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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Communicating Assistance to Ukrainian Refugees: Does Empathetic Communication Make a Difference?

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Abstract

European countries have been important supporters of Ukraine since the 2022 invasion by Russia. Responding to the invasion, however, was not the only challenge facing these countries in 2022. A tough domestic economic situation caused by high inflation and skyrocketing energy prices gave rise to public resentment accusing governments of favoring Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees over their own citizens. Yet, communicating governments' policies on Ukraine efficiently and having the public on board matters because lack of public support may endanger the countries' ability to help Ukraine in the war. Given the importance of political communication, we use the case of Czechia to explore the role of empathy in political communication between Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. We build on existing studies which suggest that empathy in communication has the potential to decrease polarization of public opinion and that candidates using empathetic communication are viewed more positively. First, in a rhetorical analysis, we demonstrate that empathy with citizens' concerns is not a part of the government's defense of its refugee policy. Then, in an original survey experiment, we show that contrary to expectations, expressing empathy with citizens' concerns does not significantly increase public support for help to refugees.

Keywords: political communication; refugees; empathy; Ukraine; Czechia

Introduction

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia was a watershed moment for most in the Western world. After many years without a large-scale war in Europe, a major war was suddenly taking place within the space that is geographically Europe. European countries took a united position in support of Ukraine, and have been providing Ukraine with military, humanitarian, and economic assistance. Millions of refugees left Ukraine and sought safety in nearby countries. These receiving countries were confronted with the pressing problem of accommodating hundreds of thousands of refugees and integrating them meaningfully into the country's societal and economic life. What is more, these challenges took place alongside significant adverse developments in the economies of European countries. High inflation, rapidly rising energy prices, and their serious negative effects on businesses and households created another problem that required large-scale financial assistance from the central governments. European countries have thus been facing a puzzle: how to defend the policy of significant financial assistance to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees at a time when their own country's citizens face significant hardship stemming from high inflation and very high energy prices.

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In light of the significance of this challenge, we focus this paper on political communications about government assistance to incoming refugees. Immigration and refugee policy is contentious in many societies because it creates conflicting pressures. On the one hand, the low fertility rate in European countries, the needs of the economy, as well as humanitarian values call for a welcoming immigration and refugee policy (Holzberg, 2021). On the other hand, citizens' fear of other cultures, fear of security threats, concerns about the cost of refugee accommodation, and concerns about societal cohesion of a diverse society make citizens call for a restrictive immigration and refugee policy (Vrânceanu et al., 2022). These conflicting pressures lead to divisions and polarization of attitudes over this issue.

The divisions and polarization have serious consequences for the political system and public policy. A divided public opinion and high politicization of immigration make it difficult for governments to design an immigration and refugee policy that would not drive large segments of the public into disenchantment with the political regime. Immigration and refugee policies are highly salient to citizens, and they touch on citizens' notions of what their political nation should look like. If a country's immigration and refugee policy is more open than what citizens are comfortable with, trust in political institutions decreases. The decrease in trust happens because citizens perceive their government as compromising their nation's political identity (McLaren, 2015). Therefore, if large segments of the population oppose immigration and refugee policy, more than just political disagreement is at stake. Opposition to immigration and refugee policy has the potential to erode public support for the political regime. This matters because political regimes need legitimacy to survive (Easton, 1975).

In addition, in the specific context of the war-related immigration from Ukraine, the lack of popular support for helping Ukrainian refugees has potentially serious implications for Ukraine's ability to fight in this war. Opposition to helping Ukrainian refugees is likely to snowball into public opposition to military and economic assistance to Ukraine. How governments communicate their assistance to Ukrainian refugees, therefore, matters for the ability of European countries to keep up the resolve to provide military and economic assistance to Ukraine. This assistance, in turn, is essential in Ukraine's fight to liberate its territory and rebuild after the war. Political communication about migration from Ukraine is, therefore, an important piece of politics related to the crisis in Ukraine.

Our paper contributes to the study of public support for assistance to Ukrainian refugees as well as to the study of attitudes to immigration in Europe in general. We take the case of Czechia and focus on the role of empathy in political communication. Unlike most of the research on empathy in political communication and public opinion (Baider and Constantinou, 2018; Verkuyten, 2004); however, we look at expressions of empathy with *Czech citizens' concerns* about the mass influx of refugees. These concerns primarily regarded the costs of refugee accommodation. The Czech government was criticized by some for putting more emphasis on assisting Ukrainian refugees than on helping Czech citizens who were genuinely struggling under the pressure of high inflation and record-high energy prices.

We build theoretically on previous research, which suggests that inclusive language may lead to more tolerant attitudes toward immigrants (Schleiter et al., 2022). Also, research on voting behavior in the United States shows that individuals are significantly more likely to accept a speaker's position if the speaker shows empathy (Renstrom and Ottati, 2020; McDonald, 2021). Building on this research, we ask the following research questions: *How does the Czech Prime Minister's communication about the assistance to Ukrainian refugees address concerns voiced by Czech citizens? And are citizens more supportive of humanitarian welfare benefits for refugees if governmental officials express empathy with citizens' concerns about immigration?*

In answering our research questions, we focus on the case of Czechia and we undertake a two-step analysis. First, we analyze Czech Prime Minister (PM) Petr Fiala's rhetoric concerning the refugee issue. Second, we use data from an original survey experiment conducted on an online access panel (N = 922) in Czechia to study the impact of empathetic political communication on support for a welfare benefit for refugees. In our rhetorical analysis, we find that Petr Fiala, as the

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Czech PM and the chief government communicator on the issue of Ukrainian refugees, utilizes a rhetorical triangle built around the message "We can do it together." Although the PM's rhetoric addresses citizens' concerns, he does not express empathy with those who are against the government policy. The second part of our analysis finds that, contrary to theoretical expectations, empathetic communication and communication without empathy lead to an equal level of support for a humanitarian welfare benefit for refugees. Overall, these results suggest that, in the case of a divisive policy like welfare benefits for refugees, expressing empathy with citizens' concerns does not persuade citizens to be more supportive of the policy.

