

A humanitarian superpower? The situation of the Ukrainian refugees and its evolution in Poland after the Russian invasion of February 24, 2022

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Abstract

After the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Poland has become one of the top destinations for Ukrainian refugees, attracting international attention and recognition for its humanitarian attitude. However, this positive picture should be confronted with the analysis of the Ukrainian refugees' situation in a more holistic manner, taking into consideration the evolution of the multidimensional surroundings of the refugees and problems they face in the long run. Therefore, this article's aim is to picture the Ukrainian refugees' situation and how it has changed over time. It argues that the Polish state was not prepared for the massive influx of Ukrainian refugees, and the relatively smooth reception of them was possible thanks to the forces of local government and civil society. Almost two years after the beginning of the invasion, there are still a variety of challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees without any systemic, government-organized approach to tackle them.

Keywords: Ukraine, Poland, immigration policy, refugees, civil society

Introduction

After the beginning of the full-scale aggression by Russia against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Poland has become one of the top destinations for Ukrainian refugees. The country received 1,5 million Ukrainian refugees (as of January 2023, according to the UNHCR) and was recognized internationally for its openness for those looking for shelter. In the first months of reception, Poland was named a 'humanitarian superpower' by the US ambassador in Warsaw (Ptak, 2022), and the global media praised Poland for its exemplary, humanitarian approach (Steć, 2022). However, this positive picture should be confronted with the analysis of the Ukrainian refugees' situation in a more holistic manner, which would take into consideration the evolution of the multidimensional surroundings of the refugees and

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the problems they face in the long run. We believe that Poland is an important case to study regarding the Ukrainian refugees due to the following reasons: first of all, as already mentioned, it was one of the top destinations for Ukrainians escaping the war and continues to host one of the biggest Ukrainian diaspora in Europe. Second, the situation in war-torn Ukraine is difficult and unpredictable, so there is still a risk of new waves of refugee movement, with Poland being an assumingly important country of destination. Third, in the last decade, Poland has experienced a significant shift from a country of emigration into a country of emigration and immigration, with the influx of Ukrainians being one of the crucial changes having a transformative impact on the receiving society. Thus, studying Poland offers an insight into more universal problems, processes and contradictions faced by countries in transition, while at the same time allowing one to grasp peculiarities of the context of Central and Eastern Europe.

Therefore, this article's main research question is how has the Ukrainian refugees' situation in Poland evolved after February 24, 2022? The concept of the 'refugee situation' should be understood as including two basic components: the reaction of the receiving country towards refugees and the characteristics of the refugees' community in terms of its legal and socio-economic position. This article demonstrates two main arguments. First, that the Polish state was not prepared for a massive influx of Ukrainian refugees, and the relatively smooth reception of those fleeing Ukraine was possible thanks to the bottom-up driven dynamics: forces of local government and civil society. Second, almost two years after invasion, despite a relatively successful integration of Ukrainians into the Polish society, there were still a variety of challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees without any systemic, government-organized approach to tackle them.

1. Theoretical background of the analysis

The aim of this article is to analyse the 'refugee situation' of Ukrainians, which was defined as both the reaction of the receiving country towards refugees and the characteristics of the refugees' community. These two crucial components should be framed in a more theoretical manner, thus directing our attention towards two strands of theoretical reflection on migrations: the theories of immigration policy (Meyers, 2000; Money, 2018; Natter, 2018) and the theories on international migrations (Richmond, 1988; Massey et al., 1993; De Haas, 2021). The first strand of theories refers to how states and their agencies react to the immigration movement, while the second one focuses on the initiation and perpetuation of migration movement itself. A comprehensive and detailed picture of a refugee situation in one country is above the confines of one article; thus, by using some of these theories, we can find background for the selection and structuring of the most important dimensions for the analysis.

The focus on Poland's reaction to the Ukrainian refugees can be interpreted throughout the main theories of immigration policy described by Eytan Meyers in his critical review: national identity approach and domestic politics approach (Meyers, 2000). According to the national identity approach, the unique history and tradition of each country determine how the concept of national identity and citizenship are interpreted/debated in the public discourse, thereby influencing the level of inclusiveness/exclusiveness of immigration policy (Brubaker, 1995; Lewin-Epstein & Levanon, 2005). In this optic, historically determined experiences with nation-building and state-building shape collectively shared or conflicting interpretations of the concept of national identity/membership. It means that the way in which the national identity and the national culture are constructed has an impact on the perception of immigrants. If national identity is interpreted in an exclusivist, ethno-cultural manner and cultural homogeneity is the expected ideal, there will be less tolerance for immigrants and inclusiveness. Whereas more inclusive, the civic conception of national identity and acceptance for cultural diversity should have the opposite effect. These regularities have been verified by using a survey data for 34 countries, and it was found that defining national belonging in an 'achievable' manner (civic-based) is conducive to support for multiculturalism (Goodman & Alarian, 2021). However, this picture is more complicated because the study of Germany in the time of the refugee crisis of 2015-2016, aside from confirming the regularities mentioned above, has shown that there is a segment of the population with a mixed conception of national identity (both ethno-cultural and civic). This specific segment expressed volatile and hesitant attitudes towards immigration, thus paving the way for elites to "shape public opinion by highlighting or downplaying one or both conceptions of the nation" (Lindstam et al., 2021, p. 110). It has been shown that the rhetoric used by political elites in developed democracies regarding notions of national belonging shapes mass attitudes towards nationhood, especially if the rhetoric articulates an exclusive conception of identity (Helbling et al., 2016). Thereby, the national identity theory and empirical findings also imply that historically determined definitions of national identity provide cultural resources that might be used/instrumentalized in a systematic manner by different socio-political forces to propagate different models of immigration politics. In this perspective, ideas surrounding and defining national identity not only provide frame and justification for the immigration policy but might be actively and selectively harnessed in favour of different solutions¹.

The second theoretical approach found useful for this study is the domestic policy approach, which treats immigration policy as a product of pressures and

¹ Aside from different understandings of national membership articulated by discourse controllers the language used to describe immigrants is also of great importance in shaping mass attitudes. Study conducted in Czech Republic has shown that labels like 'foreigner', 'migrant', 'refugee' activate different image of people crossing borders accompanied by ascribing them different motivations and moral status (Božič et al., 2023).

compromises between different social interests (Meyers, 2000). The state apparatus is under the influence of groups interested in different models/solutions for immigration, with two categories of actors being of importance here: interest groups and political parties. Interest groups put pressure on parties, legislators and administrations to adopt a specific policy. These might be national minorities, non-governmental organizations and employers, who usually have a more positive attitude towards immigrants, or trade unions and nationalist groups being the blocking forces. Political parties are crucial drivers of the immigration policy as they implement their programmes when gaining power, sometimes having migration as an important issue of their electoral platforms. Thus, immigration policy might be shaped by populist anti-immigration parties, as demonstrated by various studies of using xenophobia and fear-mongering in electoral politics (Fennema, 1997; Dennison & Geddes, 2018; Kende & Krekó, 2020; Hutter & Kriesi, 2022). However, studies also show that in liberal democracies there might be internal pressures towards more inclusive immigration policies because of inherent features of liberal democratic regimes like the human rights axiology neutralizing ethnic discrimination (and empowering minorities) and the rule of law ensuring protection for immigrant rights (Freeman, 1998; Joppke, 1998). This perspective directs attention on studying institutionalized socio-political actors within the political system as they are important drivers behind the politics towards immigrants.

The brief summary of the theoretical approaches above refers to one out of the two components of the refugee situation to be analysed. The second component is a characteristic of Ukrainian refugees' community, where theories of international migrations seem to be more suitable, especially the network theory. This theory assumes that international migration flows can be facilitated by existing personal connections (networks) between immigrants in the receiving country and would-be migrants in the sending country. Such networks might be based on kinship, friendship or shared community origin, facilitating migration because they allow for reducing costs and risks entailed by migration to another country. Thus, these networks constitute a form of social capital that can be used by individuals to make international movement easier and more predictable, because the migratory flow between two countries occurs within an already institutionalized system of connections (Choldin, 1973; Fawcett, 1989). This theory is less aimed at explaining initial forces behind migration, focusing rather on social forces responsible for perpetuation of migratory flows, their growing dynamics and geographic directions (Massey et al., 1993). In this context, the phenomenon of diaspora plays a central role because it constitutes an important foundation for the emergence of international networks shaping directions, dynamics and composition of the new waves of immigration.

