have been necessary in the making of this study, which have been a privilege that I am very grateful for. Since Swedish is my mother tongue, analyzing Swedish media have not been an issue on a linguistic level, and the access to previous research have also been increased significantly because of my linguistic background.

5.2 Gathering of Material

The gathering of material for this research have mainly been through the database Mediearkivet. This is a database that gathers all available news-articles from the biggest Swedish newspapers. The database has allowed me access through my status as student at Linköping’s University, consequently, there has been no need for fiscal resources in the gathering of the material for the research.

5.2.1 Newspapers

When gathering material from Mediearkivet, the initial search involved four different newspapers, Aftonbladet, Expressen, Svenska Dagbladet, and Dagens Nyheter. Restrictions were made so that only national media was used, and thus not local or regional newspapers or sections within newspapers, for the purpose of narrowing down, and since I wanted to look at it from a national perspective. Looking at a more regional or local narrative would also be an interesting alternative, but for this study a national perspective was an active choice that I as a researcher committed to early on. The term used for the search was “invandrare” (immigrant), and the results were 1090 articles for
the timespan of the January 1st 2015, to January 1st 2016. With the same restrictions printed into Mediearkivet’s search engine, but with the timespan January 1st, 2022, to January 1st, 2023, the results were 595 articles. These results made it clear that I needed to narrow it down further.

There are several ways in which it is possible to narrow down such a massive find, but the decision I made was to narrow down the timeframe, because having a more diversified number of sources in the form of different newspapers was something I wanted to look more into, to make sure that I take several different newspapers into consideration. However, through time I realized that having four different newspapers were simply too much, and so I decided to try the same search with two papers, Aftonbladet and Expressen. This gave a narrower search, but it was still too much to do a fruitful analysis. For this reason, I decided that I will only use Aftonbladet. Aftonbladet is an old newspaper, founded in 1830 in comparison to Expressen, that started their organization in 1944. Aftonbladet is, according to themselves, “independently social democratic” but do not wish to belong to a specific political color. Aftonbladet is to 91% owned by the Norwegian media group Schibsted, and the remaining 9% is owned by Landorganisationen (LO) an umbrella organization of workers unions in Sweden. LO have the veto on assigning the political head editor of Aftonbladet (Aftonbladet, 2023). Aftonbladet is quite transparent in their political affiliation, which makes the analyzing of material gathered from their publications easier. According to a survey conducted by the marketing company Ocast (w.y), Aftonbladet is the second biggest newspaper in Sweden, after Dagens Nyheter, when counting number of readers per day.

Having a more diversified selection of newspapers would give an advantage in the form that there would be more perspectives and political alignments to analyze, however one newspaper is more than enough considering that there is a limited time restriction for the project and considering that Aftonbladet is a newspaper of a relatively large size, the material was more than enough. Choosing Aftonbladet instead of other newspapers was a deliberate choice. Their outreach together with their transparency in political affiliation – I believe to be a good representation for Sweden. I acknowledge that having several papers would provide a larger comparison and give me more aspects to consider in my comparison, but because of the project being sensitive for time, Aftonbladet have given me a good selection with their 79 articles divided into the two one-month periods in 2022 and 2015. The material is 30 articles in 2015 and 49 articles in 2022.

The news articles that were used were all in Swedish. When quoted in this study, I have myself translated the quoted material to English to the best of my abilities, capturing the essence of what the translated text said originally. The reason for this is mainly because I do not want to restrict the analysis to only be understood by Swedish speakers, but I want as many as possible to take part in the study as a whole. The quoted parts were all analyzed in the same context as the rest of the
material, and the translations were done after the analysis was completed. A full list of the material that was cited for the analysis will be provided at the end of this study.

5.2.2 Timeframe

I decided to narrow the timeframe down to a one-month span in each case. 12th of November 2015 was the day that Sweden decided to enforce border controls, mainly on people coming from the Öresund channel and travelers entering by boat from Germany (MSB, 2015). Since this decision by the Swedish government was enforced on the 12th of November, I decided on the timespan of one month prior to this enforcement, namely 12th of October to 12th of November 2015. Similarly for the case of 2022, the same restrictions on time were chosen, but from the beginning of the Russian invasion, 24th of February 2022 to the 24th of March 2022.

5.2.3 Sampling

For this study, several decisions considering restrictions needed to be made. The initial plan was to have the years of 2015 and 2022 in their entirety as the timespan for the research, however that was quickly becoming overwhelming for the time-restrictions available for this master’s thesis. The amount that was written under the specific keywords were simply too much to do a rewarding analysis. For this reason, it was necessary to make a significant restriction regarding the timespan of the publications. The timespan chosen was thus what is mentioned above, two one-month periods, one for each case, with specific dates relevant to each of the cases circumstances.

During the research done through Mediearkivet, specific keywords were used in the search for relevant articles. In the first case, in addition to the word “flyktingar” (refugees) the country of origin that I wanted to investigate was added, namely “Syrien” (Syria). Similarly, for the case of 2022, the keyword “Ukraina” (Ukraine) was added into the search bar in addition to “flyktingar”. This gave a result that was manageable for analyzing, namely 30 articles in 2015, and 49 articles in 2022. The term “flykting” is in singular, and when using the plural version of the word, “flyktingar” the results were significantly higher. There are pros and cons with both alternatives of this term. Using the plural version will be the best option for looking at how groups of migrants are presented as a collective, whereas the singular version of the would give more alternatives to look at specific cases where the newspapers in question talk about individuals. Both alternatives are valid points of research, but for this study the purpose will see how these papers are portraying groups rather than
specific individuals, even if those often can go together since an individual is a part of a group. And thus, I used the plural version of the term, “flyktingar”.

It is important to note that despite the nationalities of the cases I looked for was specifically used, not all articles spoke of only these groups. Especially in the Syrian case, migrants with other nationalities were also described alongside Syrians. Despite this, during the analytical process, the description of Syrians was what I focused on for the sake of the study – and because of Syrians was largest group of refugees that applied for asylum in 2015, and that the search used that nationality specifically, this was also the group that was most commonly written about in the material.

5.2.4 Limitations

Considering the limit time for this study, the acknowledgement of limitations has been an important part in the process. This study will be done using only one newspaper for two one-month periods, meaning that there is a large amount of material both from Aftonbladet and from other newspapers that will not be used. There are also many other forums that will not be included, such as social media, because the limitations for this study needed to be narrow in order for the analysis to be fruitful. Because of these limitations, this study will be a small part of what is possible to do as far as research with representation in media goes, meaning that the conclusions that might be drawn from this will be relatively small. Despite the relatively small size of this study, my hope is that this will be a contribution none-the-less and might trigger more extensive research to be done in the future on this topic.

