

2024 Case Study

GLOBAL RESEARCH INITIATIVE

Dangerous Speech that targets Ukrainian immigrants in Poland

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Introduction

The beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a concerning increase in the dissemination of dangerous speech targeting the millions of Ukrainian immigrants who fled to Poland. This surge is not surprising, as dangerous speech often accompanies large population movements. Migrants and refugees commonly become targets of such rhetoric, as they often have distinguishing characteristics that make them stand out from the host community. In the context of this conflict, these dangerous narratives depict Ukrainian refugees as a security risk and burden to Poland, resulting in a sense of unjust treatment and division between Poles and Ukrainians. This creates conditions that could lead to violence against Ukrainian immigrants; however, actual violent incidents so far have been relatively scarce. Therefore, the primary objective of this report is to attempt to answer the question of why, despite the prevalence of dangerous speech, there is relatively little violence between the Poles, the in-group, and Ukrainian refugees, the out-group.

The findings of this report are a result of the 2022-2023 Global Research Initiative (GRI) fellowship. The GRI is a network of researchers who document and analyze dangerous speech within their respective countries. Dangerous speech encompasses various forms of human expression, including words and images, that have the potential to inspire violence against specific groups of people. This report is based on a comprehensive database of 50 instances of dangerous speech acts. These examples allowed me to pinpoint the most common hallmarks used to target Ukrainian immigrants in Poland and also to draw conclusions concerning the Polish-Ukrainian coexistence.

Situation overview:

In the beginning of 2022, Russia deployed its military forces to the Russo-Ukrainian borders and, on February 24, launched an invasion on Ukrainian territory. This invasion is part of an ongoing conflict over Ukraine's aspiration to become a part of the Western world and has led to a significant humanitarian tragedy for civilians. As of June 2023, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has confirmed 9,083 civilian deaths and 15,779 injuries since the invasion began the previous year. However, the OHCHR cautions that these numbers are likely greatly underestimated due to the challenges in obtaining accurate reporting from areas with intense combat activities.

It is widely believed that this conflict has created the biggest migration crisis in Europe since the conclusion of World War II. Millions of Ukrainian refugees have been forced to seek refuge outside their homeland. Most of these refugees are women (87% of all adults) with children (40% of all refugees). This demographic composition is a

consequence of a general mobilization that prohibits men aged 18-60 from departing Ukraine, leaving a disproportionate number of women, children, and the elderly as the primary refugee cohort.

Many Ukrainian refugees have sought refuge in Poland. By June 2023, a staggering 13 million people had crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border from Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion, according to the Polish Border Guard. In April 2022, there were approximately 3.2 million Ukrainians residing in Poland, more than double the number from before the Russian aggression, which was 1.5 million. Considering that the total population of Poland, according to the 2021 census, amounted to 38 million, this influx of Ukrainian refugees has led to a considerable social transformation of the country.

As mentioned in the introduction, there has been a notable increase in dangerous speech targeting Ukrainian immigrants since the beginning of the Russian invasion. Much of this harmful rhetoric closely aligns with Russia's propaganda strategies in which the tactic known as 'the firehose of falsehood' is employed. This is a propaganda method characterized by the rapid and continuous dissemination of a large volume of information, often containing partial truths, outright falsehoods, or misleading narratives. Currently, in Russian propaganda tailored for a domestic audience, prominent narratives include the portrayal of Poland preparing for a conflict and potential annexation of Belarus and western Ukraine. They assert that Poland's current assistance to Ukrainians is designed to drain their resources in the conflict with Russia, ultimately leaving Ukraine vulnerable to a Polish invasion of its territories. Essentially, Russian propaganda aims to convey to its citizens that Poland and Ukraine are not cooperating, but are rather on a trajectory toward enmity, and that anti-Ukrainian attitudes are on the rise in Poland. Such amessage is then expanded in dangerous speech actsdisseminated in Poland which attempt to sow seeds of mistrust between Poles and Ukrainians.