The theories briefly presented above are not contradictory but rather complementary by articulating different dimensions and providing general guidelines for analysis of the Ukrainian refugees' situation in Poland:

- a) historically determined ideas surrounding the national identity of the receiving country are still relevant as a factor behind immigration policy, which is why it is important to describe cultural patterns of defining national identity/membership and their articulation in the public discourse around refugees from Ukraine,
- b) cultural patterns of defining national membership constitute symbolic resources that might be instrumentalized by the socio-political groups mentioned in c) seeking to shape public opinion and legitimize different policies towards immigrants, which is why it is important to trace how public opinion fluctuates around the topic of Ukrainian refugees,
- c) immigration policy is shaped by a variety of domestic socio-political groups with a different agenda, especially interest groups and political parties, which is why it is important to identify the main socio-political groups within the political system reacting to refugees from Ukraine, describe their position towards the refugees and interactions between these groups,
- d) a diaspora constitutes an important foundation for the emergence of international networks shaping the characteristics of the new waves of immigration, which is why it is important to study the already existing legacy of Ukrainian immigration and how it might have shaped the Ukrainian refugee situation.

Methodologically, the paper is based on mixing the quantitative and qualitative data. A statistical approach was considered crucial for understanding the investigated development scale, and consequently its dynamics. This approach was further supplemented by political and public discourse analysis and their translation into a legal framework. The investigation is based on academic literature with regard to historical development and current processes. Over the last few years, a huge body of literature regarding the topic has been published in Poland. Additionally, a deepened analysis required using the data from public institutions and international organizations, reports published by NGOs and think tanks, public opinion pools, statements from political parties and manifestos, but also media coverages showing a critical picture of the refugee situation.

2. Immigration policy in Poland before February 2022

The immigration policy should be understood as the rules and procedures governing the selection and admission of foreign citizens, together with the conditions provided to resident immigrants (Meyers, 2000, p. 1246). In the history of immigration policy in Poland after 1989², a few developments might be

²In this article only the recent history of (im)migration was referred to due to the publication format and limits. We decided to put aside older historical experience of Poland, still considering it relevant for general understanding, but not of primary importance for the nature of investigated developments.

distinguished as significant factors behind the evolution of the approach towards immigrants: the EU accession in 2004, a massive influx of labour migrants to Poland since 2014 (the majority of them being Ukrainians), the so-called 'refugee crisis' and the victory of the national-conservative Law and Justice party in 2015-2016, the crisis on the Polish-Belorussian border in 2021, followed by the full-scale aggression of Russia against Ukraine in 2022.

After the collapse of communism in the early 1990's, Poland was not considered a country of immigration, having a long historical record of emigration, without any significant experience of receiving and integrating immigrants (Gul-Rechlewicz, 2023, p. 184). Before 2015, the immigration policy in Poland was determined by two main factors: a) the necessity to adapt the Polish laws on immigration to the standards and expectations of the European Union, and b) management of immigration mainly by administrative cadres perceiving immigrants as a problem to deal with rather than an opportunity to capitalize on (Matyja et al., 2015, p. 8). At the same time, the Europeanization and implementation of the Polish immigration law was not accompanied by genuine public debate and proper embedding in values underlying the adopted body of law (Kicinger, 2009). Thus, before 2015, we can speak of an 'administrative-managerial' approach towards migrants, with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (supervising Office for Foreigners) being the main administrative actor on this field (Łoziński & Szonert, 2023, p. 11).

A critical juncture was the year 2015, when the so-called 'immigration crisis' in Europe overlapped with the October 2015 parliamentary elections, resulting in the formation of a coalition government by the national-conservative United Right (with the Law and Justice as a main player), which employed anti-immigrant rhetoric. The study on politicization of immigration in European countries has shown that in the 2007 and 2011's parliamentary elections immigration was not an issue at all in Poland. It was 2015 when immigration became a highly politicized issue (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022, pp. 348-350). Presenting refugees from the Middle East and Africa as a security threat became an effective tool for mobilizing voters and winning elections, while at the same time ignoring their rights of entrance on the Polish territory (Adamczyk, 2017, p. 331). The fear-mongering politics directed against the immigrants was strategically employed by the United Right, especially in times of elections, the process resulting in the dissemination of negative attitudes towards refugees from the Middle East and Africa (Cywiński et al., 2019, p. 7)³. This was accompanied by opposing the scheme of relocation adopted by the EU and rejecting obligations of the pre-2015 government to receive approximately 7 thousand refugees within this scheme (Adamczyk, 2017, p. 331). After 2015, the governing party promoted the ethno-nationalistic idea of national membership, which was

³ In May 2015 20% of those surveyed were against accepting refugees from the Middle East and Africa, while in April 2017, 74% expressed their negative attitudes when asked about accepting this category of refugees (Cywiński et al., 2019, p. 7).

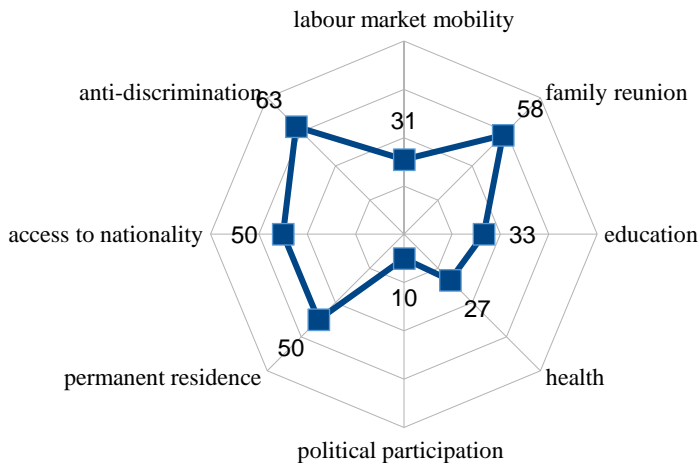
accompanied by the normalisation of anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic and xenophobic rhetoric in the public discourse (Krzyżanowski, 2020). The weaponizing of immigrants by the Belorussian regime of Aleksander Łukaszenko to destabilize the Polish and the EU eastern border provided another incentive for this strategy. Fighting with undocumented immigration arranged by Minsk fuelled the government's agenda of securitization of immigration, legitimized the building of protective fences along the border with Belarus and pushbacks of immigrants by border guards. Humanitarian organizations that monitored the situation on the border pointed at violations of international law, because immigrants were refused humanitarian help, the right to asylum and respect for the non-refoulement principle (Czarnota & Górczyńska, 2022).

It must be noted that the securitization of immigration coexisted with the growing number of labour immigrants. According to the data of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy after 2015, we can observe a dynamic increase of issuing the work permits for non-EU citizens: 2015- 65 thousand, 2016- 127 thousand, 2017- 237 thousand, 2018- 329 thousand, 2019- 445 thousand, 2020- 407 thousand, 2021- 504 thousand (Józefiak, 2023). At the same time, as the European Social Survey data for 2002-2018 demonstrated, support for immigrants in the country's economy increased among voters of the main political parties – those who were sceptical towards immigration perceived it in terms of cultural threat rather than economic competition (Andrejuk, 2020, p. 257). This showed the importance of a well-designed integration policy for immigrants, while in Poland such a policy was characterized by a chaotic, short-term and uncoordinated approach, treating immigrants as temporary compensation for labour shortages (Gul-Rechlewicz, 2023, p. 187).

There were attempts to prepare a cohesive and long-term strategy for migration policy. In 2012, the governing coalition of the Civic Platform and the Polish People's Party adopted the first (since 1989) official document formulating priorities of the Polish migration policy 'Migration Policy in Poland – current state and postulated actions' (Ministry of Internal Affairs of Poland, 2012, pp. 8-9). However, experts found the document unsatisfactory, because it did not depict clearly the scope of migration policy, lacked planning of political actions, and ignored recommendations of scientific circles (Matyja et al., 2015, pp. 48-49). In 2016, the document was annulled by the new government of the United Right, which started to prepare a new strategy - the move motivated by emerging political, economic and demographic challenges (Łoziński & Szonert, 2023, p. 14). Meanwhile, in 2019, the Supreme Chamber of Control published a report that pointed at several weaknesses of the public administration's preparation for receiving immigrants. Still, there was no one strategic document being a pillar for a long-term, well-coordinated immigration policy, and the processing time of applications for the legalization of stay prolonged from 64 days in 2014 to 206 in 2018, due to a lack of cadres and financing in the regional voivodeship offices (Supreme Chamber of Control in Poland, 2019, pp. 7-8). In the Migrant Integration Policy Index for 2019, Poland scored 43 (with a maximum of 100), being

classified as having ‘equality on the paper’ with ‘halfway unfavourable’ conditions for integrating immigrants (Figure 1). This means that the given country provides some basic rights, but immigrants do not enjoy equal opportunities and long-term security. Its policies may encourage the public to see immigrants as equal, but there is also a risk to perceive them as subordinate and not potential citizens (Solano & Huddleston, 2020). At the end of the day, the government’s work on a strategy for immigration policy in 2016-2022 has failed, being interpreted by some experts as a ‘garbage policy’, which means a lack of compromise on the main priorities, absence of one leading institution, and clear rules of cooperation between governmental agencies involved in the elaboration of the programme (Łoziński & Szonert, 2023, p. 7).