Another limitation that was necessary was the choice regarding what cases to examine. As stated previously, the decision to pick Syria in comparison to Ukraine was a conscious choice, and one that I personally had pondered on for some time. However, it is important to state that there were of course refugees of other nationalities during the same time. For example, in 2015 the amount of Syrian asylum seekers was about 50 thousand, whereas the total amount of asylum applications was approximately 160 thousand. This is important to acknowledge, just the same that asylum seekers from other parts of the world did not stop when the Russo-Ukrainian war started. In order to make this study manageable, it was necessary to narrow down and limit what specific cases I was going to analyze to not make the quest too big. There were and are other groups that is facing similar struggles that would also be valid to look for. It should also be stated that I do not see either Syrians or Ukrainians as homogenous groups. However, for the purpose of the study these were the nationalities chosen, meaning not that they are homogenous, but that limiting the material based on some form of categorization was necessary for the sake of the study.
5.3 Thematic Analysis

The analytical method that will be used to analyze the material will be a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify and categorize themes in data – with the themes being a form of pattern. Identifying themes in a material is done at the discretion of the researcher, since the themes are not intrinsic, and is thus seen by the researcher in their attempt to form a hermeneutic understanding of the material. Thematic analysis is appropriate for analyzing diverse forms of material, including newspaper articles as is the case for this study (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

There are two different forms of thematic analysis, semantic thematic analysis, and latent thematic analysis. A semantic, or explicit, thematic analysis describes the surface of the material and does not go beyond what the interviewer or author is saying. Having a more latent, or interpretive, approach to the thematized material is when the researcher is trying to identify and explain the underlying assumptions and ideas of the material, not only describing the material as itself, but is also looking for potential underlying conceptualizations. This form of thematic analysis provides a theorized analysis, where the material has been interpreted beyond the description of the material (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The themes are identified through coding. The first step in doing a thematic analysis is, of course, to familiarize yourself with the collected data. When the researcher has read through the data and is starting the coding process, the analytical process has already begun. It is through these codifications that the themes will materialize for the researcher. When the codification process has been completed, the codes are reviewed and turned into themes. The themes are continuously reviewed and merged into more encompassing themes and potential sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For this study, I will be conducting a thematic analysis with a latent approach to see if through the thematizations of the material, we can find underlying assumptions, biases, and ideas within the material. The themes that were identified were the same for both the cases, and the comparison was made mainly based on the amount of presence that each theme had in each case, and how they manifested differently. Depending on how potential differences between the cases is presented, we can see whether there are any underlying assumptions that differentiates between the cases based on how the themes manifests.

5.3.1 Themes

As an introduction before the analysis is presented, here is a short summery of all the themes that were found through the analytic process of the material. Throughout the analysis, seven themes
were found. These themes were all present in both cases in different amounts and with different manifestation, which we will see further in the analysis below.

The themes found in the material are the following:

1. **The providing of support** – Description of practical and moral support given to the refugees.
2. **Description of suffering** – Storytelling narrative that describes the devastating and dangerous situations that the migrants were facing either before, during, or after their journey.
3. **Arguments in favor of assisting migrants** – Arguments presented where the author is arguing for an increased support for refugees.
4. **Shifting responsibility** – Where the question of responsibility was raised, and the projecting of responsibility towards other actors were presented.
5. **Refugees as an issue** – Where refugees were portrayed as a problem to be solved, where they were seen as an issue.
6. **Differentiation between migrant groups** – Where the need of different migrant groups was compared and deemed non-equal.
7. **Accusations of racism** – Where differential treatment was described as racism.

These are the final themes that were found through the thematic analysis of the material. In the analysis below, I will present these themes as they manifested in the material, and how their presence and manifestation can be compared between the cases.
6. Analysis

The material analyzed for this study was, as mentioned in the methodological chapter, gathered through Mediearkivet. The final number of articles that was part of the analysis was 79 articles from different authors, all published in the span of two months, 12th of October to the 12th of November 2015, and the 24th of February to the 24th of March 2022. The keywords used to find these articles were similar in both cases, using the word “flyktingar” in both, and switching between “Syrien” and “Ukraina” as the second keywords. All 79 articles were read, coded, and added to the thematization process; however, some were more rewarding than others, which was expected. The coding of the material was a rewarding experience, since it was the first time that I did a thematic analysis of this magnitude. The themes that were found through the coding of the material will systematically be presented below, and any potential differences between the cases in relation to the themes will be presented continuously throughout the analytical presentation.

6.1 The providing of assistance

This theme was one of the most common and reoccurring themes in both the Syrian and Ukrainian cases. When comparing the material, we can see that this theme manifested differently in the different cases. The themes were related to specific actions taken in both cases, which will be presented in more detail below. The providing of support was one of the more continuously described themes. This was present in both cases, however in a very different way.

The most common presentation of this in the case of Syria was the descriptive storytelling of the “coast of death” as it was called by journalist Erik Wikman. The coast of death is referring to the coastal areas of the Greek isles where migrants came ashore after the treacherous journey over the Mediterranean. Aftonbladet had during this time established a project called “Gula båtarna” (the yellow boats) that was funded by Schibstedt, the majority owner of Aftonbladet. The project was a collaboration with the Swedish Sea Rescue Society where they provided equipment, training, and personnel to the project. The goal was that on every boat that was active in rescue operations in the Mediterranean there was to be either a photographer or a journalist working for Aftonbladet on-board, that had received training in sea rescue operations. The boats were then sent to the Greek island of Samos. Many articles that actively portrayed humanitarian and emotional aid were those that spoke of the project, and at the bottom of every article was a small informative section directed to the public where Aftonbladet asked for additional funding for this project. Aftonbladet’s reporter Erik Wikman that was on the scene together with his colleagues describes the situation.
“Aftonbladet’s photographer Andreas Bardell let’s go of the camera and manages to grasp a small bundle that a woman is desperately trying to hold above water. It is Honav, that on her seventeenth day of life is white of water and cold.” (Erik Wikman, 2015-10-28).

