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Dangerous Speech targeting Ukrainian war refugees in Poland

a context brief

P a w e ł T r z a s k o w s k i

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At the beginning of 2022, Russia amassed military forces at the Russo-Ukrainian borders and invaded the Ukrainian territory on February 24. This invasion is a continuation of a conflict that dates back to 2013 and, apart from anything else, it has been a tragedy for civilians. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as of November 2022 there has been a total of 6,595 confirmed civilian deaths, and 10,189 were injured since February 24 of the same year. However, OHCHR warns that those numbers are vastly underestimated given the difficulties of adequate reporting from places where intense fighting takes place. Moreover, this conflict is also believed to have caused the biggest migration crisis in Europe since WWII. From the first day of the invasion, millions of Ukrainian refugees have been forced to flee their country. The refugees are mostly women (87% of all adults) with children (40% of all refugees) and the elderly, because the general mobilization prohibits men aged 18-60 to leave. Many of them sought shelter in Poland, a country to the west that shares a 535-kilometer-long border with Ukraine. By October, 7 million people had crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border from Ukraine in 2022, according to the Polish border guard. It is estimated that there are now 3.2 million Ukrainians in Poland (before the February aggression there were 1.5 million). Given that in the 2021 census there were 38 million Polish citizens in total, this is a dramatic change in the social and demographic structure of the country, especially as most refugees have decided to stay in the biggest cities. For example, the population of Warsaw, the capital of Poland, has grown by 15% since the conflict began. The population of Rzeszów, the nearest major city next to the Ukrainian border, has grown by staggering 53%.

There are several likely reasons why the Ukrainian refugees have favored going to Poland. Firstly, the proximity and relatively easy transit facilitate relocation. Secondly, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians immigrated to Poland after Russia annexed Crimea 8 years prior (albeit this migration was more gradual), so there was already a noticeable and established Ukrainian minority there. Thirdly, the nations of Poland and Ukraine are culturally compatible – they are Slavic, experienced similar oppression from the USSR after WWII, and have even on occasion throughout history been part of the same political entity (the last one was the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that lasted until the end of the 18th century). In modern, post-communist times, the countries frequently cooperate, organizing the UEFA Euro 2012 football championships together, for example.

Such an influx of immigrants is obviously not without its consequences. Integration of refugees, providing permanent housing, securing continuity of education for children and adults, promoting employability, and introducing long-term protection programs

are among the greater challenges that receiver countries will have to face, according to the International Migration Outlook 2022. Moreover, factors such as compassion fatigue and record inflation may contribute to sways in willingness to help, and the authors of IMO cite perception of unfairness as the most dangerous theme that may negatively influence the public opinion.

As of December 2022, the vast majority of mainstream Polish politicians still publicly express their support for the Ukrainian immigrants and most Poles continue to agree with such policy. The only exception is Konfederacja – a coalition of far-right political parties that frequently touches upon the issues of unfairness in Polish-Ukrainian relations, threats to Poland's security and the rising costs of aid administered by the Polish state. These topics align with the main three themes that drive the anti-immigrant and anti-Ukrainian narrative in the country: economy, relations with Russia and historical resentments.

Economy

During this crisis, unprecedented public and political support was given to the Ukrainian refugees in most countries that received them. In Poland, both individual people and the state helped the Ukrainian refugees from the very first days of Russian aggression. According to one poll, 77% of the Polish people helped the refugees in some way: donated money, provided supplies, or gave shelter, often by accepting refugees in their own homes. The Polish state helped the refugees, for instance, by organizing resting points, sending convoys with humanitarian aid or providing care and education for children. Ukrainian refugees have been able to receive national identification numbers, the same that the Polish citizens have, which allow them to receive social benefits and medical care, legally get a job or start their own business. Also, a special bill on helping Ukraine was passed in the Parliament that granted Ukrainians similar social benefits to those that the Polish people receive. It is estimated that the aid given to the Ukrainians both by the state and the individual Polish people in 2022 amounts to more than 25 billion PLN – about 1% of Poland's GDP from 2021. Such a sum is considerable, especially given that Poland, like the rest of the region, is currently facing rapid inflation (17.9% as of October 2022). Poles and Ukrainians do not yet compete for jobs because of the low unemployment rate, but the rising costs of life make people increasingly cautious about their and their government's expenses.