This rise of dangerous speech should be worrying as the major demographic, safety, and economic challenges that Poland is currently facing could make Poles more susceptible to it. First of all, there has been a significant demographic shift that is particularly noticeable in major cities. For instance, the population of Warsaw, the capital, has grown by 15% since the conflict began, while Rzeszów, the closest major city to the Ukrainian border, has seen a remarkable 53% increase in population. Additionally, Poland is grappling with rapid inflation, reaching 14.4% in 2022, whereas the aid given to Ukrainians by both the government and individual Polish citizens in the same year amounted to over 25 billion PLN, equivalent to approximately 1% of Poland's GDP. Moreover, the entire eastern border of Poland, being virtually a frontline zone,

poses potential safety concerns. Polls reveal that most Polish people believe that the war in Ukraine is a threat to the safety of their country. This belief is confirmed by specific events. For instance, in November 2022, a misguided Ukrainian air defense missile caused a blast in Przewodów, a small town on the eastern border of Poland, which resulted in the death of two men. Additionally, in June 2023, Wagner Group fighters, who participated in the Russo-Ukrainian war on the Russian side, were relocated to Belarus, in close proximity to the Polish border.

The aforementioned factors (the rise of dangerous speech, economic uncertainty, and safety concerns) should theoretically lead to an increase in acts of violence directed at Ukrainian immigrants in Poland. However, this is not the case. More than 1,5 years since the immigration wave began, Poland has seen only minor violent incidents between Poles and Ukrainians. Given the presence of conditions that could lead to violence, but the absence of actual violence, it is therefore essential to investigate the possible mitigating factors that work against the dangerous speech.

Methodology and data description

For the purpose of this report, a database consisting of 50 instances of dangerous speech acts was created. The examples encompass the timeframe from the beginning of 2022, the moment the Russian invasion began, through the summer of 2023. These dangerous speech acts, gathered from the Polish media, were thoroughly described, which involved: identifying the main hallmarks, specifying the targeted groups, discerning the source and authors of the messages, and evaluating their potential level of dangerousness.

The majority of the collected examples originate from social media platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and their authorship was mostly attributed to anonymous online accounts. The primary targets attacked in these speech acts are typically Ukrainian immigrants in Poland or the Ukrainian population at large. However, at times, these speech acts also target the Ukrainian or the Polish government. Furthermore, the data collected indicates that dangerous speech directed at Ukrainian immigrants in Poland uses fourprimary hallmarks: accusation in a mirror, exploitation, unfairness, and threat to group integrity. Other identified hallmarks included questioning in-group loyalty and dehumanization; however, they were used much less often.

Some of the findings of this investigation align with those outlined in the 'Information War 2022-2023' report, jointly prepared by the Polish Press Agency and Polish Research and Academic Computer Network. Their report examines how Russian disinformation propaganda operates within the context of the Ukraine conflict. According to this report, the goal of Russian propagandists is to undermine trust in the governments of

countries that the Kremlin considers hostile; therefore, since last year the main disinformation narratives has primarily focused on destabilizing the unity of NATO and the EU, and most recently, weakening the resolve of Western nations in supporting Ukraine.

The authors of this report assert that the main objective of the Russian disinformation machinery is to confuse its audience. Poland has been a target of such disinformation campaigns at least since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, the intensity of these efforts heightened in 2021, commencing with the immigration crisis at the border with Belarus, and escalated further when Russia launched its attack on Ukraine in 2022.

In Poland, media outlets that present an overtly pro-Russian perspective, such as Russia Today and Sputnik News, are absent from the public discourse, and they are considered non-credible or even seen as a threat to national interests. As a result, social media platforms, particularly Twitter (now X), are used to spread disinformation. The objective of disinformation is not solely to make the audience fully believe in the message, but rather to create uncertainty. This strategy of confusion is best illustrated by the way the narrative of fake news changed rapidly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022: Polish sources that previously disseminated anti-vaccine content during the COVID-19 pandemic immediately shifted to sharing false information about the Ukrainian war and posting content that targeted refugees. The authors of the 'Information War 2022-2023' report outline several disinformation narratives targeted at the Polish audience. According to these narratives, Ukrainian refugees pose a significant security risk and burden to Poland, making Polish citizens feel like second-class citizens in their own country. The Ukrainians themselves are depicted as undeserving of support or sacrifices. Moreover, according to these narratives, providing military, economic, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine not only endangers Poland's safety, but artificially prolongs the conflict, causing unnecessary suffering and material losses. Additionally, the Polish government is accused of concealing the country's active involvement in the war, along with significant Polish casualties on the eastern front. Finally, the Kremlin manipulates the Polish population's strong Christian ties, promoting a narrative of Ukraine brutally targeting the Orthodox Church. These disinformation narratives are mirrored by the main hallmarks identified in the GRI database, namely: accusation in a mirror, exploitation, threat to group integrity and unfairness.