Public perception of Assistance to Ukrainian Refugees in Czechia

We have chosen Czechia for our study of empathetic communication because it is a country where the issue of assistance to Ukrainian refugees was a subject of politicization in spring 2022 (Česká televize, 2022; Novák, 2022). Czechia had accepted large numbers of refugees from Ukraine. By the end of 2022, more than 430,000 refugees from Ukraine were granted temporary protection status (Münich and Protivínský, 2023). Czechia hosts the highest number of total temporary protection beneficiaries per thousand inhabitants (32.2), followed by Poland (26.6) and Estonia (25.8); the figure at the EU level stood at 9.1 beneficiaries per thousand (Eurostat, 2023). As Czechia has a high number of registered refugees, the issue of Ukrainian refugees is highly visible in Czech politics. At the same time, Czech society is relatively divided in how to approach both the issue of refugee assistance and the views on policy toward Ukraine. Although 75 percent of Czechs declared support for the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees in the spring of 2022, support for the long-term settlement of refugees is low (Červenka, 2022). As 2022 progressed, general support for accommodating Ukrainian refugees declined (STEM/MARK, 2022), and the issue of help to Ukrainian refugees became politicized by populist opposition leaders (iDnes TV, 2022).

The introduction of a humanitarian welfare benefit for Ukrainian refugees catalyzed the emergence of opposition to the government's welcoming approach to dealing with the refugee crisis (iDnes.cz, 2022). This humanitarian welfare benefit was introduced in March 2022. It provided refugees with 5,000 CZK (approx. €200) for the first six months after being granted Temporary Protection. After the first six months, the benefit was to continue if refugees were not financially self-sufficient.[1] The overwhelming majority of Ukrainian refugees were receiving the humanitarian welfare benefit in the first months (80% in June 2022), making it a crucial part of the Czech government's assistance to Ukrainian refugees.

The humanitarian welfare benefit attracted a lot of public and media attention. In a situation of double-digit inflation and rising energy prices, part of the public perceived the welfare benefit as a free handout to refugees and a symbol of prioritizing refugees over the native population. This notion corresponds to the findings of welfare deservingness literature, which show that European societies tend to see immigrants as less deserving of welfare benefits than the native population (van Oorschot et al., 2017). Also, the literature shows that those who are not contributing to the pool of welfare resources are less likely to be seen as deserving of welfare benefits (van Oorschot et al., 2017). This notion of Czech citizens being neglected was taken upon by the opposition, which emphasized the message that the government cares more about the refugees than about Czech citizens (Tabery, 2022; Novák, 2022).

As a result of these political developments in Czechia, the issue of refugee assistance was highly polarizing in spring 2022. Czechia is thus a good example of a country that faces the challenge of finding ways to accommodate refugees in accordance with democratic and humanitarian values and mitigate possible deep societal polarization over its refugee policy.

Empathetic political communication

Political communication, as the process of exchanging ideas and opinions between citizens, public officials, political institutions, and the media has gone through changes that have made public

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deliberation of political issues more difficult. Contemporary governance has reduced collective bargaining and pushed citizens out of most political deliberations (Fawcett et al., 2017). Digitalization has played a role as well. According to some, "political communication via social media plays a destructive role by supporting filter bubbles and dis-information" (Hennen, 2020: 84). Examining political communication from a citizen's point of view shows that citizens feel that politicians do not listen to them and do not understand them (Coleman and Moss, 2022; Hochschild, 2016). Perceived low external efficacy — that is, a willingness of those in power to adhere to citizen opinion (Lane, 1959) — is an important predictor of voting for populist political parties (Van Der Brug et al., 2005; Ramiro and Gomez, 2017). This is especially true with regard to smaller populist parties without government experience (Krause and Wagner, 2021).

Addressing the problems in mutual understanding between the political system and its citizens is one of the biggest challenges for democratic institutions. By mutual understanding, we mean that citizens understand the steps policymakers are making in resolving recent or upcoming crises and that policymakers listen, understand, and work on behalf of their citizens. As part of the citizen-centric turn (Blumler, 2018), Veneti and Lilleker (2022) propose to address the problem of mutual understanding by introducing a three-dimensional normative model (3D model) for political communication. The 3D model includes ethos, inclusivity, and empathy as important parts of normative political communication. Empathy is also emphasized in Morell's model of democratic deliberation (Morrell, 2010). Similarly, Korstenbroek (2021) proposes an "empathetic public sphere" aiming to "challenge the viewpoints of those citizens supporting populist right-wing logics by regularly confronting them with the stories and experiences of the unknown others(s), while vice versa, trying to include the stories of right-wing supporters into the discourse and connect these stories back to these same others."