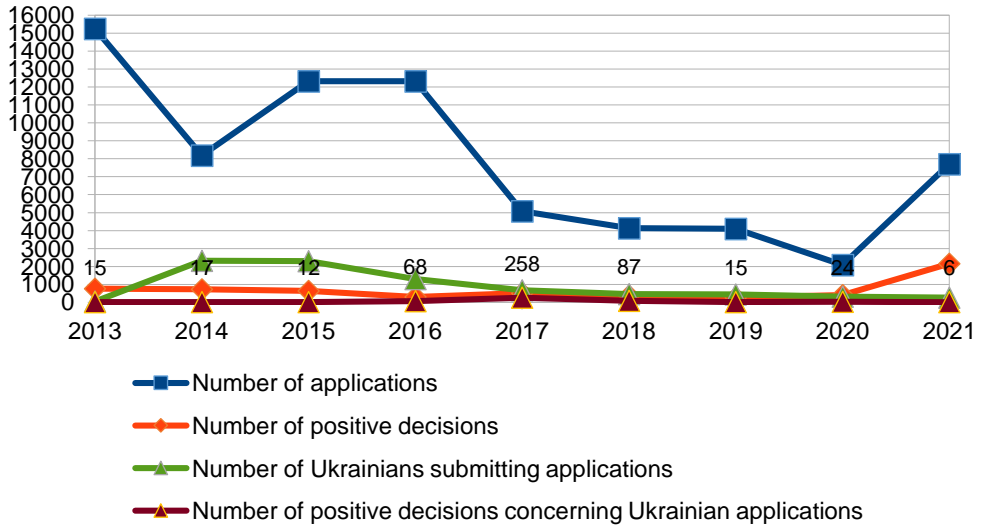
Figure 1. Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) scoring for Poland in 2019



Source: authors representation based on Solano & Huddleston (2020)

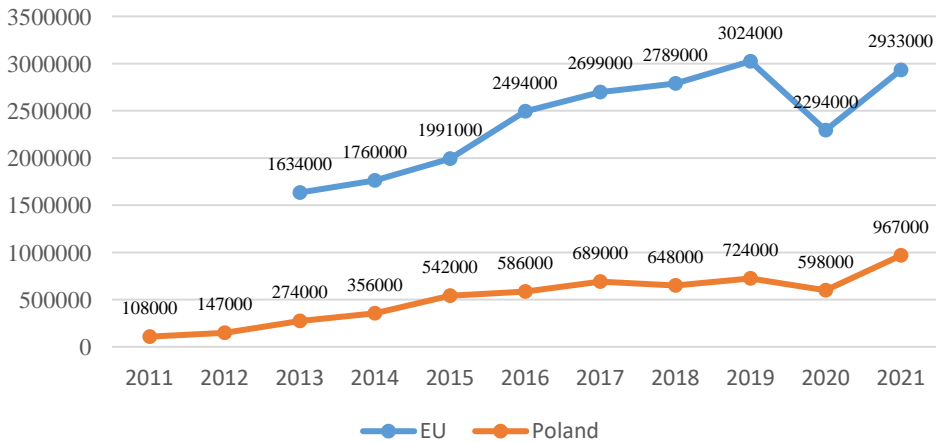
The Polish law distinguishes several categories of protection provided to foreigners, which are described by two main acts: the Act of 13 June 2003 on granting protection to foreigners within the territory of the Republic of Poland and the Act of 12 December 2013 on foreigners. These acts regulate the following forms of protection: refugee status, subsidiary protection, asylum, tolerated stay and humanitarian stay (the last two embedded in the second act). According to the data from the Polish Office for Foreigners in the last years, the number of those applying for the three main categories of protection was low, and it was accompanied by a low acceptance rate from the Polish authorities (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Applications submitted in Poland by the non-EU nationals to get protection (refugee status, subsidiary protection, tolerated stay) and decisions granting such protection, including data for Ukrainian citizens.



Source: authors’ representation based on The Office for Foreigners in Poland (2013-2021)

Figure 3. First residence permits for at least 3 months for non-EU nationals⁴



Source: authors’ representation based on Eurostat (2024)

⁴ According to the Eurostat methodology, ‘first permit’ means the residence permit issued to a person for the first time. A residence permit is considered as a first permit also if the time gap between expiry of the old permit and the start of validity of the new permit issued for the same reason is at least 6 months, irrespective of the year of issuance of the permit.

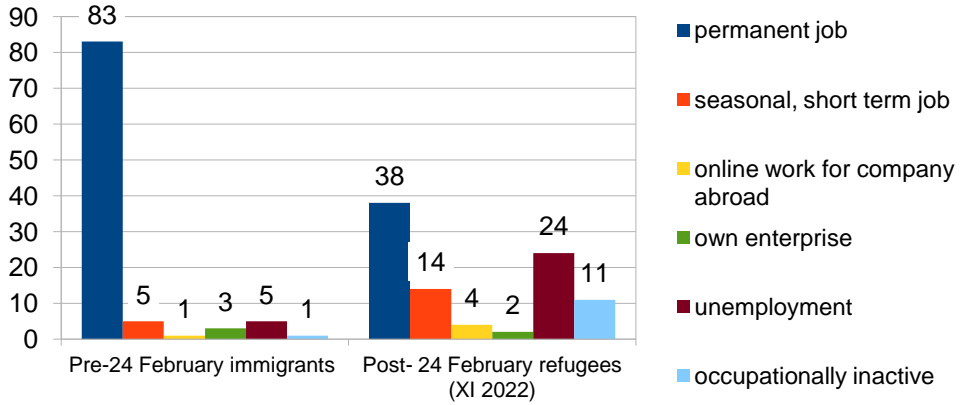
Between 2013-2021, an average of 7909 applications were submitted every year, while the average yearly number of positive decisions was 682 – this is a 10% acceptance rate. It must be noted that within this number, the applications of Ukrainians constituted a minority, because on average 906 applications were submitted every year, with an average yearly number of positive decisions being 56, which is a 6% acceptance rate. Thus, Poland was not an important destination for those seeking refuge, and it was rather reluctant to grant protection. However, the country opened its borders for a massive number of non-EU citizens (mainly for working reasons) which is demonstrated by the Eurostat data (see Figure 3).

3. Situation of Ukrainian diaspora before and after 2022

Even before the full-scale invasion against Ukraine, there was a significant Ukrainian diaspora in Poland and a culture of migration among Ukrainians. The culture of migration might be understood as the existence of collective experience of migration, accompanied by social networks built around migratory patterns and beliefs facilitating migration (Cohen, 2004; Lloyd & Sirkeci, 2022). Various studies on Ukrainian emigration show that decades before 2022, Ukrainians lived in an environment of insecurity, which was a pushing factor for emigration. After 1991, these insecurities were mainly of an economic nature, like poverty, economic inequalities and widespread corruption (Fedyuk & Kindler, 2016; Lapshyna, 2014). The 2014-armed conflict in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea added another factor of political insecurity, resulting in a new wave of forced emigration, accompanied by an increase of asylum applications to EU countries, with the majority of them being rejected on the grounds of ‘internal flight alternative’ (Solodko & Fitisova, 2016)⁵. This pattern is clearly visible in Poland, which witnessed significant growth in the number of Ukrainians settling down after 2014 (Brunarska et al., 2016). However, the majority of them migrated because of working reasons, with only a tiny proportion applying for protection as already demonstrated on the Figure 2. According to the Eurostat data in 2013, there were 176 thousand Ukrainians with valid resident permits, while in 2021, this was 651 thousand, including 285 thousand with resident permits over 12 months. Among those with resident permits over 12 months, 61% stayed due to employment reasons and 12% for family reasons (Eurostat, 2022).

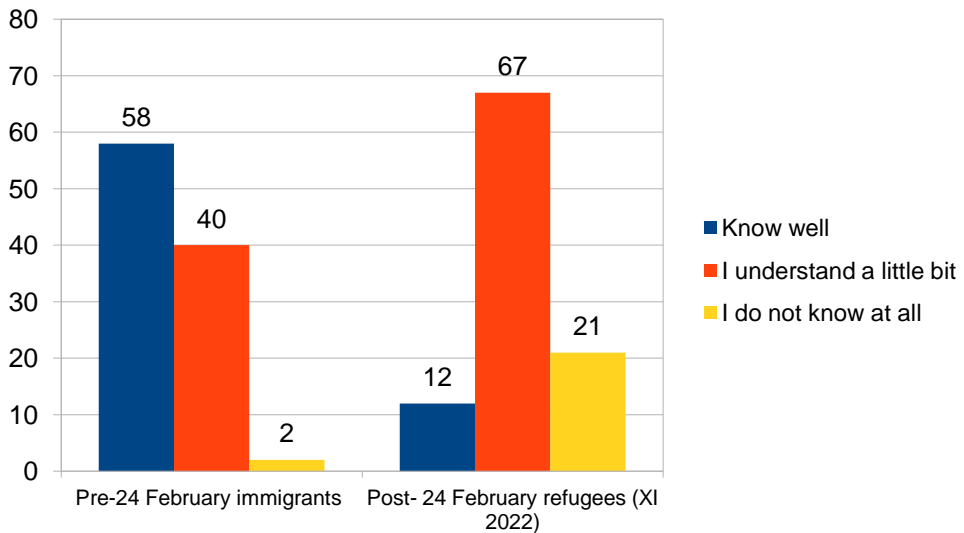
⁵ Between 2013-2021 approximately 82 thousand asylum applications were submitted by Ukrainian citizens in the EU countries, with 16 thousand positive decisions granting asylum status. Therefore, it must be reminded that before 2022, a very small proportion of Ukrainian citizens in the EU were considered refugees. In 2021, 57% had their residence permit because of employment reasons, 20% because of family reasons, 2,5% because of education and only 0,6% had refugee or subsidiary protection status (Eurostat, 2022).