Relations with Russia

Safety, after economy, is also of great concern for the Polish people during the current crisis. Throughout history Poland was more than once a victim of Russian imperialism. As to the most recent events, many Poles still remember the times of the People's Republic of Poland – a communist state that emerged after the end of WWII, and was

politically dependent on the USSR until 1989. Therefore, Russian military interventionism is a threat that many Poles still fear, and there is a common understanding among the Polish society that a Ukrainian victory in this war is beneficial for Poland as well.

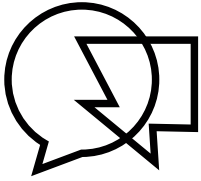
Today, almost an entire eastern border of Poland might be considered a frontline zone. To the east Poland borders Ukraine and pro-Russian Belarus, in the north-east there is also the Kaliningrad Oblast, a small but highly militarized federal subject of Russia. Also, as Russians often strike targets close to the Polish-Ukrainian border, there is a risk of the conflict escalation. Although Poland has been a member of NATO since 1996, some experts believe that a threat of Russian attack on the country is not impossible. As a matter of fact, in November 2022 a missile blast in Przewodów, a small town at the eastern border of Poland, killed two men. Initially it was thought that this might have been a Russian attack on Polish territory, but eventually it turned out that the missile which caused the blast was shot by a Ukrainian defense system to intercept Russian rockets. Nevertheless, because of this incident the national security units in Poland were put on red alert.

Given the abovementioned, it should come as no surprise that some people in Poland fear supporting Ukraine in this war may put the security of Poland in danger and mark it as Russia's next target. Claims along the lines of "this is not a Polish war" can sometimes be heard in the media and such beliefs reinforce the reluctance towards the Ukrainian refugees, as their presence and the help they receive make Poland an agent in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. In fact, Poland has already become a target in this war as much of the anti-refugee and anti-Ukrainian propaganda in the Polish media is thought to be inspired by Russia. Therefore, at the beginning of the Russian invasion some media outlets and websites believed to support Russia were blocked by the Internal Security Agency of Poland to stop disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda from spreading. As a consequence, anti-Ukrainian messages in Polish started to prevail on Twitter and YouTube, where content moderation is limited.

Historical resentments

There are certain historical resentments between Poland and Ukraine that also play an important role in driving the anti-Ukrainian narrative. Some of Ukraine's current western territories were part of the Second Polish Republic before the WWII. From 1943 to 1945 the regions of Volhynia, Eastern Galicia, as well as parts of Lublin, Podkarpacie and Polesie were sites of brutal ethnic cleansings committed on the Polish people by the Ukrainian nationalists allied with Nazi Germany. It is estimated that up to 100,000 Poles were killed in the massacres, and in Poland these victims are commemorated every year on the National Day of Remembrance of Victims of Genocide. Presently,

growing numbers of Ukrainians hold in great regard those who inspired and orchestrated those events: the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), their leader Stepan Bandera, and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), as they were also the founding fathers of Ukrainian nationalism. The glorification of Stepan Bandera has especially surged in Ukraine after the recent conflict broke, because Ukrainian nationalism is the main driving force behind the country's opposition to Russian aggression and the Russification that follows it. This has left its mark on national Ukrainian politics and Polish-Ukrainian relations as well. For instance, in November 2022, Andriy Melnyk, a Ukrainian ambassador known for his pro-Bandera views, was appointed deputy foreign minister. Also, in January 2023 the Ukrainian parliament celebrated the birthday anniversary of Stepan Bandera with a Twitter post. Both situations might seem minor, but they sparked controversies in Poland and provoked critical responses from the Polish government officials.



About the author

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About this report

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