Accusation in a mirror

Prior to World War II, certain territories in what is now western Ukraine were part of Poland. However, during the years 1943 to 1945, these regions became the sites of

ethnic cleansings, known now as 'Volhynia Massacre', perpetrated against the Polish people by Ukrainian nationalists allied with Nazi Germany. It is estimated that these massacres claimed the lives of up to 100,000 Poles. Currently, there is a growing reverence among Ukrainians for those who were involved in these events: the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), their leader Stepan Bandera, and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), as they are also regarded as the founding figures of Ukrainian nationalism. The glorification of Stepan Bandera, in particular, has witnessed a significant rise in Ukraine following the recent conflict, as Ukrainian nationalism serves as a primary driving force behind the country's resistance to Russian aggression. This has left a lasting impact on both Ukrainian national politics and Polish-Ukrainian relations, and is probably the main hallmark of anti-Ukrainian dangerous speech in Poland.

Accusation in a mirror typically involves attributing to one's enemies the very acts of violence that the speaker intends to commit against them. However, in the context of Polish-Ukrainian relations, it is interpreted differently. Due to past acts of Ukrainian violence, the concern that such violence might happen again is used as an anti-Ukrainian propaganda theme. Numerous analyzed messages warned that the Volhynia Massacre was not an isolated incident, and that Ukrainians cannot be trusted, as they still hold reverence for nationalists from World War II and have not apologized for the atrocities committed during that time.

An example of a dangerous speech act employing this hallmark is an article posted on the right-wing portal 'wprawo.pl'. This article reports on the opening of a Ukrainian shop in Poland named 'Red Viburnum.' The headline reads, 'Ukrainian Store 'Red Viburnum' Opens – Residents Express Outrage.' In this article, the author seeks to persuade readers that the actions of the owner of this particular Ukrainian shop were disrespectful toward the Polish people. The choice of the name 'Red Viburnum' is suggested to possibly allude to the Ukrainian Insurgence Army, which was responsible for the mass murder of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia. The entire article is written in an incendiary manner and describes incidents of vandalism against the shop's windows by 'outraged citizens,' as well as the shop owner's apologies.

Exploitation

The exploitation hallmark implies that Ukrainian immigrants do not need or deserve the support they receive from the Polish people. It suggests that they take advantage of the Polish state and exploit the goodwill of Polish individuals who sacrifice themselves to help them. For instance, pictures of expensive cars with Ukrainian license plates driving in Poland were used to depict the supposed affluence of immigrants. There were also stories of Ukrainians receiving higher welfare benefits than Poles, with some

even alleged to be going back to Ukraine to live there off Polish money. Additionally, the narrative claimed that the Ukrainian army receives help at the expense of the Polish army, rendering Poland defenseless, and ultimately suggested that Poland is being dragged into a conflict with Russia that is not "Poland's war". An example of a dangerous speech act that employed this characteristic was a banner that read 'Let's not engage in this war.' This banner was a part of the 'This is Not Our War' campaign organized by the Polish Anti-war Movement. The implication in this message was that if Poland continues to support Ukraine, it might provoke retaliation from Russia and leave itself susceptible to invasion. Consequently, it was suggested that aiding Ukraine could be exploitative for Poland, potentially rendering it defenseless if a new conflict were to erupt.

