

BARTŁOMIEJ ŁÓDZKI
MAŁGORZATA KOCIERZ

POLISH ONLINE MEDIA COVERAGE OF CLIMATE REFUGEES

Abstract. Climate change poses increasingly significant consequences, including the widespread displacement of populations. The article aims to demonstrate the complexity of the climate refugee issue and determine whether and how this topic has been addressed in the Polish online media between 2019 and 2023. The research focuses on framing climate refugees and the role played by the scientific discourse. The authors use hybrid methods to analyse the issue, including quantitative and qualitative content and framing analysis. Despite the limited number of reports, the problem of climate refugees is present in the Polish online media. Journalists primarily highlight the causes and consequences of the phenomenon, framing it as a pressing global issue with implications for Poland. Most articles draw on input from scientists, experts, and politicians to substantiate their coverage.

Keywords: climate change; climate refugees; media coverage; Polish online media; framing

INTRODUCTION

Climate change has more and more dangerous consequences, and one of them is massive displacement, an increasingly pressing issue affecting people globally. According to IDMC (2024), at the end of 2023, 75.9 million people worldwide lived in internal displacement, with 7.7 million resettled due to natural disasters. While not all weather-related disasters are directly caused by climate

Dr BARTŁOMIEJ ŁÓDZKI – University of Wrocław, Institute of International and Security Studies; correspondence address: ul. Koszarowa 3, bud. 21, 51-149 Wrocław, Poland; e-mail: bartlomiej.lodzki@uwr.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3526-6485>.

MAŁGORZATA KOCIERZ – PhD student at the Doctoral College of International Relations; University of Wrocław; correspondence address: ul. Koszarowa 3, bud. 21, 51-149 Wrocław, Poland; e-mail: malgorzata.kocierz@uwr.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3153-7745>.

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change, it is certainly a trigger that increases their intensity and frequency. In 2024, resettlement due to weather-related events accounted for 77% of all migration because of natural factors (IDMC, 2024).

The need to relocate affects primarily those living in the least developed countries in climate-vulnerable areas, such as deserts, small islands in danger of submergence, or territories particularly vulnerable to weather-related disasters, such as hurricanes, floods or tornadoes. A study conducted by the World Bank shows that if no climate action is taken, up to 216 million people could be forced to relocate by 2050 (Clement et al., 2021, p. 4).

The increasing incidence of forced displacement requires a deeper examination of media coverage of climate migration. The media's representation of climate migrants focuses on the dominant narratives of disaster, crisis, adaptation, and an uncertain future (Parsons, 2021). Research shows that the way the phenomenon is portrayed often deviates from scientific findings and is characterised by sensationalism, prejudice, and simplification.

There is no consensus among researchers regarding the existence of a single correct definition of a climate migrant or climate refugee or which criteria should be adopted for this purpose. Scientific, legal, and political articles use many different terms for this particular group of people. The definitions most commonly used include climate change refugees, environmental refugees, climate change migrants, environmental migrants, climate change displaced persons, and environmentally displaced persons (Groszkowska, 2019).

The first scholars were dealing with environmental and climate displacement in the 1980s, and at that time, the issue of climate change was not yet widespread. When public awareness of climate change increased, more researchers started to refer to the term 'climate refugee' (Bates, 2002). Activists nowadays often use it in the media to draw attention to the status and needs of those displaced by disasters, climate change, and environmental degradation. Nevertheless, researchers and specialised agencies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) agree that the use of the term 'climate refugee' should be avoided, as it wrongly indicates that legal protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention is granted to people who are forced to relocate due to climate change (Biermann, and Boas, 2010; Hodgkinson et al., 2010). 'Refugee' is, in fact, a legal term that can only be applied to a person who fulfils all the criteria established in international or regional refugee instruments, the UNHCR mandate or national legislation (IASC, 2008).

Instead, the term ‘climate migration’ was recommended (Biermann, and Boas, 2010; Docherty, and Giannini, 2009; Hodgkinson et al., 2010), which IOM defines as

the movement of a person or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a State or across an international border (Sironi, Bauloz, and Emmanuel, 2019, p. 31).

