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Social-affective citizenship and the transformation of welfare belonging: affective regimes of Ukrainian refugee inclusion in Poland (2022–2025)

Abstract

This article examines how Polish political elites constructed and transformed the affective foundations of welfare inclusion for Ukrainian refugees between 2022 and 2025. Drawing on the Social-Affective Citizenship (SAC) framework, it conceptualises refugee reception as a process shaped not only by legal and institutional arrangements but also by affective narratives that define belonging, deservingness, and welfare membership. The analysis is based on 46 political statements and 126 coded meaning units.

The findings identify three interconnected affective regimes: Humanitarian Belonging, Reciprocal Deservingness, and Conditional Membership. The initial phase of refugee reception was dominated by empathy, solidarity, and collective responsibility, legitimising welfare inclusion based on vulnerability and humanitarian need. Over time, political discourse increasingly emphasised reciprocity, fairness, productivity, and social contribution as criteria for sustaining support. Simultaneously, exclusionary

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narratives centred on costs, resentment, emotional fatigue, and national priority became more visible, particularly within right-wing opposition discourse.

The analysis demonstrates that conditionality did not emerge in response to declining solidarity. Rather, elements of reciprocity, fairness, and welfare sustainability were already embedded within the initial solidarity regime and became more salient over time. The article contributes to scholarship on refugee governance and welfare deservingness by showing that affective narratives shape welfare boundaries. It also advances Social-Affective Citizenship theory by demonstrating how solidarity, reciprocity, and conditionality operate as interconnected mechanisms through which welfare membership is negotiated and legitimised.

Keywords: Poland, political discourse, Ukrainian refugees, Social-Affective Citizenship, welfare conditionality

1. Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 generated one of the largest displacement movements in contemporary Europe. Poland became a central destination for Ukrainian refugees and a particularly revealing case for analysing the evolution of refugee reception, welfare provision, and political debate. As displacement shifted from an emergency to a protracted situation, the moral and affective foundations of institutional responses also changed. Political elites recalibrated the vocabulary through which support for refugees was justified, gradually redefining eligibility for welfare assistance and the conditions attached to it. Over time, the initial consensus surrounding refugee reception gave way to intensifying debates about reciprocity, deservingness, welfare sustainability, and the criteria for sustaining solidarity.

This article contends that Poland's response to Ukrainian displacement between 2022 and 2025 was marked by a gradual transformation in the affective foundations of welfare inclusion. The initial phase was dominated by a broad cross-party regime of empathic solidarity, whereas subsequent political debates increasingly mobilised narratives of reciprocity, fairness, and productive deservingness. Solidarity was not simply replaced by exclusion; rather, it was progressively redefined through more conditional interpretations of welfare membership. Consequently, access to recognition and support became increasingly linked to expectations of reciprocity, contribution, and social adaptation.

Drawing on the framework of Social-Affective Citizenship (SAC), this article conceptualises affect as a mechanism for governing belonging and deservingness (Szarfenberg, 2026). SAC highlights the circulation of emotions among political actors, institutions, and public narratives, thereby shaping the moral economy of inclusion. In the Polish context, affective registers functioned as instruments for stabilising and subsequently renegotiating the terms of welfare access for Ukrainian refugees. Through an analysis of political speeches, public interventions, and welfare-related policy proposals from 2022 to 2025, the article reconstructs the evolution of affective meaning-making and its relationship to the institutional trajectory of refugee protection.

The Polish case illustrates that the boundaries of welfare inclusion are determined not only by legal reforms but also by evolving affective repertoires that influence perceptions of deservingness. Existing scholarship has analysed the reception of Ukrainian refugees through concepts such as humanitarianism, selective solidarity, differentiated protection, refugee governance, and welfare deservingness. These studies have provided significant insights into the unequal distribution of inclusion, the influence of identity and proximity on support for refugees, and the gradual development of conditional forms of welfare membership.

Although an expanding body of scholarship has examined Poland's response to Ukrainian refugees from these perspectives, limited attention has been devoted to the affective mechanisms through which welfare inclusion is legitimised, contested, and redefined over time. Most existing studies focus on policy outcomes, institutional arrangements, or public attitudes, leaving the affective transformation of political discourse and its relationship to welfare conditionality comparatively underexplored.

This article offers three primary contributions to the literature. First, it advances research on refugee deservingness and welfare conditionality by demonstrating that entitlement evaluations are structured by affective narratives rather than solely by policy arguments. Second, it enriches scholarship on refugee reception by showing that humanitarian solidarity was not simply displaced by exclusion but was progressively reconfigured through discourses of reciprocity, fairness, and productive deservingness. Third, it advances Social-Affective Citizenship theory by demonstrating how evolving affective regimes of humanitarian belonging, reciprocal deservingness, and conditional membership structure welfare inclusion. In doing so, the article provides a systematic empirical application of the Social-Affective Citizenship framework and illustrates how affective regimes become embedded in welfare debates, shaping the boundaries of political and social membership. The article further situates Poland's post-2022 response against the background of pre-war Ukrainian labour migration and within broader European debates on the shift from emergency solidarity to more conditional forms of refugee welfare inclusion.

To address these gaps, the article examines how political actors constructed the affective conditions of belonging for Ukrainian refugees and how these constructions reshaped understandings of deservingness and welfare inclusion. The analysis is guided by two research questions:

1. How did affective narratives surrounding Ukrainian refugees evolve within Polish political discourse between 2022 and 2025, and what distinct affective regimes emerged during this period?
2. How did changing affective regimes reshape notions of deservingness and contribute to the growing conditionality of welfare inclusion for Ukrainian refugees?

The analysis identifies the coexistence and gradual reconfiguration of three affective regimes centred on humanitarian belonging, reciprocal deservingness, and conditional membership.

2. *Social-Affective Citizenship (SAC), deservingness and welfare inclusion*

2.1. The Polish context of refugee reception after 2022

The reception of Ukrainian refugees in Poland unfolded within a distinctive historical and institutional context (Klaus & Szulecka, 2023). Although Poland was traditionally regarded as a country of emigration, the years following its accession to the European Union were marked by a growing presence of foreign workers, particularly from Ukraine (Klaus & Szulecka, 2023; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). Before 2022, the presence of Ukrainians in Poland was already substantial, but their incorporation was framed primarily through labour migration, with welfare membership remaining outside the dominant framework. Since 2014, Ukrainian migration to Poland had expanded rapidly as a result of labour-market demand, simplified short-term employment procedures, visa-free mobility, and deteriorating economic and security conditions in Ukraine (Klaus & Szulecka, 2023; Strzelecki et al., 2025).

By 2021, this pattern was clearly reflected in Eurostat first-residence-permit data. Poland issued 967,300 first residence permits to non-EU citizens that year, accounting for one third of all such permits granted in the EU; 790,100 of these permits were issued for employment-related reasons. Ukrainian citizens were the largest group of first-permit recipients in the EU, with 875,800 permits granted, 83% of them issued by Poland and 88% granted for employment-related reasons (Eurostat, 2022).

This pre-war openness, however, was highly selective in institutional terms. Ukrainians were welcomed predominantly as temporary and economically useful workers, while many remained dependent on short-term permits, declarations of employment, visa-free stays, or other administratively fragile forms of legalisation (Klaus & Szulecka, 2023; Kindler & Szulecka, 2022; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). As a result, their inclusion was broad in labour-market terms but limited in welfare terms: they were incorporated as workers and contributors rather than as full members of the welfare community. These pre-existing ties shaped both the scale of the initial reception and the capacity of Polish society to respond rapidly to the arrival of displaced Ukrainians after February 2022, while also making the post-2022 shift from labour-market incorporation to protection-based welfare inclusion particularly significant.