While exploitation is not typically considered a hallmark of dangerous speech, in this particular context it could become one. Polish people have, to some extent, shared the burden of the conflict, showing their generosity by opening their homes to refugees at the conflict's onset and providing ongoing financial support. The Polish state demonstrated support for both Ukrainian refugees and the Ukrainian military, so if the Polish people were to perceive that they are being exploited by those they are trying to help, it could put them in a negative disposition towards the Ukrainians.

• Threat to group integrity

One of the primary hallmarks of dangerous speech involves asserting that members of another group can cause damage to the integrity or purity of one's own group. In the context of Polish-Ukrainian relations, this hallmark was extensively employed. The dangerous speech acts utilizing this hallmark suggested alarming scenarios, such as Poland losing its status as an independent political entity and being "Ukrainized," eventually becoming a federation state with Ukraine or even being fully incorporated into Ukraine. Some of speech acts that used this hallmark also propagated the idea of a Ukrainian party emerging in the Polish parliament, with Poles being governed by Ukrainians.

Numerous speech acts utilized this hallmark by employing the phrase 'Stop the Ukrainization of Poland'. They implied that the arrival of Ukrainian refugees could lead to the erasure of Polish culture and the state. While the term 'Ukrainization' is not inherently pejorative or derogatory, in this context, it was exclusively used in a negative light. This phrase could be seen for example on some banners held during the 'the March of Independence', an annual march held on November 11, the Independence Day of Poland.

Unfairness

The unfairness hallmark implies that Ukrainians are being treated better by the Polish

state than Polish nationals and therefore it fosters a sense of injustice and division between both nations. For example, there were stories of a disproportionate allocation of welfare and work benefits to Ukrainians or there were claims that Ukrainians were given priority over Poles in receiving healthcare, employment or education. An example of a dangerous speech act that exhibited this hallmark could be seen in a comment posted byan anonymous YouTube user beneath a video showing the Ukrainian 'March of gratitude' for the Polish people. The comment stated: 'If I were given a free apartment, access to food, healthcare without queuing, medicines, even the most expensive ones, priority in employment, a salary of 12,000 [PLN], transportation benefits, car insurance, all social benefits, retirement after just half a year of work, and all the other privileges that Poles can only dream of, I would march like this every day.' Even though most of the claims made by the author are false, as Ukrainians do not enjoy such privileges in Poland, this comment could still effectively convince some readers that Polish people are being treated unfairly in their own country.

While unfairness isn't typically considered a hallmark of dangerous speech, in this particular context it could indeed become one. The underlying reasons are similar to those in the exploitation hallmark: Polish citizens may feel they're making sacrifices to support Ukrainians, and if they were to perceive that this effort leads to Ukrainians in Poland enjoying more privileges than the native population, potentially resulting in a sense of loss, it could significantly impact Polish-Ukrainian relations.

Mitigating factors

Mitigating factors, factors that make these dangerous speech acts less effective, encompass both contextual and policy elements. Contextual factors pertain to the specific circumstances surrounding a situation that can make violence less probable, while policy factors involve regulations designed to prevent violence and resolve potential conflicts.

Two key areas significantly shape the context of this situation: the sociocultural aspect and the geopolitical aspect. When we consider the sociocultural dimension, a significant factor that contributes to the reduction of violence targeting Ukrainians is the fact that Poles and Ukrainians share a common ethnic origin as both are Slavic nations. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to distinguish a Pole from a Ukrainian based solely on appearance, making racist attacks rare. Moreover, the cultural proximity between Ukrainians and Poles is seen in their languages. As Polish and Ukrainian are similar (in fact, nearly half of their vocabularies consist of shared words), it is easy for Ukrainians to learn Polish (and vice versa), which undoubtedly aids the Ukrainians with their integration in Poland. As a result, these cultural similarities help mitigate concerns raised by attacks invoking the theme of "Ukrainization."

2022 that streamlined the legalization process for Ukrainian workers in the country.