Climate migrations are therefore extensive and consist of opposing elements. Indeed, there is a difference between people forced to flee due to rising sea levels, such as citizens of small island states, and those who choose to relocate due to decreased land fertility and economic circumstances. Scholars on migration emphasise that relocation is a specific adaptive behaviour which is deliberate and undertaken based on the knowledge of this phenomenon and the danger (McLeman, and Hunter, 2010; McLeman, and Smit, 2006). Since both discussed terms – climate migrations and climate refugees – appear in media coverage, they will be used interchangeably in this article.

1. MEDIA COVERAGE OF CLIMATE REFUGEES

According to McLuhan’s theory, the dominant medium of an era influences the way people perceive the world. In the context of climate change communication, the medium through which information is communicated can significantly affect the audience’s perception of the message (Azu, and Alakwe, 2023). Years of research established four main narratives in the media about climate refugees. The catastrophe or apocalyptic frame portrays climate migration as a serious threat to security and stability while reinforcing anxiety and fear in society (Randall, 2017). Another one, the crisis narrative, focuses on the humanitarian dimension of migration, natural disasters and refugees as its victims (Dreher, and Voyer, 2015). Migration as an adaptation frame promotes a positive image of climate migrants and shows migration as a remedy and solution to the problem (Bettini, 2013; Green, and Pécoud, 2023). The last narrative focuses on the uncertain future of refugees and the inclusion of their personal stories and perspectives (Sakellari, 2022).

Most research on media coverage of the climate refugee problem is conducted with reference to specific geographical cases (Høeg, and Tulloch, 2019). Special interest is given to media coverage in Australia, New Zealand, and the Small

Island Developing States located in the Pacific Ocean. Farbotko (2005) identifies here three narratives applied to climate-induced event relocators: climate refugees, skilful seafarers, and oceanic drifters, with the first one being the most prominent. In this region, the climate justice narrative is not often used in the context of climate migration (Dreher, and Voyer, 2015). However, the European media, especially UK and Flemish ones, are dominated by narratives of catastrophe and crisis, which can lead to climate migrants being perceived as a security threat (Bonneux, and Van Praag, 2024).

Western media, notably American and British broadcasters, present themselves as advocates for climate refugees but often speak about them rather than giving them a voice or influence over the agenda (Hartmann, 2010; Høeg, and Tulloch, 2019; Dreher, and Voyer, 2015; Farbotko, 2005; Keller et al., 2020). Ribot, Faye, and Turner (2020) highlight that climate migrants are used to disseminating climate change issues rather than addressing their real needs, which leads to politicisation. This portrayal can even discourage climate actions and foster negative attitudes toward refugees (Arias, and Blair, 2022; Gillis et al., 2023). Conversely, Global South media, such as Al Jazeera, focus on crisis narratives and personal stories, including interviews with refugees, NGOs, and local experts (Boas et al., 2019).

Polish researchers focusing on refugees most often write about illegal migration in the context of the migration crisis of 2015-2018 (Troszyński, and El-Ghamari, 2022), the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border (Bloch et al., 2021), war refugees from Ukraine (Jupowicz-Ginalska, and Gober, 2024; Zaręba, 2023), or international legal solutions (Osóbka, 2018). The issue of climate refugees has not been broadly analysed in Polish media research; our study is thus trying to fill this gap.

Climate change also poses significant challenges in continental Europe, including Poland. It has many environmental, economic, and social consequences (Gaska, 2023), for instance more frequent and intense extreme weather events, like floods and droughts. These changes have substantial impact on agriculture, water resources, and the overall ecological stability of the country (Rucinska, 2015). Climate change as a broad thematic issue is prominently featured in the coverage provided by European media outlets (Almiron, and Zoppeddu, 2015; Barkemeyer, Givry, and Figge, 2018; Kleinberga, 2022; Lochner, Stechemesser, and Wenz, 2024; Painter et al., 2021). The migration of individuals from island nations or regions directly impacted by catastrophic climate change may not immediately affect Poland itself. However, Europe must anticipate this influx and prepare for it in the coming years (Burzyński, Docquier, and Scheewel, 2021; Cattaneo et al., 2019).