The outbreak of war in February 2022 triggered one of the largest and fastest displacement movements in contemporary European history (Duszczek & Kaczmarczyk, 2022). Poland became the principal country of first reception and one of the main destination countries for people fleeing Ukraine. More than 3.5 million border crossings from Ukraine to Poland were recorded during the first months of the war (Duszczek & Kaczmarczyk, 2022), while approximately 1.6 million displaced persons remained in Poland during the initial phase of the crisis (UNHCR, 2022). By 2025, almost one million individuals had been registered in the PESEL UKR system, which served as the principal gateway to legal status, welfare entitlements, and public services in Poland (Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców, 2025).

In response to the crisis, Poland complemented the EU Temporary Protection regime with an extensive national support framework for people fleeing Ukraine. A key element of this response was the Special Act of 12 March 2022 (*Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r.*, 2022), which incorporated Ukrainian refugees into major areas of Poland's legal and welfare system by granting broad access to legal residence, healthcare, education, the labour market, and social benefits, including the universal child benefit programme (500+, later increased to 800+) (Klaus & Szulecka, 2023).

At the same time, scholars have emphasised that the Polish response combined liberalisation with selectivity (Łukasiewicz et al., 2026; Hernes & Łukasiewicz, 2026). While displaced Ukrainians received rapid access to protection, public services, and welfare benefits, other categories of asylum seekers and forced migrants generally remained subject to more restrictive admission and protection arrangements (Klaus & Szulecka, 2023). Consequently, Poland's post-2022 approach to forced migration has been characterised as simultaneously liberal and restrictive, reflecting broader hierarchies of deservingness shaped by geopolitical, cultural, and, in some accounts, racialised distinctions (Łukasiewicz et al., 2026; Marciniak & Scovil, 2026).

Although the initial framework provided extensive access to welfare benefits and public services, subsequent political debates increasingly focused on limiting eligibility, strengthening conditionality, and linking access to support with labour market participation and other expectations directed toward beneficiaries. This gradual reorientation was reflected in successive amendments to the Special Act and culminated in the decision, adopted in early 2026, to phase out the exceptional protection framework established in 2022.

Another distinctive feature of the Polish response was the central role of local governments, civil society organisations, volunteers, and private citizens (Klaus & Szulecka, 2023; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). Much of the practical support provided to displaced Ukrainians depended on cooperation between public institutions and non-state actors (Klaus & Szulecka, 2023; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). This unprecedented societal mobilisation became an important reference point in subsequent political debates on solidarity, responsibility, and the scope of welfare obligations toward refugees (Marciniak & Scovil, 2026; Zogata-Kusz et al., 2026).

The combination of extensive social support, differentiated access to protection, and evolving welfare arrangements makes Poland a particularly valuable case for examining how affective conditions of belonging, deservingness, and welfare inclusion were constructed, negotiated, and contested within political discourse.

2.2. Selective solidarity and refugee reception

The reception of Ukrainian refugees in Europe has generated a rapidly expanding body of scholarship examining the political, social, and moral foundations of refugee inclusion (Hernes & Łukasiewicz, 2026; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). Early analyses emphasised the unprecedented scale of solidarity mobilised in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and highlighted the exceptional character of protection regimes adopted across Europe (Hernes & Łukasiewicz, 2026; Marciniak & Scovil,

2026). At the same time, a growing number of studies have questioned whether this solidarity represented a genuinely universal humanitarian response or a selective form of inclusion structured by perceptions of deservingness, cultural proximity, and geopolitical alignment (Klaus & Szulecka, 2023; Hernes & Łukasiewicz, 2026; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026; Zogata-Kusz et al., 2025, 2026). These debates resonate with broader theoretical discussions on humanitarianism, deservingness, and selective inclusion. Long before the Ukrainian refugee crisis, scholars such as Fassin (2012) and Ticktin (2011) demonstrated that humanitarian responses are rarely universal in practice and are often shaped by moral hierarchies that distinguish between more and less deserving recipients of protection.

One influential strand of scholarship interprets the reception of Ukrainian refugees through the concept of selective solidarity (Hernes & Łukasiewicz, 2026; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). Studies of the Ukrainian refugee response have argued that the unprecedented mobilisation of support was facilitated by perceptions of cultural proximity, shared European identity, religious affinity, and a common geopolitical opposition to Russia (Zogata-Kusz et al., 2025; 2026; Marciniak & Scovil, 2026; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). Consequently, Ukrainian refugees were frequently represented as particularly deserving beneficiaries of protection and welfare support (Zogata-Kusz et al., 2025, 2026; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026).

These findings also connect the Ukrainian case to broader debates on selective solidarity and hierarchies of deservingness. Earlier scholarship has shown that refugee protection is often differentiated through socially and politically constructed categories of belonging, identity, and moral worth (Holzberg et al., 2018). The Ukrainian case thus illustrates how humanitarian inclusion operates through boundary-making between more and less desirable recipients of solidarity (Klaus & Szulecka, 2023; Hernes & Łukasiewicz, 2026; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026).

The Polish response to Ukrainian refugees also gains additional significance when contrasted with reactions to the 2015–2016 refugee crisis. Whereas refugee reception during the European refugee crisis was frequently framed in Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries through narratives of security threats, cultural incompatibility, and opposition to refugee relocation, the arrival of displaced Ukrainians generated an unprecedented mobilisation of solidarity. This contrast suggests that solidarity cannot be treated as an automatic response to humanitarian crises. As research on migration and refugee discourses has demonstrated, public and political responses are shaped by processes of boundary-making that distinguish between different categories of migrants and refugees (Krzyżanowska & Krzyżanowski, 2018). Ukrainian refugees were widely represented as culturally proximate neighbours, victims of external aggression, and participants in a shared geopolitical struggle against Russia. These representations facilitated forms of inclusion that differed markedly from the reception of refugees from Syria and other non-European countries a decade earlier (Zogata-Kusz et al., 2025; 2026; Hernes & Łukasiewicz, 2026; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). The comparison, therefore, reinforces arguments advanced in the literature on selective solidarity and deservingness, showing that access to protection is mediated by socially and affectively constructed boundaries of belonging rather than humanitarian need alone.

2.3. Deservingness and welfare conditionality

The selective character of Ukrainian refugee inclusion has stimulated growing engagement with theories of welfare deservingness (Meuleman et al., 2020; Knotz et al., 2022; Zogata-Kusz et al., 2025). Building on Van Oorschot's (2000; 2006) CARIN framework, subsequent research has demonstrated that public support for welfare provision is structured by evaluations concerning recipients' control over their circumstances, attitudes, reciprocity, social identity, and level of need (Meuleman et al., 2020; Knotz et al., 2022). Research on Ukrainian refugees proves that these mechanisms were particularly visible in debates concerning access to welfare benefits and public services (Łukasiewicz et al., 2026; Zogata-Kusz et al., 2025). Ukrainians were initially perceived as highly deserving recipients of support due to their circumstances of forced displacement, supposed willingness to work, and cultural proximity to host societies (Zogata-Kusz et al., 2025; Marciniak & Scovil, 2026; Klaus & Szulecka, 2023). However, recent studies suggest that deservingness evaluations evolved over time (Zogata-Kusz et al., 2026; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). While early support was largely grounded in humanitarian need and shared identity, later debates increasingly emphasised reciprocity, labour market participation, gratitude, contribution, and compliance with social expectations (Zogata-Kusz et al., 2026; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026). Consequently, entitlement became increasingly linked to economic participation and socially valued forms of conduct (Łukasiewicz et al., 2026; Zogata-Kusz et al., 2026). These developments can be interpreted through the broader lens of welfare conditionality, which highlights the growing tendency to link access to welfare support with expectations concerning reciprocity, responsibility, and appropriate conduct (Dwyer, 2004).