Figure 4. Position on the labour market of the two categories of Ukrainian immigrants (% of declarations)



Source: authors' representation based on Chmielewska-Kalińska et al. (2023)

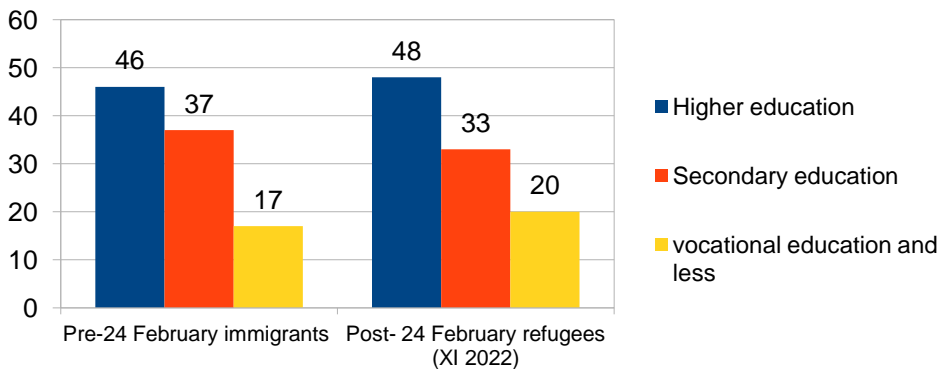
Figure 5. Command of the Polish language of the two categories of Ukrainian immigrants (% of declarations)



Source: authors' representation based on Chmielewska-Kalińska et al. (2023)

The survey conducted by the National Bank of Poland allows us to get insight into the basic characteristics of the Ukrainian diaspora before February 24 and compare it with post-February 24 newcomers (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2023)⁶. Pre-February 24 immigrants were well integrated with the labour market - the majority of them declared some form of economic activity (see Figure 4). They also declared a good command of Polish language, compared to newly arrived refugees (see Figure 5).

Figure 6. The level of education of the two categories of Ukrainian immigrants



Source: authors' representation based on Chmielewska-Kalińska et al. (2023)

The ability to communicate in Polish is an important factor behind employment, because the survey showed that a declared command of the Polish language is positively correlated with a higher probability of being employed, both among pre-February 24 immigrants and post-February 24 refugees (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2023, p. 20). The level of education in both groups was also high, with almost half of those surveyed declaring higher education (see the Figure 6). Among those who came to Poland before the full-scale invasion, 74% rented a flat, 10% had their own private flats, and 12% were accommodated by their employers (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2023, p. 10).

This picture should be complemented by adding that Ukrainians represented a historically embedded national minority in Poland, which reinforced the legal position of the pre-war population. According to the 2011 census, almost 40 thousand respondents with Polish citizenship declared Ukrainian identity (Central

⁶The survey was conducted between September-November 2022 among those who arrived to Poland before February 24 and after February 24. Altogether, 3934 interviews were conducted in 16 capital cities of the Polish provinces and from 1 to 2 smaller towns per each of the provinces. The sampling for each province was weighted to adjust it to the data on number and characteristics of the refugees as reflected in the PESEL database (base with those having Polish identity number) (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2023, p. 40).

Statistical Office of Poland, 2015). The majority of them were descendants of Ukrainians who had been forcibly resettled in 1947 into the north-west territory of Poland within the so-called ‘Wisła’ operation. This also means that there was a well-rooted network of organizations representing Ukrainians in the public space before 2022. First of all, Poland has been relatively densely covered with an official Ukrainian consular service. In addition to the Ukrainian embassy in Warsaw, there were consulates in Gdańsk, Cracow, Lublin, and Wrocław (the one in Wrocław was opened shortly before the Russian invasion). Additionally, there are honorary consulates in Chełm, Katowice, Szczecin, Przemyśl, Bydgoszcz, Łódź, Opole, Rzeszów, and Tarnów. At the same time, the Ukrainian diaspora was represented at the NGO level. The most important organization has been the Association of Ukrainians in Poland, established in 1990, with 10 regional chapters and many more local circles – this organization still functions as an umbrella organization, coordinating many actions in favour of Ukrainians and representing them in relations with the Polish government (Urbanik, 2021, pp. 85-86). Ukrainians also had their business representation, because already in 1992, the Polish-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce was established, while in 2015, the Association of Ukrainian Business was established. Additionally, Ukrainians were integrated by the religious institutions in Poland, belonging to one of the two churches: the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church (Bulletin of the Republic of Poland, n.d.).

These data demonstrate that before February 24 the Ukrainian diaspora constituted an economically active, well-educated and adapted group, with already existing institutions integrating them and representing their interests. The massive inflow of Ukrainian refugees into Poland was facilitated by these conditions, as network theory would suggest. After the full-scale Russian aggression, the Council of the European Union on March 4 activated, for the first time, the Temporary Protection Directive with unanimous support of the member states. This secured the significant position of the Ukrainian refugees, at the same time leaving to the discretion of the member states whether to apply temporary protection mechanisms towards the non-Ukrainian third country nationals escaping from Ukraine (Carrera et al., 2022). The directive was implemented in Poland by adopting the Act of March 12, 2022, on assistance to citizens of Ukraine in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of this country (Office for Foreigners in Poland, 2022). It was supported almost unanimously by the parliament (439 in favour, 12 against, and 3 abstained in Sejm voting). The act was later amended in April 2023, so the already existing protection (initially for 18 months) was prolonged to March 4, 2024, and in some cases to August 31 (school pupils and their guardians) and September 30, 2024 (high school graduates with resit exams) (Office for Foreigners in Poland, 2023).

The Act introduced several instruments offering protection to the Ukrainian citizens, who entered Poland after February 24, 2022 (and wives/husbands of the Ukrainian citizens). After registering, they were offered the Polish identity number

PESEL, crucial for contacts with the administration and receiving access to public services. Those with the number were allowed to work and set up private enterprises as all other Polish citizens. They could also register as unemployed persons. Additional assistance in accommodation, meals, free psychological support, language courses were also guaranteed. They can apply for social benefits, the main one being the 500 + program (later known as 800 +) which provides 500 PLN paid on a monthly basis for each child below the age of 18. Access to medical care was offered in a form similar to Polish citizens. Students at Ukrainian universities, who intended to continue their education in Poland, were offered a simplified procedure of verifying their achievements in case of missing documents. Special provisions enabling confirming qualifications were offered to Ukrainian doctors and dentists, academics, and psychologists. Additionally, Poles and entrepreneurs who provided accommodation and meals to refugees in their private flats (or hotels) were entitled to receive 40 PLN per person for 120 days of stay (Office for Foreigners in Poland, 2022). In September 2022, almost 1,4 million Ukrainians were granted PESEL numbers, which also reflected the number of people covered by the temporary protection on the Polish territory. The public services offered within the protection scheme significantly alleviated the difficulties of the refugee situation; however, they were about to become one of the central components of further anti-Ukrainian narratives.