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study covers the years 2019-2023, highlighting global violent weather phenomena and climate catastrophes such as heat waves in Europe, severe fires in California, Australia, and North America, and floods in Western Europe and Pakistan. The monsoon-triggered floods in Pakistan impacted millions, causing over 1,700 deaths and displacing 8 million people. In 2023, record-high global temperatures were observed (*5 Natural Disasters That Beg for Climate Action*, 2022; *Billion-Dollar Disaster Seasons*, 2024; Smith, 2024).

The BuzzSumo platform was employed to search archived materials from Polish online media (“pl” domain) using the keywords “climate refugees,” “climate migrations,” and “climate migrants.” This tool, widely used in media research (Moscadelli et al., 2020; Munyangayo, 2022), enabled the identification and verification of relevant articles. It excluded general refugee-related content and duplicates, resulting in a sample of 30 articles from news and thematic websites. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted using the software MAXQDA 2024 (Guetterman, and James, 2023; Kuckartz, and Rädiker, 2019). The quantitative approach involved counting frequently appearing words and phrases, while qualitative analysis explored the framing of the topics and problems. As Ford, and King (2015) argue, media framing helps to highlight matters related to climate issues and enhances public awareness. Media framing is a critical concept in communication studies. It refers to how media content is structured to shape audience perceptions and interpretations of events or issues. Media framing involves selecting and emphasising certain aspects of perceived reality, influencing how audiences understand and engage with information (D’Angelo, 2019). The foundational work on framing theory can be traced back to Goffman, who introduced the idea that frames are essential for understanding how individuals interpret social phenomena. Building on this, Entman defined framing as selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communication text, which promotes particular interpretations and solutions to issues (Teschendorf, 2024). This selection process is crucial because it shapes the audience’s understanding and can influence their attitudes and behaviours regarding the framed issue (Günay et al., 2021).

We posed several research questions to examine online media coverage. First, we investigated which media outlets addressed the issue and whether any focused primarily on it. Then, we explored how climate refugees are framed,

identifying key issues discussed, frequently used words and phrases, and prevailing perspectives. Additionally, we examined whether framing differed between Polish and international media. Finally, we analysed references to scientific voices, assessing their presence and how they were utilised.

3. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS RESULTS

The final research sample included 30 articles. The most numerous ones were published on wyborcza.pl (N=5), tvn24.pl (N=3), tokfm.pl, smoglab.pl, businessinsider.com.pl, and zielona.interia.pl (N=2 for each website). The remaining websites had one publication each, identified on the following sites: infoans.org/pl/, dobrapogoda24.pl, dorzeczy.pl, ekologia.pl, ekowrazliwi.pl, gazetaprawna.pl, kiwiportal.pl, nczas.com, instytutfelczaka.pl, swiatoze.pl, twojapogoda.pl, wprost.pl, wysokieobcasy.pl, zielonewiadomosci.pl.

Quantitative analysis showed that the most frequently occurring words in the articles examined were: “climate,” “refugee,” “year,” “man,” “change,” “can,” and “million” (Table 1).

Table 1. The most frequently occurring words

Climate (adjective)	185
Refugee	148
Year	143
Man	129
Change	124
Can	117
Million	116
Climate (noun)	100
Person	84
Migration	81
Have	77
World	72
Already	65
Europe	62
Other	61

Problem	59
One	56
Place	56
Have	55
State	52
Country	51
Many	51
Migrant	51
Resident	49
Our	48
Reason	48
Before	45
Level	45
Only	45
The same	44
Many	42
War	42
Home	41
Africa	40

Source: authors' own

Nearly 77% of the articles contained the phrase “climate changes.” Other most frequent phrases were “climate refugee,” “millions of people,” “climate change,” “climate refugees,” “global warming,” “leave home,” and “greenhouse gases” (Table 2).