Studies of refugee governance in Poland and elsewhere indicate that initial emergency responses gradually gave way to discussions concerning the sustainability of welfare provision, the allocation of public resources, and the appropriate limits of inclusion (Łukasiewicz et al., 2026; Hernes & Łukasiewicz, 2026). Although Ukrainians continued to enjoy privileged access to protection compared to many other refugee groups, political and public debates increasingly focused on fairness, burden-sharing, reciprocity, and the relationship between welfare rights and obligations (Zogata-Kusz et al., 2026; Łukasiewicz et al., 2026).

From the perspective of welfare conditionality scholarship, these developments illustrate how solidarity may become increasingly intertwined with expectations of contribution and adaptation, thereby producing more conditional forms of welfare inclusion (Dwyer, 2004). The Ukrainian case provides a contemporary empirical example of broader dynamics previously identified in welfare-state research.

While these studies provide important insights into selective solidarity, deservingness, and welfare conditionality, they focus primarily on policy outcomes, public attitudes, or institutional arrangements (Knotz et al., 2022; Meuleman et al., 2020). Less attention has been devoted to the affective mechanisms through which inclusion and exclusion are legitimised, negotiated, and transformed within political discourse. Existing research identifies changing evaluations of deservingness and welfare entitlement but offers fewer tools for explaining how emotional narratives

shape these evaluations, structure expectations toward refugees, and contribute to the reconfiguration of welfare boundaries (Marciniak & Scovil, 2026; Ekström et al., 2025; Klaus & Szulecka, 2023; Tyler, 2020).

2.4. Social-Affective Citizenship and affective conditions of belonging

The Social-Affective Citizenship (SAC) framework developed by Szarfenberg (2026) provides the conceptual basis for analysing these affective mechanisms. Building on scholarship on affective citizenship, affective governance, the politics of belonging, and emotional boundary-making (Ahmed, 2014; Fortier, 2021; Ayata, 2019), SAC conceptualises citizenship as the intersection of institutional arrangements and affective processes through which recognition, solidarity, inclusion, and exclusion are negotiated. From this perspective, welfare institutions do not merely allocate rights and resources; they also communicate symbolic judgements concerning worth, legitimacy, and membership. Consequently, access to welfare support is shaped not only by legal status or policy design but also by affective constructions of who belongs, who is considered deserving, and under what conditions inclusion is maintained.

Particularly relevant for the present study is SAC's emphasis on the affective dimensions of solidarity, reciprocity, hierarchy, and belonging. Drawing on Ayata's (2019) work on affective citizenship and Fortier's (2021) analysis of affective governance, the framework highlights how inclusion within a political community is structured through emotional norms, moral evaluations, and socially embedded expectations directed toward particular groups. SAC further incorporates insights from Roy et al. (2022), who emphasise the role of solidarity, mutual care, and expectations of state responsibility in shaping experiences of citizenship and social membership. Political actors play a central role in producing and circulating feeling rules that define appropriate emotional orientations toward specific social groups (Hochschild, 1979; 1983). In the context of refugee reception, such expectations may involve demonstrations of gratitude, reciprocity, contribution, loyalty, or alignment with dominant understandings of collective identity. These processes generate what SAC conceptualises as affective conditions of belonging: emotionally mediated criteria through which access to recognition, solidarity, and welfare support becomes contingent, negotiated, and potentially conditional (Ahmed, 2014; Fortier, 2021).

2.5. Research gap and analytical framework

Taken together, these strands of scholarship have advanced our understanding of selective solidarity, deservingness, and the conditionality of refugee inclusion. They show how access to protection and welfare support is shaped by perceptions of need, identity, reciprocity, and fairness, as well as by broader political and institutional contexts. Less attention has been paid, however, to the role of affective narratives in shaping evaluations of deservingness and structuring expectations toward refugees as members of the welfare community.

The Social-Affective Citizenship framework offers a useful lens for addressing this limitation by linking welfare inclusion to broader processes of belonging, recognition, solidarity, and exclusion. Applying this perspective to the Polish case allows us to examine how political elites articulated and negotiated the affective conditions of belonging in response to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees and how these conditions informed evolving understandings of reciprocity, deservingness, and welfare entitlement. This approach extends existing scholarship by focusing on the affective foundations of welfare inclusion and the role of political discourse in redefining the boundaries of support.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research corpus and selection criteria

The final corpus consisted of 46 political statements and 126 coded meaning units (MUs) produced between 2022 and 2025. The material included presidential addresses, parliamentary speeches, press conferences, official government communications, media interviews, and other public political interventions. Information on the composition of the corpus, its distribution across political actors and years, and the complete list of analysed communications is provided in Appendix A (Tables A1–A3). The extended appendix has been deposited as a dataset in a research data repository to ensure transparency and support the replicability of the research (Nakoneczna-Bartosiewicz, 2026).

The selection of material was guided by 4 inclusion criteria: (1) the statement addressed Ukrainian refugees, refugee assistance, welfare provision, or related public policies; (2) the speaker occupied a nationally relevant political position; (3) the communication was publicly accessible; and (4) it either received nationwide media coverage or was disseminated through an official political communication channel. Exclusion criteria included local-level statements, comments concerning the war in Ukraine that did not address refugee reception or welfare provision, and duplicate communications.

The temporal distribution of the corpus reflects major political and legislative developments that have affected the reception of Ukrainian refugees and related welfare policies. As a result, 2024 is represented by fewer communications, reflecting the relative stabilisation of the refugee debate between the highly politicised period of 2022–2023 and its renewed politicisation during the 2025 presidential election campaign.

The corpus focuses on political elites because of their central role in shaping public narratives and influencing welfare and migration policies. The selected speakers were leaders of their respective political parties or individuals holding prominent political and institutional positions at the national level. In several cases, additional speakers were included because they participated in joint press conferences or collective political interventions representing official party or governmental positions. To preserve the integrity of these communications, all participants making substantive statements relevant to the research topic were included in the corpus.

President Andrzej Duda and President Karol Nawrocki were analysed separately due to their distinct temporal location within the corpus and potentially different affective repertoires. However, interpretations concerning President Nawrocki should be treated as preliminary, given the limited number of statements available for analysis. The distribution of statements and meaning units by political actor is presented in Appendix A, Table A3.

3.2 Analytical framework and coding procedure

The analysis combines Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis (1992; 1995) with the Social-Affective Citizenship (SAC) framework (Szarfenberg, 2026) and an iterative qualitative coding procedure inspired by Saldaña (2021) and Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020). Fairclough's approach provided the broader analytical architecture for interpreting textual features, discursive practices, and their embedding within wider socio-political contexts. The SAC framework informed the analysis's substantive focus by directing attention to affective constructions of belonging, solidarity, reciprocity, deservingness, and welfare inclusion.