Empathetic messages play an important role in improving the link between policymakers and citizens. Survey experiments conducted in the US examined the impact of empathy on support for political candidates and found that political candidates displaying high empathy are evaluated positively and are more likely to attract an audience (Renstrom and Ottati, 2020; McDonald, 2021). If a politician expresses empathy with citizens' concerns, citizens are more likely to perceive the politician as caring about their interests. This perception may, in turn, serve as a heuristic shortcut in making up their mind about a politician or a policy. It is often beyond citizens' resources to fully understand the complexities of policymaking. If a politician uses empathy to signal that they care, citizens are more likely to have positive views of that politician and their policies (McDonald, 2021).

The impact of empathetic communication is not uniform, though. Empathetic communication appears to have a different impact on the perception of the candidates' socio-emotional traits on the one hand and instrumental traits on the other. "Highly empathetic rhetoric positively affects socio-emotionality (e.g., perceived warmth, ability to handle healthcare policy) but is detrimental in terms of instrumentality (e.g., toughness, ability to handle military affairs)" (Renstrom and Ottati, 2020: 782). Thus, empathetic communication may be perceived as a weakness in the perception of instrumental traits such as the handling of the war in Ukraine, but it may be beneficial while communicating about welfare benefits for refugees.

Even though scholarly debates about empathy in political communications offer a solid understanding of the issue, there are still at least two blank spots. First, the normative models of political communication (Veneti and Lilleker, 2022; Korstenbroek, 2021) fall short of turning these concepts into real-life public or political communication. For example, the 3D model is, to a large extent, based on the "honesty, integrity and accountability" of political leaders (Veneti and Lilleker, 2022: 11), which is a feature that is, in most societies, very difficult to achieve in practical terms. Korstebroek's (2021) model depends on the impact of open online communication. However, in practice, online communication often happens within online social bubbles rather than across social cleavages. The second weakness we see in the existing literature is the conceptual fluidity of empathy in political communication and its possible confusion with populism. Thus, in this article, we also contribute to our understanding of empathy in political communication by more clearly

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conceptualizing empathy in political communication and by operationalizing it in a way that clearly distinguishes it from populism.

The term "empathy" was translated from the German word "Einfühlung" more than 100 years ago by psychologist Tichener (Zahavi, 2022). Although the discussion about the term empathy has been going on for more than a century, scholars still do not agree on its definition and on "how to demarcate empathy from related phenomena such as emotional contagion and sympathy" (Zahavi, 2012: 81). In a review of the concept, Cuff et al. (2016) found forty-three distinct definitions of empathy from English language articles. Empathy is commonly described as "feeling as." Meanwhile, sympathy means "feeling *for* the other" (Hein and Singer, 2008: 157, emphasis original). In other words, empathy is when someone feels sad, and the empathizing person feels sad too. Sympathy, on the other hand, is when someone feels sad, and the other person feels sorry *for* the person who is sad. Feeling the same as another person is defined as *affective* empathy. Most of the definitions of empathy also include another perspective called *cognitive* empathy (Cuff et al., 2016). Cognitive empathy is defined as the ability to understand another person's feelings. Empathetic understanding allows the speaker to understand how the other person feels without necessarily feeling the same emotion herself. We draw conceptually on the third perspective related to cognitive empathy: empathetic communication, which is the *behavioral* component of cognitive empathy (O'Brien et al., 2009; Rogers, 1975).

Empathetic communication "involves responsive messages to another person's emotional needs, especially in cases where one is trying to comfort or support a person in distress" and in "addition to identifying and understanding the emotional state of the distressed person, one can reflect those emotions back to the distressed person and communicate resonant messages to make the distressed person feel better" (Renstrom and Ottati, 2020: 768). We believe that the *behavioral* component of empathy fits well with the context of politicians speaking to the public. One cannot reasonably expect politicians to experience "true" empathy with all their constituents' concerns. This would make the job of a politician emotionally unbearable. However, seeing and understanding how people feel is the kind of empathy that allows politicians to be responsive and citizens to feel that they are being heard.

In the context of political communication, government responsiveness to people's anxieties may be reminiscent of populism. It is important to make a clear difference between the two because populist communication also expresses an understanding of the concerns of "the people." Unlike empathetic communication, though, populism aims to create polarization, antagonism, and exclusion in society by making distinctions among social groups such as "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013) or between "the outgroup" and "ingroup." Empathetic communication, however, aims at depolarization, synergy, and inclusivity among groups in society.

Rhetorical analysis

In the following qualitative analysis, we investigate how the issue of Ukrainian refugees was communicated by the Czech PM and whether the PM's communication consisted of empathy with the audience. In particular, we ask: *How does the PM's political communication about helping Ukrainian refugees address concerns voiced by Czech citizens?* We analyzed the PM's political communication concerning refugees from Ukraine that was broadcasted, printed by various media, or spoken at political or public events. The timeframe for the analysis is March 2022, which is the month when the humanitarian welfare benefit for Ukrainian refugees was introduced and when public support for accepting Ukrainian refugees reached its highest point (Münich and Protivínský, 2023). However, the opposition had already developed the narrative that the government cares more about the refugees than about Czech citizens (Novák, 2022). This raises the question of how the government's communication was set up and whether there was another way to avoid the risk of

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a drop in support for refugee policy, which happened as the conflict progressed (Münich and Protivínský, 2023).