Table 2. The most frequently occurring phrases

Phrases	Frequency	Number of articles	Percentage of articles
climate changes	69	23	76.7
climate refugee	43	19	63.3
millions of people	34	14	46.7
climate change	31	13	43.3
climate refugees	17	13	43.3

leave home	16	9	30.0
global warming	16	7	23.3
flee from	13	10	33.3
greenhouse gases	13	10	33.3
effect of change	13	8	26.7
weather phenomenon	13	8	26.7
ocean level	12	6	20.0
risk factor	12	2	6.7
extreme phenomena	11	7	23.3
sea level	11	7	23.3
human rights	11	5	16.7
climate migration	11	4	13.3
climate crisis	10	8	26.7
right now	10	8	26.7

Source: authors' own

The linguistic landscape suggests a complex, multidimensional media representation of climate refugees. Analysing the frequency of words and phrases leads to the first conclusions. Regardless of the sources, individual concepts are repeated, creating a linguistic frame for the discussed problem. “Climate change(s)” and “climate refugee(s)” establish a systemic narrative frame and linguistically legitimise an emerging social category. Phrases like “leave home” and “flee from” emphasise forced displacement. “Right now” suggests immediate urgency and contemporary relevance. “Human rights” introduces a normative, ethical dimension. “Greenhouse gases,” “weather phenomena,” and “extreme phenomena” provide scientific contextualisation. Geographical references such as “Europe” and “Africa” as well as quantitative descriptors “million” and “person” indicate a global perspective that simultaneously universalises and regionalises climate-induced migration. A qualitative analysis was performed to verify those observations. The main focus was identifying the dominant themes, their perspective, and frames.

4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE CLIMATE REFUGEES' ISSUE

The examined media coverage distinguished three main thematic clusters. The first one focused on explaining the concept and diagnosing the phenomenon. The next group consisted of threads explaining the causes of climate migration. The third thematic cluster comprised fragments devoted to the possibilities of solving existing and future problems.

The articles emphasised the scale of the phenomenon. Based on forecasts, the number of migrants might reach between 25 million to even one billion by 2050. Among the problems, the legal challenges resulting from the lack of an international definition of a “climate refugee,” the inadequacy of the current legal framework to the challenges, and the issue of limited legal protection for migrants were mentioned. Attention was drawn to the geographical diversity of threats, indicating that the problem primarily affects island communities, populations in high-risk zones, as well as farmers and pastoralists in the poorest societies. Climate migration was diagnosed as a phenomenon with the potential to generate conflicts, which have a crucial impact on security threats, and pose a demographic challenge contributing to humanitarian crises.

The causes of climate migration are multifaceted. Environmental factors, such as rising global temperatures ($> 1^{\circ}\text{C}$) and extreme weather events – including droughts, floods, fires, and hurricanes – play a significant role. The loss of traditional climate zones contributes to ecosystem degradation, such as the desertification of farmland. Anthropogenic influences, including greenhouse gas emissions, poor adaptation strategies, population growth, and inefficient resource management, exacerbate these challenges. These factors often lead to socio-economic issues, such as declining livelihoods, water scarcity, food system instability, and increased poverty. Climate migration is a complex, multidimensional process requiring interdisciplinary approaches, global cooperation, and international solidarity to address effectively.

Solving the problems of climate migration requires multidimensional actions. This issue has received much less attention, but nevertheless, we can find constructive proposals. Legal and institutional actions were cited as key, including the need to expand the definition of a refugee, modify the international legal framework, create a category of “forced migrants,” and implement UN resolutions protecting climate migrants.