The primary unit of analysis was the meaning unit (MU), defined as an analytically coherent segment expressing a distinct affective, evaluative, or normative position toward Ukrainian refugees, welfare support, or related policy measures. Meaning units were identified on the basis of semantic coherence, not formal sentence boundaries. Consequently, a single political statement could contain multiple meaning units reflecting different affective orientations and evaluative logics.

All source materials were analysed and coded in their original Polish-language versions. Coding decisions were, therefore, based on meanings, affective expressions, and contextual nuances present in the original texts. English translations were prepared only at the final stage of manuscript preparation for the purpose of presenting selected illustrative quotations in the article. All translations are the author's own.

The analytical procedure followed a theory-informed iterative coding strategy. Initial coding was guided by concepts from the Social-Affective Citizenship framework, particularly solidarity, reciprocity, conditionality, resentment, gratitude, fairness, security, and boundary-making in welfare. These categories operated as flexible analytical orientations that guided the coding process without predetermining the final code structure.

Coding was conducted using QDA Miner Lite. In later stages of analysis, coding matrices, category refinement, and comparisons across years and political formations were managed in Microsoft Excel. Coding was conducted by a single researcher and followed an interpretive qualitative logic focused on reconstructing affective meanings and discursive patterns, not on producing statistical intercoder reliability. The process was iterative and abductive: meaning units were revisited and recoded where necessary to refine operational definitions and ensure consistency across the dataset.

The first coding cycle focused on identifying affective framings, justificatory narratives, and evaluative constructions related to refugee reception, welfare provision, state obligations, reciprocity, and social boundaries. Multiple codes could be assigned to a single meaning unit when several affective orientations coexisted. The coding

scheme was developed deductively from the literature on Social-Affective Citizenship and subsequently refined inductively through successive rounds of coding and recoding.

In the second stage of analysis, coded meaning units were compared across political actors and time periods. This comparative procedure enabled the identification of recurring affective constellations and shifts in the emotional construction of refugee reception. The final coding architecture consisted of 17 affective categories organised into broader analytical domains used to reconstruct affective regimes across actors and time. The complete coding scheme, operational definitions, and coding indicators are presented in Appendix B (Tables B1–B2) and are included in the deposited dataset (Nakonieczna-Bartosiewicz, 2026).

The study did not employ keyword frequency analysis or keyword-in-context (KWIC) procedures. Its objective was not to measure lexical prevalence but to identify affective meanings embedded in political discourse. Coding, therefore, focused on semantic and contextual meanings, allowing categories such as solidarity, resentment, gratitude, reciprocity, or cost to be identified even when these terms were not explicitly used.

3.3. Affective coding scheme and reconstruction of affective regimes

The final coding architecture consisted of 17 affective and justificatory codes organised into five analytical domains: inclusive affects, stabilising affects, conditionality affects, exclusionary affects, and governance-oriented justificatory codes. These domains, detailed in Appendix B, Tables B1–B2, functioned as an intermediate level between first-cycle codes and the reconstruction of affective regimes. The coding scheme captured affective expressions and normative evaluations through which political actors constructed, justified, and contested refugee inclusion. Particular attention was paid to narratives of empathy, solidarity, reciprocity, gratitude, fairness, productivity, cost, resentment, and security. Affective regimes were reconstructed from recurring constellations of codes across domains. They were derived from patterns of co-occurrence identified across political actors, documents, and time periods.

Code configurations recurring across multiple actors, documents, and years were treated as affective regimes. Less frequent or isolated code combinations were interpreted as individual discursive variations. On this basis, three affective regimes were identified: the Humanitarian Belonging Regime, the Reciprocal Deservingness Regime, and the Conditional Membership Regime.

The Humanitarian Belonging Regime was primarily associated with the co-occurrence of E_EMPATHY, E_SOLIDARITY, UNITY/COLLECTIVE_STRENGTH, E_GRATITUDE, and SECURITY, reflecting constructions of humanitarian responsibility, collective mobilisation, shared vulnerability, and common security. The Reciprocal Deservingness Regime emerged from recurrent combinations of E_RECIPROCITY, E_FAIRNESS, E_EXPECTATIONS, PRODUCTIVE_DESERVINGNESS, STATE_RESPONSIBILITY, and E_SYSTEM_BALANCE, linking welfare inclusion to contribution, reciprocity, and concerns about welfare sustainability. The Conditional Membership Regime was characterised by recurring

associations between E_COST, E_RESENTMENT, GRATITUDE_DEFICIT, EMOTIONAL_FATIGUE, and EXCLUSION/BOUNDARY_WORK, reflecting efforts to redefine the boundaries of welfare membership through narratives of burden, unfairness, and national priority. Together, these regimes served as analytical devices for tracing changes in the affective foundations of welfare inclusion.

The regimes should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories. Individual meaning units could contain elements associated with more than one regime, reflecting the coexistence of competing affective logics within political discourse. The purpose of the regime typology was, therefore, not to classify statements into fixed categories but to reconstruct dominant affective configurations through which refugee reception and welfare membership were interpreted and negotiated. Operational definitions, coding indicators, and illustrative examples are presented in Appendix B.

3.4. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the analysis relies on qualitative interpretive coding conducted by a single researcher. Although the coding scheme was systematically refined throughout the research process and previously coded material was repeatedly revisited to ensure analytical consistency, the identification and categorisation of affective meanings inevitably involve interpretive judgement. Hence, the findings should be read as a theoretically informed reconstruction of discursive patterns, with limited capacity to provide a direct measure of emotional content. Likewise, the affective regimes identified in the analysis represent analytical constructs developed to capture recurring configurations within the corpus; they are heuristic devices for interpretation, not fixed or mutually exclusive categories. All coding was conducted on the original Polish-language material. However, the illustrative quotations presented in English necessarily involve some interpretive translation and may not fully reflect all linguistic, cultural, and contextual nuances embedded in the source texts.

Second, the study focuses exclusively on elite political discourse. The corpus was intentionally constructed around statements by nationally relevant political actors, given their role in shaping public narratives and influencing welfare and migration policies. Consequently, the analysis reconstructs the affective logics, justificatory narratives, and feeling rules articulated within political communication. It does not seek to capture the attitudes, experiences, or practices of refugees, frontline service providers, civil society actors, or the broader Polish population. Moreover, although the corpus was systematically assembled around major political actors and key moments in public debate, it does not encompass the full range of political communication about Ukrainian refugees during the analysed period.

Third, the distribution of material across political actors and years is uneven. Differences in media visibility, political activity, and the intensity of public debate resulted in varying levels of representation within the corpus. In particular, the relatively limited number of statements available for 2024 constrains direct comparisons

across all periods. Similarly, findings regarding President Karol Nawrocki should be interpreted with caution, given the relatively small number of observations.

Finally, the analysis is designed to identify patterns of affective legitimization, discursive change, and welfare boundary-making, not to establish causal relationships. While changes in political discourse may coincide with policy reforms, shifts in public attitudes, or broader media dynamics, the study does not seek to determine the direction or strength of such causal influences. The findings should, therefore, be interpreted as a reconstruction of evolving affective regimes and affective conditions of belonging within elite political discourse, with limited capacity to assess societal attitudes, policy effectiveness, or behavioural outcomes.