The speeches were collected through the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) party database.[2] Out of a total of fourteen documents, ten documents in which the PM mentioned the refugee issue were selected for analysis.[3] A rhetorical analysis of the ability to persuade an audience was applied (Higgins and Walker, 2012). The rhetoric analysis has a foundation in Aristotle's rhetoric triangle of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. *Ethos* is mainly related to the credibility of the speaker and emphasizes the persuasiveness of the speaker's character (Aho, 1985). Within this strategy, the importance lies in the use of pronouns such as "we," "you," and "I," which serve as tools to invoke commonality and the impression of cohesion and community (Cheney, 1983). *Logos* is understood as argumentation patterns and strategies and refers to the clarity and integrity of the argument (Holt and Macpherson, 2010). To uncover the integrity of the *logos*, the classical argumentation inconsistencies, the so-called *argumentation fallacies*, were applied (Walton, 1987). Through *pathos*, the speaker tries to connect emotionally with the audience and trigger emotions such as happiness, sadness, pity, or fear (Aho, 1985). According to Burke (1969), this is achieved through the identification and understanding of the needs, values, and desires of the audience. As a result, this component is directly connected to empathetic communication; without *pathos*, empathy cannot work.

There are different analytical approaches to examining rhetoric, such as combining rhetoric with narrative analysis (Feldman et al., 2004; Sharf, 1990) or applying discourse analysis (Weaver, 2013; Grant, 2019). We follow the tradition of rhetorical analysis (Aho, 1985; Higgins and Walker, 2012) based on Aristotle's conception. We approach the analysis through initial, focused, and theoretical coding (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014) using the analytical software Atlas.ti.

The coding procedure was developed and implemented by one person. Nevertheless, the co-authors discussed the data and the PM's rhetoric with the goal of providing a reliability check for the analysis and interpretation. Firstly, we coded all segments related to the refugee issue in which the PM directly mentioned the Czech society, the public, or the people. We also coded segments in which the public was addressed indirectly, very often addressed by the pronoun "we," part of *ethos*, as explained above. The codes were developed and stabilized during the coding process. In other words, we entered the analysis without any predefined expectations, which allowed us to be sensitive to various forms of empathetic communication. For the coding scheme, see Table A in the appendix. In the focused coding, we synthesized the codes into two topical categories: Legitimization of the social welfare benefit and Addressing the public's concerns. The latter was divided into three subcategories: Reassuring the public; Admitting losses to the public; and Praise of the public. After this stage, the most resonating discursive message "We can do it together" was identified. This message is mainly composed of a single code "We can do it." The code appeared in nine out of ten documents and was, overall, the most frequently appearing code in the sample.[4] In addition, this code occurred together with nine other codes out of thirteen, see Table B in the appendix. In the final theoretical coding, we imported and connected empirical codes according to their meanings with components of the rhetorical triangle (*ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*), and *argumentative fallacies* to reconstruct and make sense of the rhetoric. However, each code might include more than one component of the rhetorical triangle.

"We can do it together"

During the analytical process, the message "we can do it together" was identified as the central message of the PM's political communication, see Figure 1. This key message was accompanied by *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. Within the logos, two *argumentation fallacies* were revealed, *argumentum ad consequentiam*, defending the claim by referring to the consequences of its rejection (Walton, 1999), and *argumentum ad populum*, basing the argument on popular belief (Walton, 1980). In this section, we interpret the message and rhetoric triangle concerning the role of the audience.

In the following speech act, delivered at the plenary debate, this key message "we can do it together" was elaborated by the PM in his communication about refugees from Ukraine:

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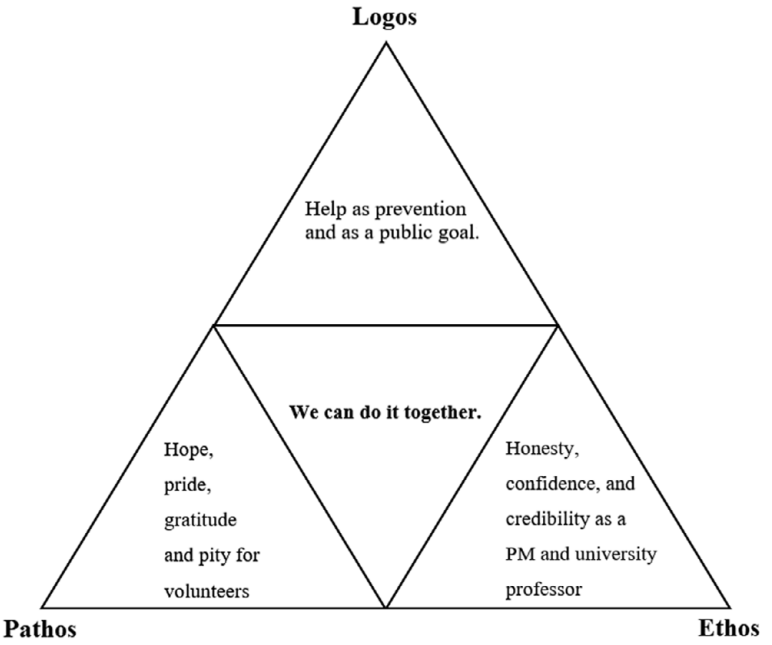


Figure 1. The PM's rhetorical triangle concerning the refugee issue and addressing the citizens.