Gula båtarna was the main subject of several quite lengthy articles, depicting the immense suffering that the journalists witnessed, alongside how their actions and the actions of other volunteers present on the “coast of death” made a huge difference for many people. This was the main presence of the providing assistance and emotional support given to migrants during the case of Syria. Apart from this, humanitarian aid was also presented in another descriptive article about a hotel outside of Kiruna in the northern most part of Sweden, that decided to open their facilities to provide a safe space for newly arrived Syrian refugees at the request of the migration agency. An interview with the CEO Sven Kuldkepp, conducted by reporter Petter Ovander describes the process of opening.

“Then came the request from the Migration Agency: Can you open? – It took a couple days. As the situation is now it was obvious, says CEO Sven Kuldkepp” (Petter Ovander, 2015-10-25).

The article, published on October 25th 2015, depicts how 580 refugees was sent to the hotel for shelter, and how volunteers from both neighboring Kiruna all the way to Narvik in Norway have come to the hotel to aid families from Iraq, Eritrea, and Syria by giving clothes and toys to the families. The kitchen-staff is trying their best to make the refugees feel at home by making food inspired by the east African and Middle Eastern cuisine, and a small interview with one of the newly arrived men from Syria explains that he feels welcome, and that he thinks that the area has a good atmosphere where he feels safe.

When looking at the same theme in the case of Ukraine, the differences was quite significant. The largest difference between the cases was not only the amount of presence that theme was given, but how it manifested. In 2022, there were entire articles dedicated to describing how a Swedish family had decided to open their home to let a Ukrainian family live with them. Although the article in question described one family, Swedish families taking in Ukrainian refugees was a relatively common occurrence, based on the material. This might very well be something that was frequently occurring in the Syrian case as well, but that was not presented in the material at all. However, one article presented in the Ukrainian case was encouraging people to not take refugees
into their homes, especially children coming without guardians. The reason for this was that the help that these children require needs to be provided by social workers and healthcare professionals. Instead, the public was urged to donate money to organizations that had the capacity to coordinate the humanitarian and emotional support that Ukrainian refugees required. In an interview with the children’s rights organization ECPAT Sverige, one of their project leaders Sara Westerberg explains these issues:

“Children’s rights organization ECPAT Sweden sees risks with a child, especially those that come without a guardian, is taken care of by people on their own initiative. – I understand that one wants to do something in this situation and does it out of the goodness of one’s heart but there are often extremely large needs with this group of children. They often have trauma after having fled and these needs must be taken care of in the correct way. Sweden has a well-established system for this, says Sara Westerberg, project leader at ECPAT Sweden.” (Anglica Öhagen, 2022-03-09).

This quote shows us that it was a rather common phenomenon, common enough for organizations like this to problematize situations where children coming without guardians were taken in by families. We can also see an argumentative article written by regional and local Moderate politicians Anna Tenje, Anna König Jerlmyr, Axel Josefsson, Peter Danielsson, and Roger Fredriksson, leading politicians in different municipalities and regions (landsting) across southern Sweden, are praising people that are doing this:

“We see many volunteers and local businesses choosing to get involved, taking refugees here on their own initiative. That is commendable and for many, self-evident. The Swedes are standing up for Ukraine.” (Anna Tenje et al., 2022-03-16).

At the end of the article, they implore Sweden to halt migration from other nations temporarily, and only accept Ukrainians, hinting that Ukrainians should take priority over other refugees. We will be looking at this further, later in this chapter.

The help given by the Swedish public is a recurring theme in articles regarding Ukraine. According to the articles, this was a common phenomenon, and there were many ways that the Swedish public contributed. The financial aid given by the Swedish public was large, and giving money was more encouraged than giving objects such as clothing because of the logistical issues of
transporting and sorting clothes. The aid given to Ukrainian refugees in 2022 was significantly larger in comparison to the aid given to Syrian refugees in 2015, as described by Elmer Rikner in an interview with Deputy Secretary General in the UNHCR, Elin Stråkendal:

“*The will to contribute is bigger than in a long time. According to Elin Stråkendahl, Deputy Secretary General on UNHCR the help from the Swedish public is more extensive than during the migration wave 2015. – We are so happy and deeply touched by this, she says.*” (Elmer Rikner, 2022-03-09).

In addition to the humanitarian aid given, we can also see a great deal of emotional and moral support manifesting. Giving emotional and moral support to Ukrainian refugees is, as described, a frequently occurring theme in the articles, however we can also see international support given to Ukraine. For example, one article mentions that in the United Kingdom, families are paid a sum of 3000 SEK to open their homes for Ukrainians, and we can also see sports commentators commenting on how support for Ukraine in the sports sector, mainly in the NHL, have spiked. The NHL in Canada and the United States have been in uproar because of one club banning the presence of Ukrainian flags in their arena, and how the fan-base of the club rose in protest. This clearly shows that not only is the humanitarian aid for Ukrainian refugees in Sweden given much attention, moral support in other sectors, such as sports, as well as in other countries, is also given space in Aftonbladet. There are also descriptions of refugee accommodations outside of Sweden, mainly in Poland which was a large hub for refugees considering its geographical proximity to Ukraine, with detailed description of how the Polish public had stepped up to take care of refugees arriving from Ukraine to Poland, despite the inaction of politicians.

In summary, this theme was one of the most common, but the manifestation was different across the two cases. The theme was more common in the Ukrainian case in comparison to the Syrian. In the Ukrainian case, the theme manifested with the description of Swedish families opening their homes to invite Ukrainian refugees to live with them, a very intimate and sympathetic display of support. This was encouraged by some politicians, but also problematized by Children Rights organizations. In the Syrian case, the theme of giving support was mainly shown when journalists visited a large refugee shelter outside of Kiruna, as well as the description of volunteers helping migrants on the coast of death in Greece. In the Syrian case, Aftonbladet had their own project, Gula båtarna, that they were actively seeking additional funding for through a small add at the end of their articles that were describing the situation for migrants at the coast of death. There is
therefore a steady presence of this theme in both cases, but in the Ukrainian case the theme is manifesting in a somewhat more intimate way where the help given was described to literally be in the homes of the Swedish population. The Syrian case had a more distanced positioning between the reader and the support described, where it was not described as being integrated in the same way for the public.

### 6.2 Description of suffering

This was the most commonly occurring theme in both cases. In both the Syrian and the Ukrainian case, a narrative depicting war and human suffering is all but constantly present, even though the circumstances differ between the cases. In comparing these cases using this theme, the space given to this kind of storytelling and the details provided are similar in sheer numbers, but changes because of the circumstances.