Another important sociocultural aspect is the gender and age make up of the refugee population. One of the common hallmarks of dangerous speech is assertion of attack on women and children. It usually highlights the perceived threat that the out-group members, typically men, pose to in-group's women and children. However, in this particular context, the impact of this hallmark is mitigated due to the limited number of Ukrainian men in Poland, as they are generally prohibited from leaving the country due to military enlistment. Moreover, the scarcity of men among Ukrainian immigrants in Poland eliminates the potential for competition between men from both nations, thus averting another possible source of tension in Polish-Ukrainian relations. Additionally, the fact that the majority of refugees are women and children has some more significant implications, as these groups are typically perceived as more vulnerable, and therefore evoke strong feelings of empathy, compassion, and a desire to protect. Another sociocultural aspect that helps mitigate potential violence aimed towards Ukrainians is the lack of economic threat from the out-group. Approximately one year after the war's onset, a significant number of Ukrainians, accounting for around 900,000 individuals (approximately 80% of the total), found employment in Poland. To facilitate the employment of Ukrainians, the Polish government passed a law in March

It is also worth mentioning that many Ukrainian immigrants have tertiary education, but they often accept lower-skilled positions and lower wages. Their contributions are primarily observed in sectors such as cleaning, childcare, education, services, construction and transportation. Therefore, instead of competing for prestigious occupations with Poles, they have effectively addressed the labor market's needs. Consequently, Poland has experienced a gradual decline in its unemployment rate, which reached 5.1% as of May 2023. As a result, the integration of Ukrainian immigrants with the Polish job market did not create additional friction, but instead contributed to the growing economy by bridging gaps in the workforce. Moreover, Ukrainian immigrants have made substantial contributions to Poland's economy, driving estimated long-term GDP growth of up to 3.5%. Around 20,000 Ukrainian-owned businesses were established in 2022 alone, and it is estimated that 10% of all businesses opened every month in Poland are now Ukrainian-owned.

What's important is that the contribution of Ukrainians to the Polish economy is not only evidenced by statistics but is also a widely held belief. This is because Polish people can observe Ukrainians working, often in positions that are less sought after by Polish citizens, which serves to counterbalance dangerous speech acts that invoke the exploitation and unfairness hallmarks.

Moreover, despite the conflict at the border and high inflation, the Polish economy continues to exhibit strength. Forecasts suggest it could achieve growth of more than

1% in 2023, with even better prospects anticipated for 2024. Moreover, the unemployment rate remains low. These indicators reflect a relatively stable standard of living for the Polish population that was not severely affected by the influx of immigrants.

In terms of geopolitical considerations, there is a widespread belief shared by Poles that Ukraine's victory in this conflict would be also advantageous for Poland. Throughout history Poland has been a target of Russian imperialism several times. Many Poles still recall the era of the People's Republic of Poland, a communist state that emerged after WWII and remained politically linked to the USSR until 1989 (similar toUkraine, which gained independence from Russia two years later, in 1991). As a result, Russian military interventionism remains a source of fear for many Poles, and there is a prevailing sentiment within Polish society that Russia's defeat would also be beneficial for Polish security. A Ukrainian victory could also strengthen the position of Poland in European politics as it might lead to increased stability and economic growth of the entire Eastern European region. Shifting Ukraine away from Russian influence and elevating it as a significant player in European politics could potentially act as a counterbalance to the dominant western EU states. It is for these reasons that Poland provides significant military aid to Ukraine and advocates for its inclusion in NATO and the European Union. Also, openly pro-Russian propaganda has very limited impact on Polish society, and there are clear reasons for this. Firstly, the long-standing animosity between Poland and Russia due to past invasions and occupations has created deep skepticism towards Russian narratives. Moreover, Poland's alignment with the European Union and NATO, along with shared interests with Western democracies, makes it challenging for Russian propaganda to gain traction. Consequently, Russia resorts to more nuanced propaganda techniques in Poland, but they are less effective compared to the overt approaches used in other regions, like Africa, for example.