4. Political institutions' reaction towards Ukrainian refugees

The first phase of the reaction of the government in Poland when facing the Ukrainian refugees was described by experts as an 'institutional bricolage' (Łoziński & Szonert, 2023, p. 22). This means that the Polish government and society suddenly faced the necessity to organize/improvise actions aimed at receiving a massive influx of refugees, these actions being spontaneously implemented by a variety of actors from different sectors and levels of state-society intersection. This institutional diversity combined with spontaneity allowed, at least in the short run, to compensate for the lack of well-design strategy of immigration policy (Łoziński & Szonert, 2023). The main institutions involved were the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, together with the voivodeships' governors (representatives of central government at the regional level) and the Border Guard. The process of liberalizing procedures for border crossing started on February 19. On February 25, the Commander-in-Chief of the Border Guard issued a decision allowing people to enter Poland on foot through all road border crossings (the border with Ukraine is 535 km long with 8 road border crossings) which facilitated migratory movement. The approach applied to the management of a massive influx of refugees was based on establishing reception points by voivodeships' governors in agreement with local governments. On March 6, there were already 28 reception points (Jaroszewicz et al., 2022, p. 5). According to the Border Guards data, the highest influx of refugees

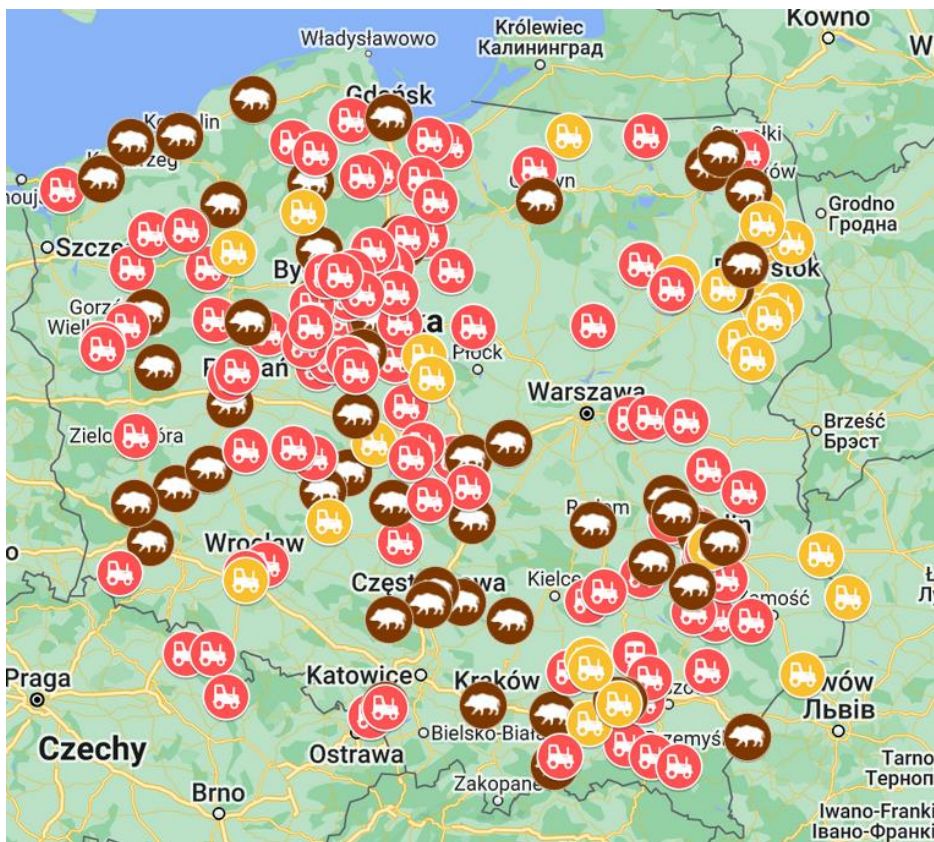
was registered in the first two weeks with an average of over 100 thousand daily crossings (Jaroszewicz & Krępa, 2022). Later, the reception points were divided into those established by voivodeship governors and local governments.

On March 12, 2022, the Polish parliament adopted the act on assistance to Ukrainian citizens in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of this state. According to the experts from the Union of the Polish Metropolises, this law should be assessed positively. However, the government was not prepared sufficiently for the systemic reception of the massive influx of refugees, despite the fact that the possibility of full-scale Russian aggression had been anticipated by intelligence services months before. Without spontaneous mobilization of the civil society and the local government, hundreds of thousands of refugees would end up without shelter and help (Cywiński & Wojdat, 2022, pp. 12-13). Additionally, some criticism appeared, pointing to a selective approach towards refugees. The media reports, the signals sent to the Polish Ombudsman and accounts of migrants indicated that students from Africa and Asia got a different treatment when waiting in line to cross the border with Poland, and some of them were transported close to the German border, although they wanted to go somewhere else in Poland (Mikulska & Rumieńczyk, 2022). In reaction to these reports, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees stressed that ‘it is crucial that receiving countries continue to welcome all those fleeing conflict and insecurity—irrespective of nationality and race’ (Reilly & Flynn, 2022, p. 3). In July 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights of migrants pointed at double standards in approaching Ukrainians and those third country citizens trying to cross the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian border (UN Human Rights Office, 2022).

Generally, in the first months after the Russian invasion, we could speak about a ‘romantic phase’ in the Polish-Ukrainian relations. It was characterized by full and unconditional support for Ukrainians (manifested by the government, the majority of political parties, social organizations and society), at the same time forgetting about the conflicts in the collective memory, mainly the tragedy of ethnic cleansing (the so-called ‘Volyn massacre’) organized by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in 1943-44 in eastern Poland (Strzyżyński, 2023). The only anti-Ukrainian force criticizing the enormous support for Ukrainian refugees was the far-right Confederation, whose prominent figures present pro-Russian inclinations and narratives (Alan-Lee, 2023). On March 12, when the act on assistance to Ukrainian citizens was supported, 9 MPs of the party voted against. The Confederation Party, with its liberal economic agenda, cultural conservatism and anti-immigrant stance, criticized giving to Ukrainian refugees the same social welfare rights as to Poles, portraying it as the ‘discrimination’ of Poles. In the party’s programme, published in July 2022, there is a clear disapproval to the ‘welfare immigration’ of Ukrainians and an opposition to welfare payments for them as leading to ‘financial catastrophe’. At the same time, the burden of reception of refugees should be reciprocated by giving to Polish companies preferential treatment in Ukraine’s post-war

reconstruction (Konfederacja, 2022). Additionally, its leaders disseminated anti-Ukrainian narratives, both in social media and during the public meetings, pointing at the risks of the ‘Ukrainization’ of Poland, exploiting fears of Ukrainian radical nationalism (including the annexation of some cities in eastern Poland) and capitalizing on old, historically determined anti-Ukrainian stereotypes (Sitnicka, 2022). The context of unanimous support for Ukrainians among the main political and social actors allowed the party to build its unique and visible position by presenting the refugees as a threat to economic and national security. In 2023, for a few months, the party was a third political force in the public opinion pools, with 10% to 15% of votes considered as a serious partner for a future governing coalition with the Law and Justice (Nizinkiewicz, 2023). The October 15, 2023 parliamentary elections gave the party 7% of the votes (18 MPs), which was far below expectations and not enough to act as a coalition partner.

Figure 7. The map of road blockades organized by the Polish farmers (supported by hunters) on February 20, 2024



Source: Institute of the Agricultural Economy (2024)

After the ‘romantic phase’ of the reception, the economic interest started to influence relations between the governments of the two countries. The most contentious issues were (and still are) agricultural products from Ukraine (especially grain) being competition to the production of Polish farmers, who represented a significant segment of the electoral base for the ruling Law and Justice party. In June 2022, the European Commission opened the internal EU market for Ukrainian agricultural production (lifting tariffs), which caused dissatisfaction among farmers of neighbouring countries. Next, in May 2023, the EU imposed a ban on exporting agricultural products from Ukraine to Poland (and 4 other central European countries); however, the ban was lifted on September 15. The fact that this overlapped with the parliamentary election campaign in Poland, prompted both the ruling and opposition parties to support an extension of the ban (Konończuk, 2023), followed by unfriendly remarks between representatives of Kiev and Warsaw. After the parliamentary elections on October 15, 2023, a new government faced the same problems, this time reinforced by protests of hauliers who, by blocking Ukrainian trucks trying to cross the Polish border, protested against cheaper transportation services provided by Ukrainian companies (Kość, 2023).

The protests of farmers intensified in January and February 2024, with road blockades covering the whole country (see Figure 7) and slogans translating into a reduction of pro-Ukrainian attitudes. These developments demonstrate that not only painful collective memories but also the economic interests of concrete pressure groups might have an impact on the quality of bilateral relations and the perception of the Ukrainian minority in Poland.