In the case of Syria, much of the depiction of human suffering is the journalistic pieces written by those that volunteered in the Swedish Sea Rescue Association’s project together with Aftonbladet. There is a frequently occurring description of how refugees coming over the Mediterranean lost their lives through capsizing vessels, the consequences of extreme conditions that the seas alongside the insufficient safety measures provided by human traffickers resulted in, signs of trauma, and the general agony and precariousness of the situation for the migrants. The journalistic mission here is to provide information as well as to try and create some form of understanding to the readers as to what these migrants are going through. There are more general articles written from the journalist’s point of view, describing the situation, and there are more personalized articles where they interview and explain the journey of a certain individual or a family. This is also reoccurring in the case of Ukraine. Erik Wikman, reporter for Aftonbladet gives an example of the morbid reality on the coast of death:

> “The day before yesterday two children drowned in the waves along a cliff-side. Just like Mahmud were they on their way away from the bombs. Instead, their lungs were filled with salt-water in front of the eyes of powerless parents.” (Erik Wikman, 2015-11-01).

The main difference on how this theme manifests in these cases is the circumstances that the migrants face or have faced. There are several articles describing the horrors brought down on Ukraine in the form of Russian artillery. The description of war-torn cities is reoccurring. Just like in the case of
Syria, there are both general articles describing the circumstances for groups in Ukraine just as there are articles that take a more personal perspective where one or two individuals are the focus. In 2022, the descriptions are mainly focused on the war itself, and how Russian aggression have uprooted the everyday life of Ukrainians. There are narratives describing children in bomb-shelters, cities torn apart by artillery, and young soldiers preparing for the frontlines in Ukraine, but this was not the case in Syria.

“This Sunday the safety bubble was crushed, Olha says. Early in the morning, before dawn, the windows shook in their home, and she heard the explosions. Boom, boom, boom, she describes.

(Nora Savosnick, 2022-03-18).

The description of human suffering is a theme that is very present in both cases. All articles analyzed have in one way or another been written referring to conflicts that have resulted in large numbers of injured and dead, where families have been torn apart, and this is something that is described in grim detail in both cases. The main difference regarding this theme between the cases is based on the different circumstances that the migrants find themselves in. In the Ukrainian case, the war itself is the focus. Articles describing soldiers going to war and families that fled Ukraine to seek shelter in the European Union was dominating. In the Syrian case, the theme was not as common, although it was still frequently occurring. In this case, the description of human suffering was focusing on the migration process rather than the actual war that resulted in people fleeing. No article described the war in Syria, instead the focus was on the precarious journey over the Mediterranean to the coast of death and the description of just how awful the journey was, and the deadly consequences that many migrants faced.

It is important to not forget the atrocities that these migrants have been subjected to, and the presence of this theme is therefore extremely important. These are real people that have experienced real suffering. Reading and writing about human suffering is hard, and I believe it to be impossible to completely capture the stress caused by the war in Ukraine and the journey over the Mediterranean unless you have lived through it personally. Because of this, making the attempt to describe and trying to make the readers understand even a glint of the situations that these migrants find themselves in is extremely difficult, but endlessly important.
6.3 Arguments in favor of giving migrants support

Recurring throughout the material there were texts written by journalists and chroniclers that argued for, not necessarily an increase of migration per se, but that there should be more resources and more focus on helping and taking in refugees that were fleeing for their lives. This theme differentiated itself from the theme of humanitarian aid in the sense that this was more argumentative and less descriptive, where the author implored politicians as well as the public to step-up and welcome those that arrive in Sweden. There is a difference between the description of practical help given, and the argument for inclusion and aid to increase, however there were occasions where these two themes overlapped.

The difference between the cases regarding this theme was small but present. In both cases there were many articles that was actively arguing for a better welcoming for refugees, and that the focus in the debate should be to help people before anything else. There were several complete articles and partial articles that was completely engulfed in this argument. The Danish football player Riza Durmisi says in an interview to Aftonbladet’s Johan Flinck:

“It’s a shame that Denmark haven’t opened the doors for more refugees. I won’t be political, but this is my opinion, Durmisi says while he feels as though he in a way is treading on dangerous grounds.” (Johan Flinck, 2015-11-12).

This theme was also reoccurring in articles that only indirectly was referring to migration, like the quote above where Riza Durmisi was interviewed about his career and integration within the football sphere. Durmisi is here showing his support for refugees coming to Scandinavia, he is celebrating Sweden for their, in his opinion, welcoming of migrants while also urging Denmark to do the same. He clearly sees a difference between the Swedish and the Danish response to the refugees coming from Syria, and he is obviously favoring Sweden in this regard. In the case of Ukraine, the theme is even more frequent.

“Welcoming refugees from Ukraine? Yes, says even 60 precent of the Sweden Democrat’s voters.”

(Lena Mellin, 2022-03-04).

The alt-right party in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats, is a political party in the Swedish parliament who is leading an anti-migration conservative political ideology. Lena Mellin’s statement that 60
percent of the Swedish Democrats’ voters are supportive of Sweden accepting Ukrainian refugees is a large shift in attitude, considering that the party’s main political idea is that migration should be reduced and even stopped. Despite this theme being reoccurring in both cases, there is a difference in the themes amount where it is significantly more common in the case of Ukraine.

6.4 Shifting responsibility

When analyzing the presentation and manifestation of focus on helping or assisting migrants, the amount of the theme’s presence was not the only difference between the cases. There was the frequently occurring issue of responsibility that was often present in the case of Syria, but not nearly as present in the case of Ukraine. This theme was often manifested as though focus should be on helping migrants, while simultaneously raising the issue of who should be the one helping. Authors often acknowledged that the Swedish state should help refugees coming from Syria, while simultaneously claiming that Sweden cannot do it on their own and that the European Union should take on more responsibility. The European Union was the most frequently mentioned target for these demands, but there were also other actors mentioned.

“Of course the nations in Europe should accept refugees. But that they never from a political standpoint, or from any other standpoint for that matter, is demanding that the Arab countries who are so incredibly rich in oil should accept refugees is very unsatisfactory.” (Letters to the editor, 2015-11-12).

This quote was published as a letter to the editor of Aftonbladet. The focus with this article is not to help refugees, but rather on who should help them. In this case, the responsibility is projected towards the gulf-states that are in relative geographic proximity to Syria, but the same can also be seen when the projecting is targeting other member states of the European Union. The minister of migration at the time, Morgan Johansson (S) is paraphrased saying that he wishes that other nations in the European Union would take a bigger responsibility and that refugees should seek asylum elsewhere.