Journalists also cited experts' proposals indicating the need to implement adaptation mechanisms such as creating special migration programs, introducing dedicated climate visas, facilitating controlled relocation, and supporting integration

processes. Experts also raised the importance of environmental and economic solutions such as investments in adaptive agricultural technologies, diversification of livelihoods, development of resilient production systems, and support for local communities. There was also no shortage of technological proposals, such as developing CO₂ capture technologies and innovative climate solutions, monitoring environmental changes, and early warning systems. Crucially, the need for international climate cooperation was emphasised, and it consisted of finding mechanisms for financial support, fair distribution of obligations and protection of human rights.

Similarly to the types of problems, it was also possible to distinguish three time perspectives. Climate migration was presented as a present problem, having consequences for the future as well as appearing in the past, often very distant.

The present perspective is a form of showing problems as a phenomenon that is happening here and now and concerns not only distant island states but also has an impact on various regions, including Europe. It refers to the way of presenting the displacement of millions of inhabitants forced to leave their homes destroyed by hurricanes and cyclones. Floods, fires, hurricanes, and other natural disasters are being associated with climate change, the effects of which are currently felt by everyone, regardless of the geographical zone. Extreme weather conditions are observed in Europe, and in Poland, they translate into water shortages.

The future perspective presents the problem from the point of view of the omissions we are committing today. The lack of an international legal framework for treating people displaced due to extreme weather conditions will result in a lack of control over migration movements. Lack of action and insufficient actions to limit temperature rise will contribute to further melting of the Arctic, and increased exploration of resources will lead to displacement and conflicts over these resources. Notably, the poorest, who have contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions, are and will be most affected by the effects of climate change.

The historical perspective mainly refers to scientific research, which proves the connection between environmental events, conflicts, and migrations. For example, journalists cited research from the *Science* magazine, which included examples from Europe. According to scientists, the years 250-550, when the Roman Empire in the West fell, and the great migration of barbarian peoples took place, was characterised by temperature spikes, droughts and floods. The beginning of the Little Ice Age in the 13th-14th century and probably its effect in the form of plague devastated Europe. The cold did not let up until the 17th-19th centuries, during the great emigration of Europeans to America. An example outside Europe concerns the Mayan Empire in the 10th century, which fell since

the climate changed to a very dry one. Another example is the reference to research by scientists from Columbia University in the US published in *Nature*. They analysed over 200 conflicts that broke out in 175 countries over the last half-century.

As they calculated, El Nino could have contributed to almost one in three wars fought in Africa, Asia and South America, and one in four conflicts that broke out in other parts of the world. The researchers listed, among others, the 20-year civil war in Peru, which broke out after the 1982 El Nino; the civil war in Sudan, which broke out in 1963 and escalated during subsequent El Nino occurrences in 1976 and 1983, conflicts in El Salvador, the Philippines and Uganda in 1972, in Angola, Haiti and Burma in 1991, as well as in Congo, Rwanda, Eritrea and Indonesia in 1997.¹

In *Nature Communications*, scientists confirmed that climate changes led to the fall of the Ptolemaic dynasty in ancient Egypt. Similarly, climate change drove five million people to migrate from Germany to the USA in the 19th century. Environmental issues also contributed to the Syrian civil war, with a million people migrating internally due to a severe drought that devastated crops, escalating conflict risk and intensity.

CONCLUSIONS

The examples analysed illustrate frames and perspectives, showing the scientific discourse in the journalistic articles. The voice of science was prominent, with journalists frequently citing scientific findings and expert opinions. These articles referenced reports, studies, and research conclusions, professionalising the messages with reliable evidence. Experts like lawyers and climatologists from international organisations also made their contribution. In 76.1% of cases, there were references to foreign researchers, while 23.9% – to Polish scientists. Although researchers' names appeared in the articles, their representation in the study sample was minimal and not quantified.