4. Findings

The analysis of meaning units extracted from political statements delivered between 2022 and 2025 reveals a transformation not simply in the emotional tone of refugee-related discourse but in the affective conditions through which Ukrainian refugees were recognised as legitimate members of the welfare community. Across the analysed period, political actors continuously negotiated who belonged, why support should be provided, and under what conditions welfare inclusion could be justified. Three dominant affective configurations emerged from the material: (1) Humanitarian Belonging Regime, (2) Reciprocal Deservingness Regime, and (3) Conditional Membership Regime. Supplementary distributions of affective codes across political formations and illustrative coding examples are presented in Appendix C (Tables C1–C3). These configurations represented competing and evolving models of belonging, extending beyond distinct emotional repertoires. They overlapped and coexisted throughout the analysed period, although different affective logics became more prominent at different moments.

Before discussing these regimes, it is important to note that the corpus demonstrates substantial political consensus during the initial phase of the refugee response. Across government and opposition actors alike, the early discourse was dominated by empathy, solidarity, collective responsibility, and support for displaced Ukrainians. At the same time, the data reveal that concerns related to fairness, state responsibility, and the sustainability of support were already present from the outset. Greater political differentiation emerged over time, particularly around welfare entitlements, economic costs, reciprocity, and the conditions under which support should continue.

4.1. Humanitarian belonging regime: humanitarian inclusion and moral community (2022–2023)

The first affective regime extended belonging primarily through vulnerability and humanitarian need. Ukrainian refugees were represented as legitimate members of the moral community on the basis of vulnerability and displacement. Inclusion was justified through empathy and solidarity, which functioned as the dominant affective

foundations of belonging, while welfare support was framed as a morally self-evident response to humanitarian need.

In 2022, the most frequently occurring affective categories across the corpus were E_SOLIDARITY, E_EMPATHY, UNITY/COLLECTIVE_STRENGTH, and E_GRATITUDE. Refugees were primarily represented as innocent victims of war, while Polish society was constructed as a compassionate moral community obligated to provide protection and assistance.

I know that you are doing this out of the goodness of your hearts. (...) As a nation, we are once again showing what solidarity truly means. (Duda, 2022, March 2)

Political actors across the ideological spectrum employed highly emotional language, emphasising suffering, vulnerability, and moral responsibility. References to women, children, war trauma, and humanitarian duty appeared repeatedly. Refugees were described as people fleeing violence and seeking safety, while politicians highlighted the moral imperative of providing shelter, security, and care. Empathy was closely intertwined with solidarity, producing a narrative in which helping Ukrainians became a defining expression of national identity and civic responsibility.

Out of these one million refugees, (...), the vast majority are women with children – the most vulnerable individuals fleeing the war. (...) Thousands of Polish families have offered shelter to our neighbours from across the eastern border. (Morawiecki, 2022, March 7)

Equally important was the prominence of UNITY/COLLECTIVE_STRENGTH. Political leaders repeatedly portrayed the refugee response as a collective achievement transcending political divisions. Statements celebrating the opening of homes, voluntary assistance, grassroots mobilisation, and local initiatives constructed Poland as a unified community capable of extraordinary solidarity. The recurring metaphor of “opening hearts and homes” became a central symbolic marker of this period.

And they must be helped. The whole of Poland has become involved in this effort. (...) A great network of mutual assistance has emerged. (Zandberg, 2022, March 8)

This inclusive discourse was further reinforced by security-related arguments. Support for Ukrainian refugees was often framed not merely as humanitarian assistance but also as a contribution to Poland’s own security. Ukrainian resistance against Russia was represented as protecting both Ukrainian and Polish freedom and sovereignty.

What does a true warrior need? To know that his family is safe. We provide shelter for their women (...), and they are fighting for our freedom as well, because we would be Putin’s next target... (Morawiecki, 2022, May 21)

Consequently, security functioned primarily as an inclusive justificatory frame that reinforced solidarity during this phase. Humanitarian assistance and national security

were presented as mutually reinforcing objectives, with support for Ukrainian refugees framed as contributing to both humanitarian protection and Poland's own security.

The Humanitarian Belonging Regime also incorporated narratives of gratitude. In this phase, gratitude served primarily as an affirmation of solidarity, whereas later phases linked it more directly to expectations directed at refugees. Political actors frequently expressed appreciation for volunteers, local communities, municipalities, public institutions, and citizens involved in refugee assistance.

Importantly, this regime did not construct refugee reception solely as temporary humanitarian relief. Political actors frequently discussed access to education, healthcare, housing, and labour markets as essential components of protection and social participation. Ukrainians were increasingly represented as legitimate participants in a shared social space, beyond their immediate status as emergency beneficiaries of aid.

At the same time, the corpus indicates that the foundations of later debates concerning reciprocity, conditionality, and welfare sustainability were already present within the Humanitarian Belonging Regime. Alongside empathy and solidarity, political actors frequently referred to fairness, state responsibility, system balance, and the organisation of support. Although these considerations remained subordinate to humanitarian concerns, they foreshadowed subsequent discussions regarding reciprocity, contribution, and the appropriate limits of welfare inclusion.

This assistance cannot be purely spontaneous. Today, it is both spontaneous and organised. That is why, at today's meeting of the Council of Ministers, we adopted a special law prepared under an accelerated procedure (...). (Morawiecki, 2022, March 7)

The corpus also contains an early exclusionary counter-discourse, concentrated almost exclusively within the Confederation. Unlike other political actors, Confederation representatives frequently framed refugee reception in terms of costs, unfairness, resentment, emotional fatigue, and boundary protection. Although marginal within the broader debate at this stage, these narratives anticipated many of the themes that became increasingly visible in later phases of political contestation.

Presidential discourse constituted a partially distinct component of this regime. Throughout most of the analysed period, President Andrzej Duda articulated narratives centred on empathy, solidarity, gratitude, and moral responsibility, while largely avoiding cost-oriented and exclusionary framings. In contrast, the 2025 presidential campaign introduced a noticeable shift. Karol Nawrocki increasingly emphasised reciprocity, labour market participation, and contribution as conditions legitimising access to welfare support, thereby incorporating themes that were more closely associated with the Reciprocal Deservingness Regime.

In SAC terms, the Humanitarian Belonging Regime established a predominantly need-based model of belonging. Access to recognition, solidarity, and welfare support was justified primarily through vulnerability, shared humanity, and collective responsibility. While concerns about fairness, state responsibility, and system sustainability were already present, they remained secondary to humanitarian

considerations. The affective conditions of belonging were, therefore, relatively inclusive and only weakly conditioned by expectations of reciprocity or contribution.

4.2. Reciprocal deservingness regime: deservingness, reciprocity, and welfare membership (2022–2025)

The second affective configuration transformed the basis of belonging without rejecting inclusion itself. Refugees continued to be recognised as legitimate members of the welfare community, but their inclusion was increasingly justified through notions of reciprocity, fairness, and contribution. The central question was no longer whether support should be provided but how the relationship between refugees and the host society should be organised.

Elements of the Reciprocal Deservingness Regime were already visible during the initial phase of refugee reception.