5. The local government

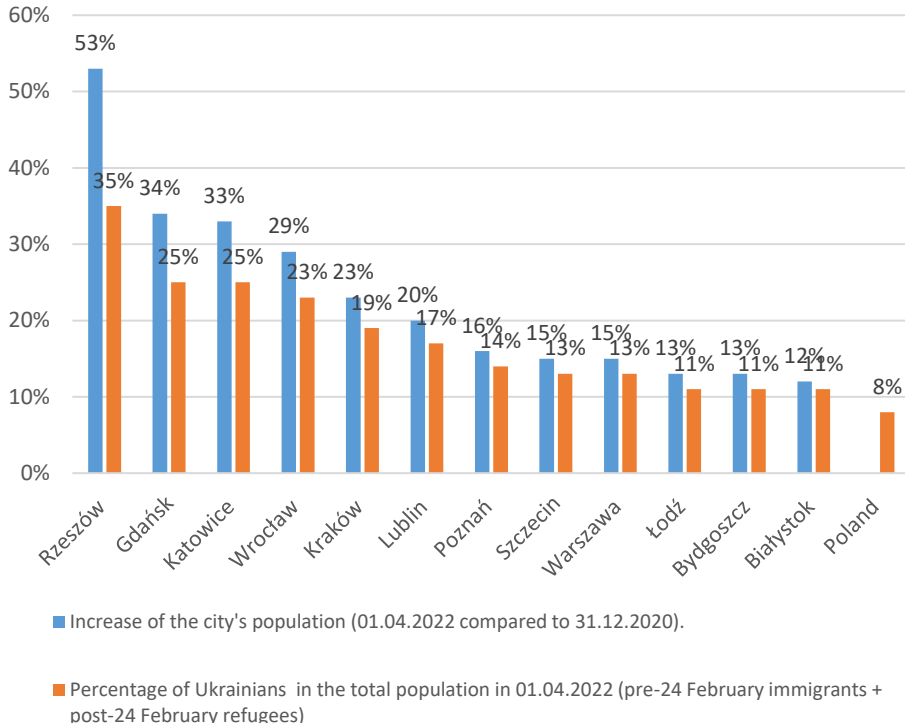
In the years preceding the massive influx of Ukrainian refugees, the Polish local government experienced a weakening of its competences and financial situation, which was a result of recentralization efforts implemented by the ruling coalition (Sześciło, 2018; Swianiewicz et al., 2023). However, this was a still relatively strong, active and autonomous institutional sector with a significant position of mayors at the municipal level, having at their disposal an experienced administrative apparatus, well embedded in the local context. Moreover, because the majority of immigrants for years settled in the biggest cities, these were municipal authorities that presented greater awareness of the importance of integration policies for immigrants and implemented some programmes in this regard (Dragan, 2017; Gul-Rechlewicz, 2023, p.187). Thus, the local governments have proven to play a crucial role both at the reception phase and later, when the need for integration became the crucial problem. Generally, their reaction depended on a couple of factors: previous actions aimed at the local integration of immigrants; already existing networks of cooperation between local administration and NGOs; personal attitudes/engagement of the leaders of local administration (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023a, p. 25).

The reception phase, which lasted for a few months, was characterized by ad hoc actions necessary for providing basic humanitarian help (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023a). In this phase, almost all local government entities (2477 communes, 380 counties, and 16 regional self-governments) were engaged in support for refugees. However, the burden of receiving refugees was not equally distributed because it depended on the type and location of given local government. These were cities located close to the border with Ukraine and the biggest cities, that received the highest share of refugees; however, the small towns and rural communes also hosted refugees (Ruch Samorządowy TAK! dla Polski, 2022). The estimates based on the geotrapping method showed that at the beginning of April 2022, around 70% of Ukrainians (both refugees and those who already lived in Poland before February 24) stayed in 12 of the biggest Polish cities and surrounding communes (metropolitan areas)⁷. These cities experienced a 17% increase in population (Cywiński & Wojdat, 2022). These 12 biggest cities were already associated within the Union of Polish Metropolises, which became a platform for coordination and experience exchange in order to improve the reception of refugees since the first days of reception (Jaroszewicz et al., 2022).

The survey conducted in the first month of the reception of refugees (in 81 communes located in 15 voivodeships) showed variety in the forms of support for refugees in which local governments were engaged (see Figure 9). An important characteristic of the municipal authorities' support for refugees (especially in the big cities) was the usage of already existing networks of cooperation with the local non-governmental organizations and the Ukrainian community. These cooperative networks also used support of international organizations (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023a, p. 36). One of the main challenges faced by municipal authorities during the reception phase was the ability to coordinate decentralized support provided by different organizations in the public and private sectors (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023a). This phase was characterized by the intensification of inter-sectoral cooperation and establishment of the 'local systems of humanitarian aid'. The situational pressure forced the local government to resign from traditional, formalized paths of participation and cooperation, proving the necessity for elaborate and more flexible forms of crisis management. However, in the course of time, when the feeling of solidarity declined, cooperation of the local governments with the non-governmental sector regressed and returned to the old patterns characterized by paternalism. This was disappointing for many non-governmental organizations (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023a, p. 37).

⁷ The majority of those who came to Poland, both before and after 2022, had an urban background (82% and 84% respectively), so it seemed natural for them to look for urban environment as well (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2023, p. 8).

Figure 8. Ukrainian population in the 12 biggest cities (estimated influx and share in the total population in 01.04.2022 based on the geo-trapping method)

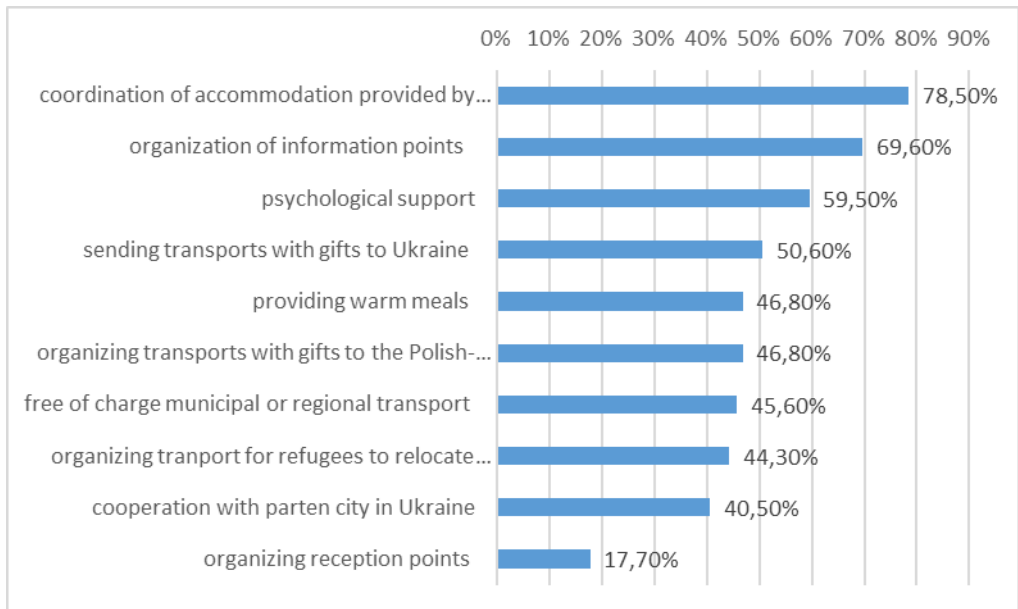


Source: authors' representation based on Cywiński & Wojdat (2022, April)

The second phase was aimed at providing mid-term and long-term help by the inclusion of refugees into the social and economic life of the municipalities, mainly into the labour market, educational system, social welfare system, and housing (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023a, p. 25). The local government-initiated actions aimed at preparing a long-term and systemic strategy for integration. The most visible example of that was the 'Territorial Governmental Round Table' organized in Wrocław in May 2022, when around 120 representatives of the local government, academic circles, business sector and the third sector worked on recommendations on legal changes that should be implemented to manage the immigration flow from Ukraine. The result was a White Paper which was handed to the Polish Prime Minister, President and Senate (Territorial Government Round Table in Wrocław, 2022; Wapłak & Wołodko, 2022). Nevertheless, the central government has not adopted any long-term strategy for integrating the refugees, leaving the burden of organizing integration on the local government. Thus, the second phase is characterized by serious challenges faced by local governments, which are not

properly equipped in terms of financial and organizational capacities for integrating refugees who settled mainly in urban areas.

Figure 9. The most common forms of supporting refugees by local governments (% of communes declaring given type of support) in the reception phase



Source: authors' representation based on Ruch Samorządowy TAK! dla Polski (2022, March 30)

After the adoption of the act on assistance to Ukrainian citizens, the communal authorities were responsible for receiving applications for a PESEL number and distribution of social benefits. The communal authorities also distributed financial support for those citizens who provided accommodation to Ukrainian refugees. These new responsibilities, especially the need to work with a high number of Ukrainians and to handle their cases, caused the necessity to implement some changes in the administrative arrangements. More information was provided in the Ukrainian language (also on the official websites), special information points were established, and special teams were created to handle the issues of Ukrainians. However, after the central government entitled the refugees to social benefits, it did not foresee financial transfers to the local government to finance these benefits (the exception being the lump sum of 300 PLN and money paid to citizens providing accommodation). Therefore, there was a significant financial and organizational pressure to fulfill these new tasks (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023a, p. 42).

It must be noted that the communal authorities in Poland are responsible for managing schools, so the burden of the reception and integration of Ukrainian

children into the educational system was put on the urban and rural communes. According to the Polish law from March 2022, children who escaped from Ukraine can either attend Polish schools, or they can choose to learn online within the Ukrainian education system. According to the Ministry of Education and Science in November 2022, there were 190 thousand children from Ukraine in Polish schools, who came to Poland after February 24. At the same time, the communal authorities and teachers were not prepared for the inclusion of a massive number of Ukrainian pupils into the schools. The report from monitoring published in January 2023 by Amnesty International showed the number of problems faced by teachers and pupils. There were not enough teachers, and those who were working did not have the proper training to work with foreigners. There were not enough ‘preparatory units’, which is a special, temporary class for foreigners to teach them Polish and improve their adaptation to the new environment. Other problems were a small number of intercultural teaching assistants with Ukrainian language, a shortage of bilingual or Ukrainian handbooks and insufficient prevention of discrimination (Amnesty International in Poland, 2023).