“– I am hoping for a diminishing effect, Johansson said. Clearly, Johansson wants more refugees to go elsewhere. Maybe he is also hoping for other countries to take on a bigger responsibility. It is doubtful that it will work.” (Ingvar Persson, 2015-11-06).
Morgan Johansson (S) called for a press-conference on the very same day and said:

“– Sweden is the country that have taken a bigger responsibility than any other in the European Union, and now we have reached our limit.” (Ivarsson Nordström, 2015-11-06).

A statement like this by the Swedish minister of migration shows clearly that the issue of responsibility was closely intertwined with the issue of helping refugees. There is an acknowledgement that refugees need aid and refuge, but alongside this acknowledgement there is a vivid debate regarding who should be taking responsibility for this reception, and except for some deviations, there is a consensus that Sweden is not able to accept any more refugees, and that refugees need to apply for asylum elsewhere. The theme of the issue of shifting responsibility towards the reception of refugees is not remotely as present in the Ukrainian case as it is in the Syrian. The only mentioning of projecting responsibility elsewhere is formed as a form of reminiscence regarding the case in 2015, and how Sweden took more than their responsibility back then, meaning that they should not need to do so now. However, that attitude that Sweden should not be partaking in the refugee reception in a similar extent as in 2015 was quickly turned into the opposite.

“Sweden has taken its responsibility, and more, for the EU:s refugee reception during the crisis 2015. Period. Now it’s time for other nations to step up, was Sweden’s bone-hard stance. For a while.” (Lena Mellin, 2022-03-06).

The attitude that Lena Mellin describes here is saying much about how the attitudes in Sweden shifted quickly. She describes how the consensus in Sweden was that because of the generous reception of migrants in 2015, Ukrainian refugees was not our problem, and that the European Union should take a larger responsibility. This shifted quickly after the invasion of Ukraine and evolved into Sweden opening their refugee reception. Even the more right-winged parties agreed that Sweden needed to accept Ukrainian refugees, despite the initial stance that Sweden did not have the capacity. We can see in a statement from the minister of integration and migration Anders Ygeman, that this shift occurred near the Ukrainian invasion, signifying just how quickly the Swedish political sector was ready to open and accept Ukrainian refugees:
“An important act of solidarity, Anders Ygeman said. That is, as you know, not what it sounded like a week earlier.” (Lena Mellin, 2022-03-06).

Making a collective decision together with the rest of the European Union that resulted in the Temporary Protection Directive being activated was a big difference compared to how the situation in 2015 was handled. The solidarity for Ukrainian refugees was established quickly by the Swedish government after the invasion, and for the public as well as in the private sector this solidarity was established even faster, and this occurred alongside a shift in defense policy in general. Sweden has a longstanding tradition of being “neutral” and not taking sides in most conflicts in the world. But, with the invasion of Ukraine that changed and in the writing of this study, Sweden is still waiting for Turkey to ratify the Swedish NATO application, which was a direct result of the war in Ukraine and the changing political situation around the Baltic Sea.

This theme was also reoccurring in both cases, but once again different in its manifestation and its frequency between the two cases. In the Syrian case, the projection of responsibility to other actors was a common way to argument in favor of aiding migrants. Claiming that the European Union should take a bigger responsibility in the refugee reception was common, and government officials themselves made statements like this. In the Ukrainian case however, projecting responsibility was not as common. Despite there being a resistance from government officials very early on after the invasion, this quickly shifted into Sweden focusing on advocating for helping migrants and along with the rest of the European Union the Temporary Protection Directive was activated not even two weeks after the invasion. The attitudes regarding Sweden’s responsibility were very different in the Syrian case compared to the Ukrainian, where Sweden was significantly more willing to mantle the responsibility to provide sanctuary together with the European Union towards Ukrainians in 2022 compared to Syrians in 2015.

6.5 Refugees as an issue

In contrast to the previous theme which focused on arguments in favor of helping refugees, there were also articles that emphasized the negative aspects of migration and refugees as a problem. This theme was at times difficult to define. There were many articles, especially in the case of Syria, that talked about the “refugee crisis”, as it was often called, as a challenge – however defining it as a problem was at times found to be different than simply mentioning it as a challenge or a difficulty.

“There are no countries the size of Sweden that can handle such an onslaught pain-free.” (Lena Mellin, 2015-11-07).
This quote by Lena Mellin, a prominent writer at Aftonbladet that have also been acting as the responsible editor for the paper, is good representation of how the theme manifested throughout the Syrian case. Statements like these are a continuous manifestation of the portrayal of refugees as a challenge that can destabilize society and the European cooperation. Ingvar Persson makes a strong statement, saying that refugee “crisis” threatens the relationship between member states of the European Union:

“In the long run this will be a threat to entire cooperation. It is exactly in situations like this that an institution like the EU is tested.” (Ingvar Persson, 2015-11-06).

This quote does not only directly claim that refugees coming to the European Union, and more specifically to Sweden, is a threat to the European cooperation that the Union represents, but it also implies that the influx of migrants at this magnitude is a threat both in itself and in the way that the European Union handled it. The alarmist attitude presented in this quote is a good example of many similar presented opinions and statements. The Prime Minister Stefan Löfven (S) and the Minister of Finance, later Prime Minister, Magdalena Andersson (S) also spoke alarmingly about the situation, claiming that Sweden was at the end of its rope:

“Stefan Löfven is talking about a strained situation and Magdalena Andersson is saying that we don’t have much capacity left.” (Ingvar Persson, 2015-11-06).

This type of discourse presented by the leaders of the Swedish political sector shows how the government was doing damage control, and that this attitude was more than widespread. When the government established border controls on the 12th of November 2015, the leader of the opposition at the time, Anna Kindberg Batra (M), also claimed that the situation was dire, and that she welcomed the government’s actions, while also saying that it was not enough:

“It is good that the government have realized that the situation is serious. But I don’t believe it’s enough. We need more order regarding those that do not have the right to be in Sweden. Anna Kindberg Batra (M).” (Susanna Nygren, 2015-11-12).
In the same article, aptly named “We are already too many”, the leader of the left party, Jonas Sjöstedt (V), was also asked on his thoughts on the situation, and interestingly he had a quite different concern:

“The most important thing is that the right to asylum is not infringed upon, which we will watch closely that they don’t, Jonas Sjöstedt (V).” (Susanna Nygren, 2015-11-12).