But I would also like to address an appeal to the Ukrainians who have arrived in Poland. (...) Let us say, a principle of heart for heart. (Morawiecki, 2022, March 7)

The assistance is mutual. As we help refugees and Ukraine, they fight for our security. (Morawiecki, 2022, April 25)

Although empathy and solidarity remained clearly dominant, political actors increasingly referred to fairness, reciprocity, state responsibility, and the normalisation of refugee presence. The relatively frequent occurrence of E_FAIRNESS, E_RECIPROCITY, STATE_RESPONSIBILITY, NORMALISATION, and E_SYSTEM_BALANCE indicates that concerns about the organisation, sustainability, and social legitimacy of support were embedded within the initial Humanitarian Belonging Regime. Discussions, therefore, focused not only on the moral imperative of helping refugees but also on the conditions under which support could be maintained in a manner perceived as fair and sustainable for the broader welfare community. These themes remained secondary to humanitarian considerations in 2022 but became increasingly prominent in subsequent years.

The growing visibility of E_RECIPROCITY further reinforced this shift. Political actors increasingly referred to the economic and social contributions made by Ukrainians, emphasising labour market participation, tax payments, and broader contributions to Polish society.

(...) it is evident that this assistance is mutual. Just as we help refugees and Ukraine, and they fight there for our security, those who have come to our country work for the benefit of the Polish economy. (Morawiecki, 2022, April 25)

Reciprocity, therefore, became an important mechanism for legitimising continued inclusion. Refugees were represented not only as vulnerable beneficiaries of protection but also as active participants contributing to the functioning of the welfare community.

During 2023 and 2024, these themes became more pronounced. Political actors continued to defend support for Ukrainians while simultaneously emphasising the need for balanced solutions that would protect both refugees and citizens.

We still do not know how much money has been spent on this (...). I want a firm and realistic policy that, first of all, protects Poland and Polish interests while also helping Ukraine in its war against Russia. (Tusk, 2023, September 21)

Appeals to fairness were increasingly linked to discussions about access to public services, welfare entitlements, and the distribution of responsibilities between the state, local governments, and society. Support was progressively framed as a relationship involving mutual obligations rather than a purely humanitarian response.

By 2025, this affective configuration had become significantly more prominent across several mainstream political actors. E_RECIPROCITY, E_EXPECTATIONS, PRODUCTIVE_DESERVINGNESS, and E_SYSTEM_BALANCE all increased in frequency, indicating a growing tendency to evaluate welfare inclusion through the lens of contribution, responsibility, and social participation. Political actors increasingly argued that access to welfare benefits should be accompanied by labour market participation, tax contributions, respect for social norms, and engagement with Polish society. The code PRODUCTIVE_DESERVINGNESS became particularly salient during this period, reflecting a shift toward representations of refugees as deserving because they worked, contributed economically, and participated in collective welfare arrangements. These expectations were especially visible in debates concerning access to family benefits, where support was increasingly linked to labour market participation and contribution to the host society.

As for benefits such as 800+ for Ukrainians, they should be granted only if Ukrainians work, live in Poland, and pay taxes in Poland. (Trzaskowski, 2025, January 17)

The 800+ benefit should be available only to those Ukrainians who undertake the effort of working in Poland. (Nawrocki, 2025, August 25)

The system should absolutely be tightened so that no fraudsters can exploit the Polish state (...). But it is in both our moral and economic interest to ensure that everyone who needs support receives it. They may receive the 800+ benefit for several or even a dozen years, but they will spend decades in Poland paying taxes and social security contributions as workers. Given Poland's demographic situation, this is not a giveaway. It is an investment. (Hołownia, 2025, September 5)

The convergence of these arguments across politicians representing opposing political camps suggests that productive deservingness had become a broadly accepted criterion for legitimising welfare inclusion by 2025. What initially appeared as a supplementary justification for support evolved into a cross-partisan principle structuring legitimate access to welfare benefits.

The most pronounced transformation occurred within PiS discourse, which evolved from a humanitarian-security synthesis in 2022 toward a more conditional configuration combining solidarity with reciprocity, productive deservingness, and welfare sustainability. While solidarity remained an important component of the party's discourse, it became increasingly embedded within narratives of contribution, responsibility, and balanced welfare provision.

This development indicates an important shift in the affective conditions of belonging. Whereas the Humanitarian Belonging Regime legitimised inclusion primarily based on need, the emerging discourse of reciprocal deservingness increasingly linked recognition and support to forms of economic and social participation. Contribution became an additional source of deservingness alongside vulnerability.

Importantly, this discourse did not amount to a rejection of solidarity. Rather, it transformed solidarity itself. Support for Ukrainian refugees continued to be defended by most mainstream actors, but increasingly under conditions linked to reciprocity, contribution, and responsible participation.

In SAC terms, belonging became increasingly reciprocal. Refugees remained eligible for inclusion, but membership within the welfare community was progressively tied to expectations of contribution, participation, and mutual obligation. The shift, therefore, did not mark a replacement of solidarity by exclusion, but a redefinition of the emotional and moral foundations through which solidarity itself was justified.

4.3. Conditional membership regime: boundaries, costs, and the reassertion of national priority (2022–2025)

The third affective regime did not merely seek to condition inclusion; it questioned the scope of belonging itself. Whereas the reciprocal deservingness accepted refugees while attaching conditions, the conditional membership regime increasingly challenged whether refugees should be treated as members of the welfare community in the first place.

Unlike the previous two regimes, this discourse was concentrated primarily within the Confederation throughout the entire period under analysis. In 2022 alone, Confederation politicians employed a distinct affective repertoire dominated by E_COST, E_RESENTMENT, EXCLUSION/BOUNDARY_WORK, and EMOTIONAL_FATIGUE. While solidarity and empathy remained dominant among most political actors, Confederation consistently framed refugee reception in terms of welfare expenditures, unequal treatment, and the protection of citizens' interests. As a result, exclusionary narratives were present from the outset of the refugee response and continued across subsequent stages of the debate.

The costs are a burden for all of us (...) at a time of soaring inflation, rising mortgage payments, and growing problems for Polish citizens. (Grabarczyk, 2022, May 17)

A central feature of this regime was the construction of welfare support as a zero-sum relationship between refugees and citizens. Political actors repeatedly emphasised financial costs, pressure on public services, housing shortages, and competition for social resources.

In 2022, refugee assistance was already linked to broader concerns about inflation, public spending, and the distribution of scarce resources, foreshadowing later narratives centred on welfare competition and national priority.

Welfare provisions were portrayed as excessive, unfair, or insufficiently justified, while refugees were increasingly represented as beneficiaries of preferential treatment.

How long will we maintain another nation with our taxes? (Mentzen, 2025, January 23)

References to “privileges”, “maintaining another nation”, and claims that “Poles are treated worse in their own country” became recurring rhetorical devices. Within this discourse, refugees were no longer primarily represented as vulnerable victims but as potential recipients of benefits which should rightfully be reserved for citizens.

The exclusionary repertoire therefore operated through a different logic of belonging from humanitarian solidarity and reciprocal deservingness. It shifted the question from how refugees should participate in the welfare community to whether their incorporation should extend beyond temporary humanitarian assistance.

The affective architecture of this regime relied heavily on resentment and boundary-work. E_RESENTMENT and EXCLUSION/BOUNDARY_WORK frequently appeared together, constructing a symbolic distinction between deserving members of the national community and outsiders whose access to welfare support required stronger justification. The recurring emphasis on national priority reinforced the view of welfare as a resource primarily intended to serve citizens.

(...) Poles who have lived within this system have at least contributed to it. (Braun, 2022, May 17)

In SAC terms, this discourse sought to narrow the boundaries of belonging by reasserting the distinction between members and non-members of the welfare community.