Last, but not least, there was a problem of providing accommodation to the newly arrived. After the ‘romantic phase’ of solidarity and the government’s financial support for citizens providing accommodation for 120 days have finished, the problem of accommodation remained with the local governments. In the first three months since February 24, the number of flats for rent dropped 40% as a result of the sudden growth of demand from Ukrainians (Monitor Deloitte, 2022, p. 76). In November 2022, 52% of the surveyed refugees rented private flats, 19% used different forms of collective accommodation free of charge, 6% lived in other Ukrainians’ flats free of charge, and 6% were hosted free of charge in private Polish houses (Chmielewska-Kalińska et al., 2023, p. 10). This means that there was still a significant share of those who were not able to find and finance their own places of living. It must be noted that the housing problem already affected the Polish population before the influx of refugees, and after February 24, it acquired a new humanitarian dimension. Thus, solving the problem is above the capacities of the local government and demands systemic changes in the housing policy at the central level (Territorial Government Round Table in Wrocław, 2022, pp. 55-56).

The collective accommodation provided by the public authorities did not address the challenge. Since March 1st, 2023, as a result of an amendment to the act on assistance to Ukrainian citizens, those who resided in Poland longer than 120 days have to cover 50% of the cost of such accommodation (but not more than 40 PLN per person per day), while those residing over 180 days have to cover 75% (but not more than 60 PLN per person per day). The new rules do not apply to those not able to work because of disability, age, difficult life situation, pregnancy or childcare (Kaczorowska, 2023). According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration, this change was aimed at the activation of the refugees on the labour market. In March 2023, there were 81 thousand refugees placed in collective

accommodation centers, while in June 2023, there were 59 thousand (MSWiA: przy zwalnianiu, 2023). The report from monitoring in the collective accommodation centers published by the Migration Consortium in August 2023 showed that there was no cohesive governmental strategy towards housing refugees in such centers. The march amendment was against EU law, gave space for discretionary interpretation, and worsened conditions for refugees (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023b).

6. Civil society's reaction

In Poland, before February 24, there were NGOs with experience related to immigration, with the 9 main organizations being integrated into the Migration Consortium. However, according to the 'open letter' published by this Consortium, altogether there were 55 organizations in Poland, many of them small and working on a local scale, having professional experience working with immigrants (Migration Consortium, 2022). These were important organizations, which in the first months of the influx of refugees coordinated and initiated various forms of humanitarian support, while after the reception phase engaged in efforts aimed at the integration of refugees, monitoring their status, advocating in favour of systemic and long-term strategy to integrate them. It must be noted that these actions were implemented in cooperation with a variety of other actors like local governments, international organizations and volunteers who joined their ranks. This is also the time of developing unprecedented cooperation between the third sector and private entrepreneurs, who supported efforts to help refugees in the form of transportation, material help, housing and employment (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023a, p. 6).

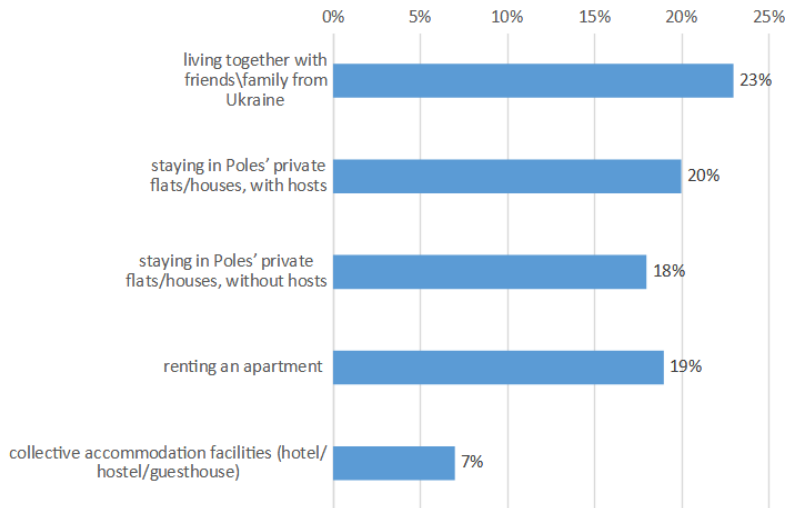
Aside from NGOs with migration-related experience, civil society witnessed the transformation of many NGOs, which did not have immigration-related actions within their profiles, towards the support for refugees (a lot of them previously working in the field of social inclusion or education) (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023a, p. 56). For example, the survey conducted in May 2022 in the Greater Poland voivodeship has shown that out of 108 NGOs supporting Ukrainian refugees, 65% were not engaged in such actions before February 24, which means they have changed their profile (Centrum PISOP, 2022). Similarly, NGOs established by the Ukrainian diaspora before February 24 had conducted mainly educational-cultural activities; however, a sudden influx of refugees forced them to rapidly change their profile (like the already described Association of Ukrainians in Poland). The support was also provided by country-wide organizations like the Polish Scouting Association, Caritas, Rural Housewives Circles or Voluntary Fire-Brigades (Jarosz & Klaus, 2023a, p. 57). The last two organizations, having a dense network of local chapters, constituted significant social capital and important help providers in rural communities.

Aside of the humanitarian help, undertaken at the reception phase, NGOs are also active in the fields like watchdogging, advocacy and building a strategic

approach to immigration policy based on human rights agendas. On March 4, 2022, 96 Polish NGOs published an appeal to the Polish government to ensure procedures preventing discrimination on the Polish-Ukrainian border and segregation based on race, nationality or religion. Additionally, the appeal stressed the importance of introducing a law that would give equal protection for all those fleeing from Ukraine (OKO.Press Editorial Team, 2022). The appeal was the reaction to the reports about discrimination on the border towards third-country nationals fleeing Ukraine (Mikulska & Rumieńczyk, 2022). When the Polish parliament adopted the act of 2022 on the assistance to Ukrainian citizens, throughout the fast-track legislation process, 14 anti-corruption NGOs officially expressed their critical opinion on the law, pointing at corruption-prone regulations. According to their official communique, the act contained provisions allowing for public officials and those employed in state-owned companies to be released from accountability when misusing public office (Civil Development Forum, 2022). The Migration Consortium criticized the government for the amendment of this law in January 2023, which obliged those staying in collective accommodation centres to cover part of the cost. According to the Consortium, it was against EU law and humanitarian principles, because the new regulations would push away refugees from the centres (Krzysztozek, 2023).

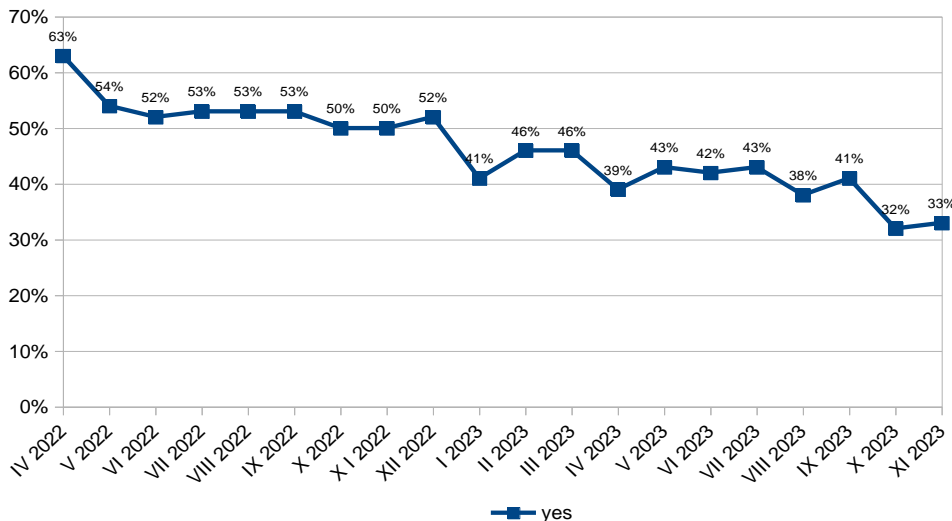
The most professional NGOs were also involved in advocating for a long-term and strategic approach to immigration policy. In May 2022, during the so-called 'Territorial Government Roundtable' organized by the municipality of Wrocław, there were representatives of 29 non-governmental organizations, who worked with experts on recommendations representing other sectors (Waplak & Wołodko, 2022). Another example of long-term and vision-based engagement is a document prepared by the Migration Consortium 'The outline of the local integration policies' (Dąbrowska, 2022). It provides local governments with the framework and guidelines for planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating local migration policies. The document was presented during the round-table debate on urban immigration and refugee policies organized within the 'Local Trends' conference in Poznań in October 2022. In 2022, the Polish Humanitarian Action and Ashoka Foundation established the *Forum "Together" – NGOs for Poland and Ukraine*, which is a platform facilitating the cooperation between organizations supporting refugees. The Forum allows for knowledge sharing, building partnerships, trainings, advocating in favour of mid-term and long-term systemic solutions. As of March 2024, there were 228 NGOs registered on its internet platform (<https://www.forumrazem.org.pl>). After October 15, 2023's parliamentary elections, the Migration Consortium publicly appealed to the prospective government for the preparation of a new immigration policy ending the humanitarian crisis on the Polish-Belorussian border (Chrzczonowicz, 2023).