> I promised the citizens that I would not lie to them, that I would always tell them the real state of affairs, that I would not paint things in bright colors, and I am going to stick to that this time as well. The war in Ukraine will affect us all. The refugee crisis will affect us all. The consequences of Putin's war will affect us all. That is the way it is, and it cannot be otherwise. Each of us will have to sacrifice some of our comforts for a while. I believe, and our government is doing everything it can to ensure that it is only temporary, that it is as short as possible, but we must not succumb to Russian propaganda […] Let's not let that happen. The situation is not and will not be easy, but we will overcome it together. I ask you, I ask you, and I firmly believe that we will manage it together. Together, we can do this (Fiala, 2022d).

This message works indirectly by reassuring the public that the government does its best to accommodate the high numbers of refugees. In other words, the PM tries to calm down the worries of the public. Moreover, as Holzberg (2021) argues in his study of Angela Merkel's rhetoric of "we can do it," such a message also articulates the emotion of hope, which is part of the *pathos* persuading strategy. This might be well demonstrated by the following statement: "We have a difficult time ahead of us, but I am confident that we will come through it even stronger than we are now" (Fiala, 2022c).

The PM also communicates inclusivity by the pronoun "we" and the adverb "together," which is part of the *ethos* persuasive strategy. Such a strategy is meant to give the impression of cohesion and unity.[5] However, as is demonstrated later, despite the seeming inclusivity, not all Czech citizens are included. The PM's rhetoric also consists of honesty by acknowledging "a difficult time ahead of us" which "will affect us all" and confidence that "we" will get through it. Moreover, the PM in his communication asks for understanding, which might be labeled as a demonstration of humility: "And of course, I have to ask people for both patience and understanding […] Again, there is a war close to us […] And we are feeling the effects of that war" (Fiala, 2022b). The credibility of the PM is generated by his position as a Prime Minister and former university professor.

With regard to *logos*, we found two main argumentation strategies legitimizing help to refugees, *argumentum ad consequentiam* and *argumentum ad populum*.[6] The first argument

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defends the solidarity action by referring to the consequences of not helping, as depicted in the following speech act:

> We have done everything possible so that Ukrainians who come to us can start working so that their children can go to school. *This means that their dependence on the state should be as low as possible.* However, we have also made it so that those who cannot work and simply cannot support themselves in any other way will receive a certain social support of CZK 5,000, which they must apply for; it is not automatic(Fiala, 2022b).

The PM thus argues that if the Czech government does not help the refugees, there will be negative consequences for Czech society. Thus, solidarity with refugees is presented as help to the Czech public:

> We simply have to manage these masses of people in such a way that it does not bring social and other problems, and in this way, we are actually taking care of Czech citizens(Fiala, 2022a).

The following excerpt shows an example of the same category of argument but with slightly different content:

> Why should we help the Ukrainians? They are fighting for us. If anyone thinks that Vladimir Putin will stop if we don't stop him, they are very wrong. […] You can't think like that. They are fighting for us; we must help them(Fiala, 2022b).

The PM argues that if "we" do not help the Ukrainians (not exclusively refugees), the war may spill over to Czechia as a consequence. In both examples of this argumentation strategy, solidarity with Ukrainian refugees is instrumentally used to show that helping Ukrainians is the highest interest of Czechia.

By the *argumentum ad populum*, the PM legitimizes the help to refugees as a policy that responds to what the public wants. The following example expresses this legitimization strategy:

> Our common goal - and I am certainly speaking for the vast majority of the opposition here - is - but this is, mainly, what we hear from the citizens, this is how people perceive it, this is the mood in society - our common goal is to take care of the children and wives of Ukrainians who are fighting for their country(Fiala, 2022d).

Within this *logos*, solidarity with Ukrainian refugees is presented as a common goal, refuting that it might be viewed differently by other citizens. Yet, the PM declares that the Czech government does not forget the struggles of Czech citizens once he is confronted with this question in interviews. Nevertheless, the PM's rhetoric is aimed mainly toward those who are actively participating in helping Ukrainian refugees. The PM expresses positive feelings such as pride, gratitude, or pity to them, "When I see the level of support for Ukraine and Ukrainians that has risen in our country, I feel immense pride." (Fiala, 2022d). Some scholars argue that pride and gratitude foster solidarity and generate positive feelings in any social relationship (Scheff, 1994; Lawler et al., 2009). However, this is particularly a challenge in Czechia since national pride is very low (Vlachová, 2019). If political elites show positive feelings toward their own citizens, it may enhance trust in the governmental institutions and, by extension, increase the likelihood that the government's policies will be viewed positively.

However, as mentioned, this *logos and* accompanying *pathos* refer to those who support the government's policy of helping Ukrainian refugees and assisting Ukraine's war efforts. In the PM's rhetoric, we rarely find direct *pathos* and understanding toward those who do not agree with the government's steps. Although Fiala (2022d) admitted that "Each of us will have to sacrifice some of

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our comforts," the PM does not sympathize or empathize with those who voice concerns over his government's policies. The PM instead asks the citizens and the opposition parties for understanding with regard to the refugees' difficult situation and the challenges the government is facing. Moreover, on one occasion, while presenting the humanitarian welfare benefit for Ukrainian refugees in Czechia, the PM even says that Czech citizens should not envy the refugees, "But we must remember, [to] those who would perhaps envy the Ukrainians, these are the people who have lost everything" (Fiala, 2022b). The PM in his rhetoric does not express sympathy, pity, or empathy with those who are critical of the government's refugee policy. Therefore, the discursive suggestion of unity and inclusiveness falls short of including all.