Jonas Sjöstedt’s (V) statement does not fit into the theme of painting migrants as a problem, but rather the opposite, showing that his main concern was the right for a refugee to seek asylum. This differs much from the focus that both the government and the opposition had, showing that the attitude of challenges taking priority was not all-encompassing in the political sector. However, the majority of parliament did indeed see Syrian migrants in 2015 as an issue that should be prevented through border controls and tougher measures against people that was not considered to have a rightful claim for asylum, which we can see in the material as well as in research done regarding migration policy after 2015.

In the Ukrainian case this theme is also present but not to the same extent. In this case, the theme is more subtle, not as common, and is presented with a different prerequisite.

“On par with the increase in migrant flows, the social and economic strains on EU-nations will also grow. Poland already has over two million Ukrainians. The Mayor of Warsaw says that with almost 400 000 refugees they are starting to reach the limit of what they can handle.” (Wolfgang Hansson, 2022-03-23)

This quote is descriptive of the situation in Poland, most specifically Warszawa, where 400 000 Ukrainian refugees have arrived at the writing of this article by Wolfgang Hansson. Considering Poland’s proximity to Ukraine, Poland was the closest way to safety for many migrants after the war broke out. With the number of refugees arriving to Poland’s capital Warsaw, the pressure put on them was so big that the mayor warned that they could not take in anymore. The discourse of a society being at the end of their rope was similar to what Morgan Johanson (S) said in 2015 regarding Sweden, and what the mayor of Warsaw said in 2022, but the numbers of migrants were significantly different, with 400 thousand in Warsaw compared to 160 thousand asylum seekers in total to Sweden.
in 2015, whereas approximately 50 thousand were Syrian. This is especially interesting considering that Warsaw is the capital city, whereas Sweden is the entire nation. As we can see, this narrative is different in comparison to the same theme’s manifestation in the Syrian case, where the alarmist descriptions were more common and required significantly smaller numbers to be present.

The focus on migration as a challenge and a problem had a different focus in the two cases. In the Syrian case, there were articles quoting politicians that described the challenges that migrants were posing to Sweden, and the claim that Sweden could not accept any more migrants. This attitude was not shared by all political parties, but the government and most of the opposition did take this stance. Alarmist accounts regarding how the European Union was threatened by this “crisis” and that Sweden risked chaos was frequently manifesting through the month leading up to the enforcement of border control. A similar rhetoric to what was used in the Syrian case was used regarding the situation in Poland, despite the numbers of refugees arriving was immensely larger in Poland 2022 compared to Sweden 2015. However, this this was not used to describe the refugee reception for Ukrainians in Sweden.

6.5 Differentiation between migrant groups

This theme was only present in the Ukrainian case, and notably absent in the Syrian. This theme was often present within articles that compared the Ukrainian situation in 2022 to the Syrian in 2015. It was frequently occurring in the Ukrainian case, mainly with authors being critical towards the discourse that many, mainly right-winged, politicians in Sweden took part in where they differentiated between refugees from Syria and Ukraine. There are entire articles dominated by this theme where criticism is directed towards the political opposition where their behavior and statements have clearly differentiated between refugees, claiming that Ukrainians are more worthy of aid than Syrians are.

“Up until now we have not received any “real” refugees, that’s what the Sweden Democrats mean. Maybe that’s how they defend their u-turn regarding the refugee reception.” (Zina Al Dewany, 2022-03-18)

Zina Al Dewany is here saying that according to the Sweden Democrats, the refugees arriving from Syria should not be considered real refugees and the party is using that as an excuse to help Ukrainians while not helping Syrians. The description given is clearly showing how the, in this
case, alt-right Sweden Democrats differentiates between refugees from Syria and refugees from Ukraine with the argument that the war in Syria is not a “real” war and that Syrian refugees are therefore not “real” refugees. The article presents the Minister of Migration and Integration Anders Ygeman (S) denouncing this notion, while at the same time the government is presenting policy contradicting this denunciation, according to Zina Al Dewany:

“Ygeman is not wrong. But while the government on the one hand is denouncing the myth of “real” refugees, they are also making policy that is signaling something different.” (Zina Al Dewany, 2022-03-18).

The policy that Al Dewany is referring to is the reinstatement of identification controls on busses, trains, and ships, that the Social Democratic government implemented to prevent non-Ukrainian migrants from entering alongside Ukrainians. This is contradicting the Schengen agreement and is a political decision that actively favors one group of migrants compared to others.

“The controls are supposed to be temporary, but there are some issues with such a change. There are issues in the performing of these controls. In many cases there have been accusations of racial profiling during these controls. That is signaling which refugees are worthy of protection, and which are not.” (Zina Al Dewany, 2022-03-18).

This decision can also affect Ukrainians, since many Ukrainian refugees likely do not have valid identification after fleeing their homes, while also increasing the risk for racial profiling against non-whites. Valuing some migrants worthy of support while neglecting to support others can also be seen in the article written by Anna Tenje (M) et al, where they explicitly argue migration from other countries that are not Ukraine should be temporarily diminished or completely stopped.

“Regardless of scenario, there will be many Ukrainians coming to Sweden. That means that the reception of migrants from other countries should be rigorously diminished or halted.” (Anna Tenje et al., 2022-03-16).
The presentation of this opinion, especially when presented by elected politicians of one of Sweden’s biggest political parties, is a strong statement. A war in one part of the world does not cancel out a different war elsewhere, making it reasonable to assume that the influx of Ukrainian migrants does not mean that other migrant groups are in any way in less need of aid and protection than they were previously, yet there seems to be a consensus in one of Sweden’s biggest parties that the reception of non-Ukrainians should diminish by a large amount, or even halt completely for the time being. This statement clearly shows that there is an attitude that is given space in the media where Ukrainians are seen as more deserving of coming to Sweden than for example Syrians are.

The portrayal of the Syrian civil war as not being a “real” war and thus Syrian refugees not being “real” refugees, when compared to Ukrainians, was mentioned in many ways. In contrast, Ukrainians were portrayed as being more legitimately in need and more deserving of aid in comparison to Syrians, hinting that Russia should be considered a “real” threat. However, parts of Syria were also bombed by the Russian air force, which is not something that is acknowledged in these statements about “real” refugees. This was both explicitly and implicitly mentioned and can also be seen when comparing the portrayal of migrants as a problem between the cases. Syrian refugees were often depicted as a challenge and a problem for Sweden and others to solve, meanwhile Ukrainians were not seen in that way, except for in the case of Warsaw – while even then, the discourse used was somewhat milder compared to the rhetoric in Sweden in 2015.