This mistrust towards Russian propaganda is also visible in grassroots counterspeech and opposition from the Polish people towards such messages. For example, media outlets have reported on instances of anti-Ukrainian protests in Poland that garnered little to no attendance. Moreover, when anti-Ukrainian posts surfaced online, they were usually swiftly met with robust opposition from numerous users. As to the policy factors, the Ukrainians' successful integration into Polish society can be attributed, in part, to their swift introduction to various facets of the Polish way of life, including education, healthcare, employment, and welfare systems. For example, refugees were promptly provided with the opportunity to obtain PESEL identification numbers, which allowed them to access legal employment and enjoy the same social benefits as Polish citizens. Furthermore, the government ensured that all Ukrainian refugee children had access to schools, thus securing their right to education. These

inclusive measures have facilitated the smooth assimilation of Ukrainian refugees into Polish society, fostering coexistence rather than social isolation and can be an answer to the attacks that use the threat to group integrity hallmark.

Also, the Polish state is taking proactive measures to combat the spread of anti-Ukrainian disinformation. From the onset of the war, the Polish Internal Security Agency has been blocking suspicious accounts on social media and certain websites, aiming to curb the dissemination of false narratives. In addition, the country has enforced restrictions on certain Russian journalists known for spreading pro-Russian propaganda, such as Sputnik's Victor Bezeka, preventing them from entering Poland to limit their potential disruptive influences. To actively counteract anti-Ukrainian propaganda, the government has also launched initiatives that focus on deconstructing false messages, such as FakeHunter – a community-driven content verification initiative launched by the Polish Press Agency, aiming to expose false information with a primary emphasis on the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Conclusions

As can be observed, there are numerous factors effectively addressing the concerns related to threat to group integrity, unfairness, and exploitation hallmarks. However, there remains one prominent issue that has yet to find a satisfactory resolution – the use of the accusation in a mirror hallmark, in which the Volhynia Massacre of 1943 is invoked to sow distrust between Poles and Ukrainians. This particular hallmark stands out as one of the most frequently cited in the GRI database, yet it lacks a direct mitigating response.

This issue is even escalated by the fact that Ukrainian authorities are unwilling to acknowledge Ukrainian responsibility for ethnic cleansing against Poles in Volhyniaand Eastern Galicia. Moreover, they also reject the idea of conducting exhumations of Polish victims and establishing cemeteries for them. It also does not help that a significant part of the Ukrainian society is largely unaware of these events. A report titled "Poland and Poles as seen by Ukrainians," conducted by the Mieroszewski Centre, confirms the limited knowledge of the Volhynia Massacre in Ukrainian society. According to the survey carried out for this report, 22% of Ukrainians had never heard of the massacre, and 62% had merely heard the phrase.

Given this backdrop, there are various conceivable mitigating factors to address the accusation in the mirror hallmark. These could encompass contextual efforts, such as educating Ukrainians about the Volhynia Massacre, or policy measures, including adopting the Polish perspective of the events by the Ukrainian government. Regrettably, progress on this issue has been slow, causing division between the two societies and providing fertile ground for anti-Ukrainian dangerous speech.

However, despite this unresolved problem, as of early autumn 2023 Poles have managed to maintain a relatively peaceful coexistence with the Ukrainian refugees. But this harmony seems to be anchored on a delicate balance of various factors. The stability of this situation relies heavily on the developments in the ongoing war, but other factors that could potentially lead to a deterioration of this peaceful coexistence could include a deeper involvement of Poland in the conflict, a new surge in immigration, extended economic challenges such as recession, high inflation or increased unemployment, and major policy changes in any of the countries involved in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. As a matter of fact, in September 2023 there was a first serious strain in the Polish-Ukrainian relations when Poland extended its trade embargo on Ukrainian grain despite the EU's decision to lift the ban. Kyiv's answer to this move was filing a lawsuit against Poland with the World Trade Organization. As the situation stands, this issue did not spark any violent incidents between Polish and Ukrainian citizens; however, being the first situation of that kind it has shown that Polish-Ukrainian relations are based on the principles of the 'realpolitik', thus paving the way to more rational and less emotional coexistence in the future. As a consequence it remains to be seen whether this new transactional relationship between the two countries will create a ground for peaceful coexistence of both nations on the Polish territory.



About the author

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About this report

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Suggested citation

Trzaskowski, Paweł. Dangerous Speech that targets Ukrainian immigrants in Poland. (2024). Dangerous Speech Project. https://dangerousspeech.org/publications