In sum, the core message "We can do it together" of the PM's rhetoric triangle about the refugee issue is composed of *ethos* (inclusive language to some extent, honesty, confidence, and credibility as a PM and scientist), *logos* (*argumentum ad consequentiam* – help as prevention and *argumentum ad populum* – help as a public goal), and *pathos* (hope, pride, gratitude, and pity). However, in the PM's rhetoric, we observed a discursive disparity regarding a specific audience. Those who agree with the government's refugee policy are directly addressed in the PM's rhetoric, and positive emotions are expressed toward them. Conversely, the PM's rhetoric does not address the concerns of those citizens who are critical of the government. As a result, empathy with citizens' concerns is missing. The 3D model consists of inclusiveness, *ethos*, and empathy (Veneti and Lilleker, 2022), which might address a mutual understanding in political communication, is thus incomplete.

After examining what political communication about refugee assistance looks like in Czechia, we follow with the second stage of our analysis. There we take the case of the humanitarian welfare benefit for Ukrainian refugees in Czechia and explore whether applying empathetic political communication to the presentation of this policy has a chance to increase public support for this policy.

The survey experiment

As the theoretical section has shown, experimental studies in political communication suggest that empathetic rhetoric leads to a more favorable perception of politicians' ability to handle healthcare or social policies. Building on this research, we utilize the concept of empathetic communication and examine whether expressing empathy with citizens' concerns about immigration leads to higher support for a humanitarian welfare benefit for Ukrainian refugees in Czechia. Our hypothesis is as follows:

> H: *Individuals who are exposed to empathetic communication will have higher support for the welfare benefit than individuals who are not exposed to empathetic communication.*

To test our hypothesis, we conducted an original online survey experiment (N = 943). The experiment took place between June 22 and 26, 2022, in Czechia. The data were collected by Median, a data collection company, using data from an online access panel. The sample was a quota sample, with quotas on gender, age, education, region, and size of the town of residence. The experiment had a simple design, with one treatment group and one control group.

In the early part of the survey questionnaire, respondents indicated their informed consent with participation in the research project and then answered a few questions about demographics and political attitudes. Then, respondents were randomly assigned to either the control group or the experimental group. The control group was presented with a paragraph in which an unnamed member of the government informed the public about a humanitarian welfare benefit for refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. The experimental group was presented with an equivalent statement that included statements of empathy with the respondents' possible reservations about this welfare benefit. Empathetic communication is thus our key independent variable. The following paragraph

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provides the full text of the treatment text. The words in bold denote parts that were missing in the control-group text.

> *Czech government introduces welfare benefit for refugees from Ukraine.*
>
> *The Czech Republic will provide a welfare benefit of CZK 5,000 per month to all refugees from Ukraine.* ***We understand that some people find it unfair when you work hard, pay taxes and rent, and someone new comes in and simply gets everything. It is understandable to feel that way. However,*** *the benefit is intended for people who are coming to our country, seeking refuge from the war, and it is intended to help them pay for the basic necessities. We must help, at least in the first few months, those who have had to leave everything behind and now need our help. We help because we are human beings, and helping someone who is in need is a basic act of humanity* (*the minister told the media*).

The facts in the statement are based on a real policy that the government enacted in March 2022. The wording of the arguments supporting the introduction of the benefits was adapted from speeches by government officials. The expressions conveying empathetic communication were designed by the research team to closely follow the logic of empathetic communication. The issues addressed by the empathetic phrases, though, are taken from public discussions that followed the introduction of the welfare benefit.

After receiving the treatment or the control text, the dependent variable was measured: respondents were asked about the extent to which they support the humanitarian welfare benefit for Ukrainian refugees. The survey item was the following:

> *Some people think that Ukrainian refugees should receive this welfare benefit, other people think that Ukrainian refugees should not receive it. What is your opinion? Please mark it on the following scale, where 0 means that Ukrainian refugees should not receive this benefit and 10 means that they should receive it.*

To evaluate the extent to which the treatment affected the respondents, we included a measurement of the perceived responsiveness of the government. This survey item asked the respondents about the extent to which the government cared about people like them. We opted for this measure rather than asking directly about how much empathy with the respondent's concerns government officials have. Even though empathy is a concept that most people are familiar with, it is not typically used in the context of politics. Asking directly about politicians' empathy in a closed survey question would run a high risk of respondents not understanding the intended meaning of the question. Asking respondents whether politicians care about them is a familiar concept that is close to the meaning of empathy.

In addition to the main variables, the early part of the questionnaire collected data on respondents' gender, age, education, trust in government, the size of the place of residence, and their position on the left-right ideological scale. The exact wording of all survey items, as well as descriptive statistics for the variables, can be found in the appendix.

Does empathetic communication make a difference?

The fact that our survey experiment has one treatment group and one control group means that the leverage for the analysis of the treatment effect comes from the between-subject comparison. Thanks to the random assignment to one of the two groups, the only thing that distinguishes the treatment group from the control group is the exposure to the empathetic statements in the short paragraph the respondents read. Therefore, if our analysis finds a difference in the level of support

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Figure 2. The difference in perceived responsiveness of the government. Treatment group minus control group. The line in the middle of the box denotes the average difference. The lower and upper borders of the grey box show the upper and lower bound of the 95% confidence interval. Results of an OLS regression model.

for the welfare benefit between the two groups, the experimental design allows us to attribute the difference to the presence of empathetic language.