Another important feature was the growing prominence of GRATITUDE_DEFICIT and EMOTIONAL_FATIGUE. Political actors increasingly referred to the sacrifices made by Polish society and questioned whether these efforts had been sufficiently recognised. Narratives concerning insufficient gratitude, abuse of hospitality, or declining public willingness to provide support became particularly visible in 2025.

I often hear people saying that there is no gratitude on the Ukrainian side. I, however, must say that I do not share this perception. (...) I have heard words of thanks many times. But I know people who say that there is no gratitude, that [Ukrainians] believe they are entitled to it, and so on. Such voices exist. (...) This is our reality, and we should not pretend otherwise. The question is what solutions should be sought to calm these sentiments. (Duda, 2025, March 5)

Although such arguments remained concentrated among exclusionary actors, their increasing frequency suggests that the emotional foundations of solidarity had become less stable than during the initial phase of refugee reception.

The most significant development occurred in 2025, when nearly all exclusionary categories reached their highest levels within the corpus. E_COST, E_RESENTMENT, EXCLUSION/BOUNDARY_WORK, GRATITUDE_DEFICIT, and EMOTIONAL_FATIGUE all increased substantially, indicating a growing tendency to frame refugee reception in terms of burden, unfairness, and national priority. Although selected elements of boundary-work, gratitude deficit, and emotional fatigue also appeared within parts of mainstream political discourse by 2025, exclusionary narratives remained most strongly associated with Confederation. At the same time, mainstream political actors increasingly adopted elements of conditionality, particularly through references to reciprocity, contribution, and welfare sustainability. However, they generally stopped short of embracing the exclusionary logic characteristic of Confederation. They did not advocate withdrawing support but sought to redefine the conditions under which support should continue.

Consequently, the central cleavage in the later stages of the debate was no longer between support and opposition to refugee assistance. Instead, political actors differed over the conditions of inclusion. While mainstream parties increasingly linked welfare membership to reciprocity, productivity, and social participation, exclusionary actors questioned the legitimacy of extending welfare support beyond narrowly defined national boundaries. The result was a growing contestation over the affective conditions of belonging and the proper limits of welfare inclusion.

In SAC terms, this regime sought to narrow the affective boundaries of membership. Recognition and welfare inclusion were increasingly subordinated to national priority, while citizens and refugees were constructed as competing claimants to limited social resources. Belonging was, therefore, transformed from a relatively inclusive status into a more restrictive and contested category.

4.4. Reconstructing affective conditions of belonging

Taken together, the findings reveal a gradual transformation in the affective conditions through which Ukrainian refugees were incorporated into the Polish welfare community. This transformation did not follow a simple trajectory from solidarity to exclusion; rather, it involved the coexistence and reconfiguration of multiple affective logics. During the initial phase, inclusion was justified primarily through empathy, solidarity, collective responsibility, and humanitarian need. Over time, however, belonging became increasingly linked to reciprocity, fairness, labour market participation, tax contributions, and mutual obligations between refugees and the host society.

At the same time, exclusionary narratives remained present throughout the period under analysis and became substantially more visible by 2025. These narratives challenged the scope and legitimacy of refugee support by emphasising costs, resentment, emotional fatigue, gratitude deficits, and the priority of citizens' interests. However, they remained a competing interpretation of the proper boundaries of welfare membership and did not become the dominant affective framework across the political spectrum.

A key finding of the analysis is that neither conditionality nor exclusion emerged as reactions to declining solidarity. Elements of fairness, reciprocity, state responsibility, and welfare sustainability were already visible within the initial Humanitarian Belonging Regime, while exclusionary narratives were present from the outset of the debate, primarily within the Confederation. Subsequent developments, therefore, reflected the reconfiguration and intensification of existing affective logics rather than their replacement.

Viewed through the lens of Social-Affective Citizenship, these developments reveal a broader transformation in the emotional foundations of welfare inclusion. The central shift was not from inclusion to exclusion but from relatively unconditional forms of humanitarian belonging toward increasingly conditional forms of membership grounded in reciprocity, productivity, fairness, and welfare sustainability. As a result, access to recognition and support became progressively linked to affective expectations concerning contribution, responsibility, and appropriate participation within the welfare community. In this sense, the debate increasingly shifted from the question of whether refugees deserved protection to the question of what kinds of affective and social performances qualified them for membership within the welfare community.

The findings, therefore, suggest that solidarity did not disappear from Polish political discourse but underwent a process of redefinition. While humanitarian need remained an important source of legitimacy, support for refugees became increasingly embedded within a framework of conditional membership in which belonging was negotiated through evolving expectations of reciprocity, productive deservingness, and social contribution. Conditionality thus emerged not as an alternative to solidarity but as one of the mechanisms through which solidarity itself was justified and sustained. The distribution of affective codes across political formations and the actor-specific configuration of affective regimes are summarised in Appendix C (Tables C1–C2).

5. Discussion

The reception of Ukrainian refugees in Poland cannot be adequately understood either as a simple story of humanitarian solidarity or as a linear transition from hospitality to exclusion. The analysis instead shows a dynamic process in which competing affective logics shaped the boundaries of welfare membership. Viewed through the lens of Social-Affective Citizenship, refugee reception emerged as a field of affective governance: emotions did not merely accompany political decisions but structured the conditions under which inclusion, recognition, and welfare entitlements became legitimate.

The Polish case demonstrates that welfare institutions operate not only through legal rules and administrative procedures but also through affective mechanisms that define who is perceived as deserving of support and under what conditions. Institutional arrangements such as the Special Act of March 2022 translated solidarity into concrete rights and entitlements, while political narratives supplied the affective legitimacy through which these arrangements were established, maintained, and gradually transformed. Refugee governance thus functioned as a form of affective–institutional

governance in which political actors renegotiated the affective foundations of welfare inclusion.

This resonates with scholarship on deservingness and welfare conditionality, which shows that access to welfare support is shaped by evaluations of need, reciprocity, identity, and contribution (van Oorschot, 2000; 2006; Meuleman et al., 2020; Knotz et al., 2022). It also aligns with studies of Ukrainian refugee reception that document the growing importance of reciprocity, labour market participation, gratitude, and social contribution in evaluations of refugee deservingness (Łukasiewicz et al., 2026; Zogata-Kusz et al., 2025; 2026), while connecting these developments to broader scholarship on welfare conditionality (Dwyer, 2004).

Yet these evaluations are not merely cognitive judgements or policy preferences; they are embedded in affective structures that shape perceptions of legitimacy, obligation, and membership. In this respect, the article extends scholarship on affective governance and belonging, which emphasises emotions, moral evaluations, and affective expectations in defining the boundaries of political communities (Ahmed, 2014; Fortier, 2021; Ayata, 2019). It also develops Szarfenberg's argument that citizenship operates not only through formal rights and institutions but also through socially organised affective expectations that determine who is recognised as a legitimate member of the welfare community.

A central contribution concerns the relationship between solidarity and conditionality. Existing scholarship often treats conditionality as a reaction to declining solidarity or as evidence of hostility toward welfare beneficiaries. The Polish case suggests a more complex dynamic. Elements of reciprocity, fairness, state responsibility, and welfare sustainability were already visible during the initial reception phase, when empathy and solidarity remained dominant. Exclusionary narratives concerning costs, unequal treatment, and national priority were also present from the outset, although largely confined to the Confederation. The later transformation of refugee discourse therefore reflected the increasing salience and mobilisation of pre-existing affective logics. It was not just the replacement of one regime by another.