6.6 Accusations of racism

While the support was flowing for the Ukrainian refugees, and the differential treatment of different migrant groups was manifesting, there were also articles published in Aftonbladet that argued that the sympathy shown to Ukraine was very different in comparison to what Syria received seven years prior. In an article written by Eric Rosén he highlights this difference in attitude and treatment towards different migrant groups, and the very name of the article shows clearly what he argues for in the matter. The article is called “There is only one word: racism”.

“Thousands on the run – many from Iraq and Syria – stood during the fall and winter by the Polish border. Some of them froze to death, some were assaulted. 15 000 soldiers were sent there to stop them. They were also people, adults and children, siblings and parents. But perhaps not everyone remembers that, because they are rarely describes as such. More often we got to hear that they were part of an operation to destabilize Europe.” (Eric Rosén, 2022-03-20).
Rosén here described how he believes that the maltreatment of Iraqi and Syrian refugees is significantly different compared to the treatment of Ukrainian refugees. Rosén continues:

"Ukrainian refugees are described as fundamentally different than people with a need for protection from other countries." (Eric Rosén, 2022-03-20).

This description, that when comparing the differential treatment and attitudes regarding Ukrainian migrants in comparison to Syrian, we can see that Ukrainians are seen as a group that is in more need and is more deserving of help in comparison to Syrians. Rosén argues that this is racism, but that it is taboo to name it as such:

“In our public debate today, you can’t name something as racism. Then you are considered to have derailed. But I can’t find any better word for it.” (Eric Rosén, 2022-03-20).

Rosén is vividly describing his view on how Ukrainians and Syrians were treated differently. The theme of accusations of racism is dominating in his article. Lena Mellin also provides an article focusing on the Sweden Democrats’ racist differential attitudes towards migrants:

“The party have also nuanced their earlier very negative stance to Swedish refugee reception. Ukrainians are welcome. For a short period. If the EU stands for the expenses. And all other refugees will be declined (which is probably impossible if we are to respect the conventions that Sweden have signed.)” (Lena Mellin, 2022-03-13).

The shift in opinion that the Sweden Democrats did regarding refugee reception was clearly only meant for Ukrainians, is what Mellin describes. The Sweden Democrats were not the only party to shift their migration policy when suddenly the refugees coming to Sweden were European. The leader of the moderate party and now prime minister of Sweden, Ulf Kristersson (M), also had a similar change of mind as he is paraphrased in the following article:

“This is illustrated clearly when Ulf Kristersson (M) swiftly turned on the migration issue. In SVT’s 30 minutes he is saying that he no longer wants to reduce the refugee reception. Now he is saying
that there are “many things that no longer applies” when there is a war in Europe.” (Zina Al Dewany, 2022-03-05).

Ulf Kristersson (M) is here saying that the war in Ukraine, and thus the Ukrainian refugees, should be considered a different situation compared to the war in Syria. The reasoning is because the war is taking place in Europe. Considering the now prime minister’s own logic, the refugee reception does not need to be lowered because the people coming are European, whereas before the war in Ukraine, refugee reception should be minimized because the refugees are not European.
7. Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how Swedish media report on different groups of refugees. To achieve this aim, I conducted a thematic analysis whereby I compared media portrayals of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Sweden. The way I found themes within the material is subjective to my interpretation as a researcher, and a different researcher might have found different themes and come to a different conclusion. With this in mind, there were differences in how the media portrayed the different cases. Description of suffering was present in both cases where the plight of migrants was described in detail in both cases. The description of providing of support was also present in both cases, however with quite different manifestations. In the Syrian case, the description was mainly focused on help provided by the Swedish state and NGO’s. Examples of this was the assistance given at the coast of death, as well as some descriptions of refugee shelters in Sweden. In contrast to this the Ukrainian case was described more as the help from the “average” Swedish citizen, giving money, moral support, and at times even an invitation to one’s home for shelter. The aim of this analysis has not been to look for potential differences in actual support given, but rather how this support has been portrayed in the media. In the material, the situation in Ukraine, and the situation that Ukrainian refugees find themselves in, is described more as a public concern for the Swedish public – with a positive focus on helping – something that is not described in the same way in the Syrian case.

In the Syrian case, there was an alarmist tone in several articles, wondering whether Sweden really could withstand the arrival of so many people without the public welfare in Sweden being severely strained. This is also something that we can see guided Swedish migration policy in the years after 2015, as presented previously in the study with Hagelund’s (2020) account on how Swedish migration policy changed after 2015. This alarmist rhetoric was not used to the same extent in the Ukrainian case, except for reporting on the situation in Warsaw. The capital of Poland had taken in 400 thousand Ukrainian refugees, and thus the mayor of Warsaw was paraphrased in Aftonbladet as saying that they can’t handle any more. This was similar to the rhetoric used in the Syrian case in Sweden, but after a far greater number of refugees was taken in by a capital city, rather than an entire country. My interpretation of this difference in rhetoric hints to a difference in tolerance. Looking at the numbers we have presented earlier in the study, the total amount of asylum applications to Sweden in 2015 was approximately 160 thousand, whereas about 50 thousand were Syrian. This compared to the 400 thousand Ukrainians coming to Warsaw shows a large difference in the sheer numbers of people. This alarmist rhetoric was stronger in the Syrian case than it was in the Ukrainian, and the size threshold for Syrian refugees required for statements like this to be made was lower than the threshold for Ukrainians. The difference in number of refugees suggests that there was a lower tolerance for Syrians than for Ukrainians.
Another important theme was the differentiation between different groups of migrants – and this theme manifested in several ways. For example, there were direct statements in some articles that indicated that Syrians were not considered “real” refugees in comparison to Ukrainians. However, the differentiation between groups also manifested in with more subtle statements, for example in how the situation in Ukraine was held to a different set of rules, because the war was in Europe, and thus because the refugees were European. These attitudes were also highlighted in the subsequent theme which I call “accusations of racism”. There, these attitudes were criticized by the journalist called out for differentiating between migrants in need. This shows that Aftonbladet did publish articles that presented both sides of this debate – those that were differentiating between migrants, and those that were against this differentiation. Some journalists were very critical of this differentiation, while some were more descriptive in what had been said in the political sphere about this, without giving much critique or taking a stand themselves. My analysis for this study has shown that there are indeed differences in how Syrian and Ukrainian refugees are portrayed in the material.