Since the dependent variable is measured at a continuous-like level, an OLS regression is a suitable analytical method to examine the difference between the two groups. We therefore estimate a linear regression model with the dummy variable indicating the group (experimental/control) as the only predictor. The other factors that could potentially influence the level of policy support are controlled for through the random assignment in the experimental design.

First, we examine how much the reading of the empathetic version of the text changed respondents' perceived government responsiveness. Figure 2 shows the results. The line with the little X in the middle of the box shows the average difference between the treatment group and the control group. The upper and lower ends of the box denote the upper and lower end of a 95% confidence interval. We see that respondents in the treatment group have, on average, 0.19 higher perceived responsiveness of the government. However, considering the 11-point scale, the effect is small. In addition, the 95% confidence interval includes zero. We therefore cannot be confident that empathetic communication changes respondents' perception of government responsiveness.

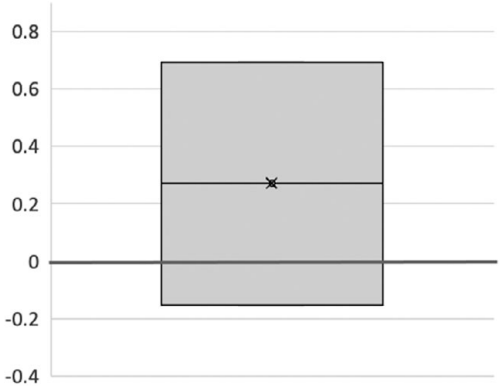


Figure 3. The difference in support for the humanitarian welfare benefit. Treatment group minus control group. The line in the middle of the box denotes the average difference. The lower and upper borders of the grey box show the upper and lower bound of the 95% confidence interval. Results of an OLS regression model.

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Next, we examine the effect of the experimental treatment on support for the welfare benefit of Ukrainian refugees. Figure 3 shows the results. It works along the same logic as Figure 2: the line in the middle of the box denotes the average difference between the treatment group and the control group. The boundaries of the box show the 95% confidence interval. Individuals who were exposed to empathetic communication had, on average, 0.27 points higher support for the welfare benefit than individuals in the control group. This effect is in the expected direction but considering the 11-point scale of the variable, the effect is small. Examining the confidence interval in Figure 3, we notice that it includes zero. This means that the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant. The logic of this type of statistical test, however, does not allow us to confidently conclude that there is *no effect*. It only allows us to say that there is an effect in the sample but we cannot be confident enough that this conclusion extends to the population.

In order to allow for more specific conclusions about the effect of the treatment, we apply the TOST test of equivalence (Lakens, 2017). This test allows researchers to directly test for statistical equivalence of means in two groups. The researcher first sets the lower and upper bounds of an equivalence interval. The equivalence interval is a range of the difference between the two groups that is deemed sufficiently small to allow the conclusion that the means in the two groups are "equivalent." The TOST equivalence test determines whether the observed effect size is significantly within the equivalent bounds (Lakens, 2017). In other words, the TOST test allows us to statistically examine the hypothesis that the means in the two groups are, for all practical purposes, equivalent.

Table 1 reports the results of the equivalence test. The upper and lower bounds of equivalence were set to 0.2 a -0.2 Cohen's d, respectively. Cohen's d is a standardized measure that reports the size of the difference between means, relative to the variation of the data, 0.2 is a small Cohen's d. This means that our equivalence test is conservative and that even a small difference between the two groups would be considered meaningful. The statistical test of whether the effect size is significantly within the equivalent bounds is in the bottom half of the table, with the corresponding p-value (p = 0.038) in the bottom right corner of the table. The TOST equivalence test thus shows that the difference in support for the humanitarian welfare benefit between the control group on the one hand and the treatment group on the other, is significantly within the equivalent bounds.

Table 1. TOST equivalence test results. Dependent variable: Treatment effect on support for humanitarian welfare benefit.

Control group		Treatment group	
Mean	5.175	Mean	5.447
Std. deviation	3.277	Std. deviation	3.253
N	463	N	459
TOST Equivalence Test			
Low equivalence bound (Cohen's d)	–0.2	High equivalence bound (Cohen's d)	0.2
One-Sided Test 1		One-Sided Test 2	
t	1.773	t	–4.300
df	919.999	df	919.999
p	0.038	p	0.000
TOST result			
t	1.773	p	0.038

Note: This table was adapted from an Excel file provided by Lakens (2017).

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Substantively, this means that empathetic communication about a welfare benefit for refugees does not lead to higher support for the benefit.

Conclusion and discussion

European countries helping Ukraine are democracies and, as such, their policies depend to a smaller or larger extent on public support. Highly unpopular policies are difficult for governments to keep pursuing. The societal polarization in some European countries over help to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees runs the risk of being one of those policies that democratic governments in these countries may find difficult to maintain. Public support for policies assisting Ukrainians and Ukraine itself is thus vital. If opposition to these policies prevails, it may have serious negative consequences on Ukraine's ability to fight off the Russian invasion.

In this paper, we address this issue by looking at public support for public policy that helps Ukrainian refugees in Czechia. Czechia is one of the countries that has most strongly supported Ukraine and has accommodated large numbers of Ukrainian refugees. All this was happening at a time of double-digit inflation and sky-rocketing energy prices. The energy crisis began in 2021, and the war in Ukraine exacerbated it. Since Europe depended on Russia to cover much of its oil and natural gas needs, the onset of the war in Ukraine threatened the delivery of oil and gas, contributing to higher energy prices. The combination of these developments led to vocal opposition to the policy of helping Ukrainian refugees and Ukraine itself. Therefore, we focused our attention on the government's communication of its assistance to Ukrainian refugees. In particular, we examined the role of empathy in this communication. Unlike most of the existing research on empathy in political communications, however, we looked at expressions of empathy with *Czech citizens' concerns* about the mass influx of refugees.