This contributes to SAC theory by showing that conditionality may emerge from within solidarity itself. Solidarity and conditionality did not operate as opposite moral positions but as interconnected affective mechanisms. The same political actors who initially justified support on humanitarian grounds later defended welfare provision on the grounds of reciprocity, contribution, responsibility, and productivity. Conditionality thus functioned not as a rejection of solidarity but as a way of redefining and stabilising it under changing political, economic, and institutional conditions.

The growing prominence of reciprocity and productive deservingness is significant. In the initial phase, belonging was justified primarily through vulnerability and humanitarian need. Over time, political actors increasingly linked welfare inclusion to labour market participation, tax contributions, and social contribution. By 2025, productive deservingness was visible among major actors. The debate shifted from whether refugees deserved protection to how they should participate in the welfare community and which contributions justified continued support. In SAC terms, this marks a transformation from predominantly need-based belonging to more reciprocal, contribution-based membership.

This parallels broader transformations in contemporary welfare states, where access to support is increasingly linked to activation, labour market participation, and social contribution. The Polish case shows that similar logics can also emerge within refugee governance, turning humanitarian protection into conditional welfare membership. Refugees were increasingly recognised not only as persons in need of protection but also as participants expected to contribute to the host community's social and economic functioning.

Exclusionary affective logics remained persistent. The Confederation challenged not only particular welfare provisions but also the legitimacy of extending welfare membership beyond narrowly defined national boundaries. Through narratives of costs, resentment, gratitude deficit, emotional fatigue, and national priority, refugees were positioned as potential competitors for scarce social resources. This speaks to scholarship on welfare chauvinism, deservingness, and boundary-making by showing how affective narratives can restrict welfare inclusion and reinforce distinctions between insiders and outsiders (Holzberg et al., 2018; Krzyżanowska & Krzyżanowski, 2018).

Yet exclusion did not become the dominant framework of refugee governance. Even as debates increasingly focused on reciprocity, fairness, and sustainability, most mainstream actors continued to defend support for Ukrainian refugees. What changed was not the principle of support itself—it was the affective conditions under which it was justified. Belonging remained possible, but it became increasingly contingent on expectations of contribution, responsibility, and participation.

The Polish case is valuable for SAC for three reasons. First, the scale and speed of refugee reception generated an unusually strong mobilisation of solidarity across political and social actors. Second, protracted displacement transformed emergency response into a debate about long-term welfare inclusion and membership. Third, refugee reception became highly politicised, producing competing narratives of reciprocity, deservingness, welfare sustainability, and national priority. Together, these conditions make Poland a revealing case for tracing how affective conditions of belonging evolve and how welfare boundaries are negotiated through competing emotional repertoires.

This trajectory was not unique to Poland, although the Polish case makes it particularly visible. Across Europe, the reception of Ukrainian refugees was shaped by a broader shift from emergency openness toward more institutionalised and conditional forms of inclusion. At the EU level, displaced Ukrainians were constructed as deserving subjects of protection through references to gendered vulnerability, Europeaness, cultural proximity, and geopolitical alignment with host societies (Dück et al., 2025). This legitimised the exceptional response, but also embedded Ukrainian protection within differentiated hierarchies of deservingness.

Similar tensions appeared in Central Europe. Comparative research on Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary shows that these recent immigration destinations faced related pressures: rapid legalisation, emergency assistance, limited institutional preparedness, pressure on housing and public services, and the challenge of transforming temporary protection into more durable integration arrangements (Pędziwiatr & Magdziarz, 2022). Hungary illustrates the importance of national

political context: the reception of Ukrainians differed from earlier securitised approaches to non-European migration, yet it remained shaped by domestic political calculations, selective reception, limited integration infrastructure, and established migration-policy narratives (Korkut & Fazekas, 2023).

Germany represents another configuration. Ukrainian temporary protection holders were incorporated into a more developed welfare and labour-market activation system, but uncertainty persisted. Research on Ukrainian refugee women shows how migration and integration policies shaped refugees' decision-making, future planning, and dependence on state-defined categories of protection and support (Lazarenko, 2024). Studies of private hosting in Berlin further demonstrate the limits of solidarity-based accommodation under protracted displacement, showing how initial hospitality may become strained by dependency, emotional burden, housing insecurity, and the absence of stable institutional support (Lazarenko, 2025).

This comparative analysis clarifies the specificity of the Polish case. Poland serves as a revealing example because the transition from solidarity to conditionality occurred after Ukrainians had already been integrated, primarily as labour migrants rather than as members of the welfare community. Post-2022 policies transformed a longstanding labour migration presence into a protection-oriented and emotionally legitimised form of welfare inclusion. In the context of prolonged displacement, this inclusion has been continually renegotiated through narratives emphasising reciprocity, contribution, fairness, welfare sustainability, and national welfare boundaries.

Overall, the article contributes to the study of Ukrainian refugee reception in Poland and to the development of Social-Affective Citizenship as a framework. It demonstrates how SAC can be operationalised empirically through discourse analysis and affective coding, tracing the emotional mechanisms through which welfare boundaries are expanded, stabilised, contested, and reconfigured. Beyond the Polish case, this framework may be applied to other contexts involving refugee reception, migration governance, poverty policies, or family welfare programmes, supporting a comparative agenda on the emotional constitution of welfare membership in contemporary societies.

7. Conclusion

This article examined how Polish political actors constructed the affective conditions of welfare inclusion for Ukrainian refugees between 2022 and 2025 through the lens of Social-Affective Citizenship. By analysing political discourse surrounding refugee reception, welfare provision, and public responsibility, the study explored how belonging, deservingness, and welfare membership were emotionally negotiated during one of the largest refugee movements in contemporary Europe.

The analysis identified three interconnected affective regimes – humanitarian belonging, reciprocal deservingness, and conditional membership – which structured political representations of refugee inclusion throughout the analysed period. These regimes coexisted and interacted, with their prominence varying across actors and over time. The findings demonstrate that refugee reception was not organised around

a single emotional logic but around competing affective interpretations of who belonged within the welfare community and under what conditions.

The study's central finding is that conditionality did not emerge in response to declining solidarity. Elements of reciprocity, fairness, state responsibility, and welfare sustainability were already embedded within the initial architecture of refugee reception, while exclusionary narratives concerning costs, resentment, and national priority were present from the outset among particular political actors. The subsequent evolution of political discourse, therefore, reflected the reconfiguration and intensification of existing affective logics, not just a simple transition from solidarity to exclusion. These findings contribute to the development of Social-Affective Citizenship theory by demonstrating that welfare inclusion is shaped not only by legal status and institutional arrangements but also by affective evaluations of deservingness, reciprocity, responsibility, and contribution. More specifically, the analysis suggests that solidarity, reciprocity, and conditionality should be understood as interconnected mechanisms through which welfare membership is negotiated and legitimised. In this sense, conditionality became one of the mechanisms through which solidarity was redefined and sustained within the welfare community.

Beyond the Polish case, the article contributes to broader debates on refugee reception, welfare conditionality, and the moral boundaries of political communities. As refugee governance increasingly intersects with questions of welfare sustainability, social cohesion, and political belonging, understanding the affective foundations of inclusion becomes an important task for migration and social policy research. Future comparative studies could apply the Social-Affective Citizenship framework across different refugee populations, welfare regimes, and policy domains to examine how affective conditions of belonging are constructed, contested, and transformed in diverse political contexts.

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