The topic of climate refugees was present in the media discourse during the research period (2019–2023). However, individual editorial offices only occasionally published materials on this issue. Coverage primarily appeared in mainstream media—similar to patterns in reporting on climate change—and in ecological editorial divisions within portals such as *Wirtualna Polska* or *Interia*. Additionally, articles were featured on websites focused on environmental issues,

¹ <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75400,18746657,to-poczatek-exodusu-wypedzeni-przez-susze-i-wojny-dobijaja.html>. Translation by the authors.

renewable energy, and human rights. As in many foreign media outlets, refugees were often presented as a collective group, typically described as coming from distant regions (from the perspective of the Polish audience). A few articles, however, did include individual stories of people from specific locations. Unfortunately, only limited quotes from individuals directly affected by the problem were presented.

The articles emphasised that climate migration has the potential to impact everyone. The dominant narrative frames were as follows:

1. Legal frame – highlighting legal loopholes and the pressing need for changes to the international legal system.
2. Economic frame – discussing the economic costs of disasters for nations and regions.
3. Social frame – focusing on the tragedies faced by social groups and individuals, including the violation of human rights, loss of homes, and the suffering of families and children.
4. Environmental frame – concentrating on the factors driving changes in natural systems.

Key findings from the content analysis indicate that climate change poses a serious threat to human rights. This is evidenced by the increasing number of climate-induced displacements globally. The UN Human Rights Committee has ruled that governments cannot legally deport individuals to countries where their lives would be endangered by the climate crisis. Furthermore, the Catholic Church has expressed significant pastoral concern for those displaced by the impacts of the climate crisis. Experts stressed that the climate crisis is not merely an environmental, political, or economic issue but rather a profound challenge that undermines fundamental human rights.

Experts argue that real and sustainable solutions require a collaborative approach involving governmental action alongside investments by large corporations, which have long resisted transitioning to sustainable energy infrastructures. For many impoverished communities, the destruction of the natural environment—on which their livelihoods depend—directly threatens their fundamental rights to food, clothing, and shelter. Renewable energy is seen as a democratising force capable of addressing the intersection between climate and human rights challenges.

Conversely, certain conservative sources characterised climate migration as a concept invented by leftist factions. Politicians and commentators cited in these articles argued that distinguishing between regular migrants and “climate migrants” is problematic. They also claimed that this concept is being used to facilitate the entry of migrants into Europe, including Poland, which they believe could jeopardise the economic system and national security.

This study has several limitations. First, the corpus of texts analysed was relatively small, although this was beyond the researchers' influence. Evidence suggests that the issue of climate migration is only beginning to enter public discourse in Poland. The limited number of texts restricted the scope of the quantitative analysis to relatively basic measures. Moreover, advanced natural language processing techniques and large thematic clusters were not used. Themes and findings were presented collectively, as comparing topics across individual texts carried the risk of overinterpretation. Future studies should compare Polish mainstream media's content with media from other Central and Southern European countries. Additionally, further research could delve deeper into the frames and perspectives, mainly focusing on how people, issues, and potential solutions are portrayed.

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RELACJE POLSKICH MEDIÓW INTERNETOWYCH NA TEMAT UCHODźCÓW KLIMATYCZNYCH

Streszczenie

Zmiany klimatu niosą ze sobą coraz bardziej znaczące konsekwencje, a jedną z nich są powszechne przesiedlenia ludności. Artykuł ma na celu ukazać złożoność kwestii uchodźców klimatycznych oraz określić, czy i w jaki sposób temat ten był poruszany w polskich mediach internetowych w latach 2019-2023. Badanie koncentruje się na ramowaniu uchodźców klimatycznych i roli, jaką odgrywa dyskurs naukowy. Autorzy wykorzystują metody hybrydowe do analizy zagadnienia, w tym ilościową i jakościową analizę treści i ramowania. Pomimo ograniczonej liczby doniesień problem uchodźców klimatycznych jest obecny w polskich mediach internetowych. Dziennikarze podkreślają przede wszystkim przyczyny i konsekwencje tego zjawiska, przedstawiając je jako palącą kwestię globalną z implikacjami dla Polski. Większość artykułów opiera się na opiniach naukowców, ekspertów i polityków.

Słowa kluczowe: zmiana klimatu; uchodźcy klimatyczni; relacje medialne; polskie media online; ramowanie