The material that is analyzed here is not sufficient to allow for a definitive explanation of why these migrant groups were represented differently in Swedish media. However, with the help of the theoretical framework presented earlier, some potential explanations will now be discussed. When considering Charles Mills’ theory of the Racial Contract (1997), we can start to make sense of the potential reason behind this difference in media portrayals of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. According to Mills’ theory, human suffering is highlighted differently depending on the victim’s assumed race. This is an unpleasant reality that can be seen throughout history, where this (often unconscious) attitude has manifested in the most grim and violent ways, as we have discussed in previous chapters. According to the Racial Contract (1997), the ontological categorization of people as white and non-white, based on a perceived racial belonging provides us with an understanding as to why this difference in treatment and difference in attitude towards the different groups of migrants exists – the result of centuries of oppression of racialized groups. Institutionalized racism, just like Mills describes it, affects everything in the modern world. The differential treatment of migrants, how the public support for Ukraine in its war with Russia is manifesting and spreading, and how the media is portraying these migrant groups, are according to his theory all affected by this.

As race is a socially constructed categorization, the definition of who is considered “white” and who is considered “non-white” is changing through time and context. For example, Irish, Italians, Jewish, and Finns are examples of some groups that historically have not been considered “white” but might be today. A person’s or a group’s belonging in this “white” and “non-white” categorization that Mills (1997) engages in cannot be assumed, meaning that in order to say that the Racial Contract is the definite answer to the question of why, I would need to categorize Syrians and
Ukrainians into these categorizations, which is not my place to do. For this reason, I cannot with certainty claim that the Racial Contract is the answer here, but it is a theory that could be taken into consideration. There are examples of some people who have done this categorization, where they use it as an excuse to help one group while not helping another. For example, David Sakvarelidze, Ukraine’s former deputy chief prosecutor, said “It’s really emotional for me because I see European people with blue eyes and blonde hair getting killed.” (Bueno Lacy & van Houtum, 2022). Statements like this, comparing Ukrainians to other groups that have experienced war, and claiming that this is different because of eye- and hair-color, is a statement racializing both of these groups, and defining their worthiness of aid and protection based on their appearance. I will not define who is considered “white” and who is considered “non-white”, but a racializing statement like the quote above shows that Mills’ theory is something that should be taken into consideration, even though I cannot with certainty say that it is the absolute answer.

This is an unpleasant alternative argument, but none the less, when looking at the Racial Contract in relation to the thematic analysis that this study has provided, this is one potential reality that might provide an explanation. Mills (1997) acknowledges that most of these attitudes are in the form of unconscious biases that exists within the consciousness, difficult to notice for most. However, when looking at the themes from the analysis, we can also see that there was a continuous acknowledgement and criticism directed towards this differentiation, mainly from journalists, but also from some governmental representatives, where they accuse these differential attitudes of being racist. Several articles were written with the accusations of racism being the dominant theme. So – despite some articles’ contribution to these attitudes of differentiation between migrants – the material also included articles that served to highlight this as an injustice.

When considering the concept of color-blindness, that according to several scholars presented in this study is so prevalent in Sweden (Bessone, 2020., Hübinette, 2021., Osanami Törngren, 2015) we can also understand why, and if, these differential portrayals are founded in racism, that is never expressed outright. None, not even those that were quoted saying that the Syrian civil war was not a “real” war, claimed that it was because of an assumed racial or ethnic belonging that they did not want to accept refugees from Syria in the same amount as they did refugees from Ukraine. That these claims would not be explicit in what they mean was expected, considering the presence of the discourse of color-blindness in Sweden. Swedish politicians have outright claimed that non-Ukrainian migrants such as Syrians should not come here during the duration of the Ukrainian war, because Ukrainian refugees are clearly seen as a priority. The war in Ukraine is seen as a more “real” war and thus a more “real” humanitarian crisis.
There is also the argument of proximity i.e. the argument that Sweden is geographically closer to Ukraine than it is to Syria, and thus it is reasonable to assume that the Russo-Ukrainian war would have had a deeper impact on Swedish defense policy, as well as the general sense of safety for the Swedish public. This might also be a possible explanation as to why there is a differential portrayal of migrant groups. This argument is at times presented in the material, for example when Ulf Kristersson (M) said that the Ukrainian situation is subjected to different rules because it’s a war in Europe. That a Swedish politician, and later Prime Minister, considers Russian aggression as a threat to Sweden, and considers a war in Sweden’s relative geographic proximity as something to be viewed with greater caution seems reasonable. However, as presented in the introduction of this study, there are those that are critical to the argument of proximity, claiming it is insufficient (cf. Bueno Lacy and van Houtum, 2022). The “proximity trap”, as they call it, is used as an excuse to treat Ukrainian migrants differently than other migrants. In their opinion, the Temporary Protection Directive, that have been available since early 2000’s, could have been activated during the “refugee crisis” in 2015, but it was not. Despite Bueno Lacy’s and van Houtum’s critical position, they also acknowledge that in early 2015, refugees coming from Syria (and elsewhere) to Europe were treated with solidarity and kindness, but that it changed in late 2015 – and especially in the years after, which in the Swedish case have also been proven from earlier research by for example Hagelund (2020).

7.1. Further research

There is much potential further research to be conducted regarding this topic. A similar study to this could be made using other cases as focus points, and the cases does not necessarily have to be related to migration. Thematic analysis was what I thought made the most sense for my own analysis of this material, but that does not mean that there are no other analytical frameworks that would also work for a similar study. Potential further research could also include comparisons between different newspapers, both in Sweden and from elsewhere, and also look at other sorts of media, for example social media. What I have done is to analyze how these cases were presented in Aftonbladet, not how the actual reception was similar or different to one another. This is something that I believe, and hope, will be investigated in the not-too-distant future, to see whether the treatment both from the public and the authorities in Sweden might have differed between migrant groups. Sadly, both of these conflicts are still raging, and the future is always uncertain. Looking at the Swedish as well as the European refugee reception is something that I believe will be necessary in the future – as well as looking at how different groups are represented in media, to highlight potential injustices.
8. Conclusion

The thematic analysis made off the material gathered showed a difference in how Ukrainian refugees and Syrian refugees were portrayed and written about. This analysis is made from my own perspective, meaning that a different researcher engaging with the material could have a different interpretation of the thematic categorization and their meaning. I have presented the differences that I found and potential underlying reasons as to why this difference existed. The definite reason behind these differences, if there is a definite reason behind it, is still uncertain. I have, however, discussed some potential answers to this question, and some existing critique to these potential explanation – but an ultimate answer, if there is one, would require further research.
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