We used rhetorical analysis to examine whether the Czech PM's communication about the help to Ukrainian refugees addresses concerns voiced by Czech citizens. This analysis finds that although the inclusive and hopeful notion of "We can do it together" is the central theme of the PM's communication about assistance to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees, the concerns of those who have reservations about this policy are not really acknowledged or addressed in the communication. By contrast, positive emotions were expressed towards those who support the government's positions and those who are helping Ukrainian refugees. Based on this, we argue that empathy with citizens' concerns was not used in the PM's communication about the government's policy toward Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. Nevertheless, our analysis focused on a narrow time frame in the early stages of the war when the government did not have to react to truly large-scale demonstrations increased populists' rhetoric from the opposition, and a decline of Czechs' support for helping Ukrainian refugees. Thus, more research is needed to examine whether and how the PM's rhetoric has changed in the course of these more recent developments.

In the second part of our analysis, we built on public opinion research conducted in the US (Renstrom and Ottati, 2020; McDonald, 2021), and we examined the impact of empathetic political communication on citizens' political attitudes in Czechia. We used an original survey experiment to examine whether communicating humanitarian welfare benefits for refugees in a way that expresses empathy with citizens' worries makes citizens more supportive of the policy. We find that communication expressing empathy leads to an equivalent level of support for the humanitarian welfare benefit as communication without empathy. This finding is contrary to the expectations derived from the existing literature.

What might explain the absence of an effect of empathetic communication? One reason might be that our operationalization of empathetic communication was not strong enough. Our treatment validation showed that the experimental manipulation had only a weak and statistically insignificant effect on respondents' perception of the extent to which the government "cares about people like them." If the treatment validation is subjected to the TOST equivalence test, the results show that the difference between the two groups is significantly within the equivalence bounds (results of

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this test are in Table G in the appendix). Even though empathy was clearly expressed in the wording of the experimental text, respondents were not persuaded that there was empathy on the government's side. Since perceived empathy of the government is at the core of the causal mechanism connecting empathetic communication and policy support, the reason why empathetic language did not lead to more policy support may lie here.

Another explanation may lie in the one-off nature of the present experiment. It is possible that one short treatment does not have the power to change individuals' perceptions of whether the government understands their concerns. It may be the case that such a perception builds over time in repeated interactions. It is, therefore, a question for future research to determine whether the absence of impact empathetic communication extends to support in other policy areas, other operationalizations of empathetic language, and whether repeated empathetic communication makes any difference.

Another explanation for these unexpected results may lie in the concept of *informational equivalence* (Dafoe et al., 2018). Informational equivalence means that the value of the independent variable is the only thing changed by the experimental manipulation. In other words, the experimental manipulation does not change any background characteristics of the situation presented in the experiment. In the present case, it is possible that the assumption of informational equivalence does not hold and that expressing empathy evokes other perceptions in respondents as well. A government official who expresses empathy with the feelings of those who do not agree with them may be perceived as more competent. Thus, it is not just the expression of empathy that is manipulated but information about the level of government's competence. Also, the statement expressing empathy unavoidably mentions arguments against the proposed policy. It is thus possible that these arguments, rather than the expression of empathy, influence respondents and may explain the null results.

Even though our study did not find a positive effect of empathetic political communication, it did contribute to a highly relevant question with regard to the war in Ukraine. At the time of writing, the war in Ukraine was predicted to turn into a long war (Economist, 2023). Financial and military assistance by European countries may turn out to be the decisive factor in the war. At the same time, support for accepting Ukrainian refugees in Czechia has been going down over time (Münich and Protivínský, 2023). Radical right-wing and populist political actors have been feeding anti-Ukrainian sentiments by organizing anti-government demonstrations and using this issue to gain support (Česká televize, 2022). Opposition to accommodating Ukrainian war refugees may spill over into opposition to assisting Ukraine in the war. Governments, thus, may find it difficult to sustain large-scale financial and material assistance to Ukraine. Yet this support is essential for Ukraine's effort to reclaim its territory. Therefore, the study of public opinion and political communication about helping Ukrainian refugees and Ukraine remains an important research agenda for the future.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at http://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.59.

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Notes

1 The basic rate for adults was 4,860 CZK and for children 3,490 CZK. In August 2022, 80% of Ukrainian refugees received the benefit; in March 2023 60% of them did; and in June 2023 55%.
2 The PM is the leader of the ODS, the conservative, right-wing party.
3 The sample of communication analyzed in the rhetorical analysis consists of four speeches and six media interviews; see the appendix.
4 Nevertheless, the frequency of coding is secondary in this type of analysis.
5 'Together' (Spolu) is also the name of the party coalition, composed of the right-wing conservative ODS, the center-right liberal party of TOP09, and the Christian-democratic party (KDU-ČSL). All three parties are in the government, jointly with a center coalition of Pirates and Mayors. However, in the Czech language *Spolu, meaning* 'Together' in the name of the coalition, is spelled differently than *společně*, which means 'together' in the 'We can do it together' message.
6 Argumentation also included single claims that refugees might fill the labor market and an appeal to humanity by claiming that these people have nothing left, see Table A in the appendix.

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