Figure 10. Refugees in 12 biggest Polish cities at the end of April 2022 according to the top 5 types of accommodation



Source: authors representation based on Mędrzecka-Stefańska et al. (2022, September)

Figure 11. Do you or someone from your household help Ukrainian refugees voluntarily and free of charge? (Yes answers)



Source: authors' representation based on Public Opinion Research Center (2023, November)

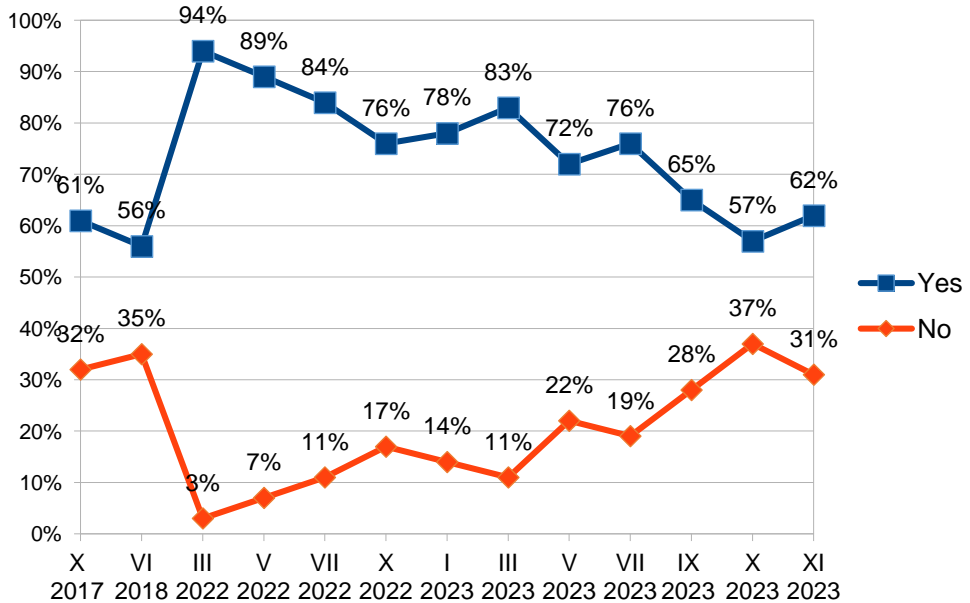
Aside from the NGOs, the Polish citizens also manifested a strong helping attitude. According to the country-wide survey conducted in April 2022, 63% of respondents declared that they (or someone from their household) engaged in some form of help (see Figure 11). This was manifested especially by the spontaneous implementation of the idea of refugee sponsorship in the form of accommodating them together in private flats with basic care (Grzymała-Kazłowska et al., 2022, p. 8). According to the April 2022 data from the Union of Polish Metropolises, 38% of refugees in the 12 biggest cities stayed in private flats owned by Poles (see Figure 10), while 23% lived together with friends or family from Ukraine.

This accommodation pattern shows that during the reception phase, these were ordinary Poles and members of the Ukrainian diaspora who constituted the main safety net for the refugees. However, surveys conducted later demonstrate a systematic decline in helping behaviour, which might be the reflection of the growing fatigue with helping, the different needs of refugees after the reception phase, and the shift in public opinion towards a less sympathetic position.

7. Public opinion

Another interesting and, at the end of the day, one of the most important aspects determining and contextualizing the presence of Ukrainian refugees in Poland is their perception among Polish society. To understand the currently dominating picture of Ukrainians among Poles, it seems necessary to embed it in a wider context and timespan. Together with the first wave of immigrants from Ukraine to Poland after the annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainians started to be present in public debate and public discourses. Research on the picture of Ukrainians in Polish selected journals in 2014-16 stressed the dominance of positive perceptions of the incomers, showing them as skilled and hardworking individuals contributing to the development of the Polish economy (Rozbicka, 2018). Similarly, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022, the general perception of the Ukrainian refugees has been very positive. As already demonstrated, from the first days there has been a massive mobilisation of the majority of Polish society aimed at supporting the incomers. It was in contrast with other recent migration waves that the EU and Poland were exposed to, including the 2015 situation in the Balkan Road and the 2021 pressure on the Polish-Byelorussian border. The most common forms of support were volunteering in reception centres, a collection of products to be sent to Ukraine and handed out to refugees and hosting them in private houses. Over the months of war, the Poles' enthusiasm seemed to shrink. Eventually, anti-Ukrainian attitudes started to be formulated; these referred especially to the social benefits and 'privileges' as believed to be offered to the refugees by the Polish state. As already mentioned, some of the political actors intensified such critical arguments especially during the electoral campaign for the parliamentary voting on October 15.

Figure 12. In your opinion, should Poland accept Ukrainian refugees from the territories affected by the war?



Source: authors' representation based on Public Opinion Research Center (2023, November)

According to the poll research, the number of Poles believing that Ukrainian refugees should be accepted dropped from 94% in March 2022 to 62% in November 2023 (see Figure 11). Thus, a systematic decline of public support is clear; however, two-thirds of the respondents still supported the policy of accepting refugees from Ukraine. When asked about motives of their critical opinions, Poles were especially afraid of the negative consequences of hosting Ukrainians in Poland in the fields of availability of public services and the growing prices of renting apartments (Kubiciel-Lodzińska & Kownacka, 2023). Research conducted in the social media forums and aid groups presented similar conclusions (Janusz et al., 2023). The latest survey from the end of February 2024 showed that these fears and scepticism towards Ukrainians are shared by a significant portion of population: 40% believed that it would be bad for the country if those Ukrainians staying in Poland will stay for many years (with 45% believing that it is good). Interestingly, this percentage is even higher among women between the ages of 18-39 and respondents between the ages of 18-49. This might be caused by perceiving Ukrainians as a potential competition for public services, jobs, accommodation or matrimonial prospects (Pacewicz & Garbicz, 2024).

As suggested by the research, Kremlin is one of the key actors creating anti-Ukrainian attitudes in Poland. It is especially visible in social media where Kremlin

has some leverage to disseminate its narratives, while traditional media provide a much more balanced and adequate picture of Ukrainians. The fact that it is the younger generation who is the main user of social media makes them much more vulnerable to the Kremlin's propaganda narratives compared to older Poles, which has been confirmed by research. As far back as January 2023, a significant portion of those surveyed agreed with such narratives: 41% agreed that the Ukrainian refugees are in fact economic immigrants, and 62% agreed that Poland cannot afford to accept refugees (Warsaw Enterprise Institute, 2023, p. 10). Old sentiments, embedded in a historical context of the Volhynia massacres⁸, have also been a fertile ground for anti-Ukrainian narratives on social media disseminated by some politicians and freelance journalists, calling themselves 'independent' (Tymińska et al., 2023, pp. 16-17). As previously mentioned, it is particularly the Confederation party that employed anti-immigrant rhetoric, including anti-Ukrainian slogans in the 2023 and 2024 election campaigns. Its leaders (being also MPs) belong to the top propagators of anti-Ukrainian messages online, with Twitter (now X), being the main tool used, as found by monitoring between XI 2022 and IV 2023 (Grzesiczak, 2023). The beginning of 2024 was additionally marked by a new dimension of the anti-Ukrainian attitudes. The influx of Ukrainian agricultural products (in both legal and illegal ways) to the Polish market resulted in massive protests of the Polish farmers, blockades at the Polish-Ukrainian border crossing points that lasted for months, and visible tensions between the governments of both states (Jarynowski, 2024). It has translated into a political debate on the limits of supporting Ukraine and Ukrainians and reciprocity in mutual relations. A series of elections in Poland resulted in an ongoing politicization of this theme, which maintains an already visible erosion of support for Ukrainian refugees.

Conclusions

The aim of the above presented considerations was to debate dynamics and directions of the Ukrainian refugees' situation in Poland. As a point of departure, we selected theories to frame more precisely the analysis of the two components of the refugees' situation: the reaction of the Polish state and society as well as the legal and socio-economic situation of the incomers.

The national identity theory suggested that Poland, with its dominant ethno-cultural concept of national membership, would present a rather exclusionary

⁸ It is important to remember about the historical legacies of mutual conflict dating back to (at least) 17th and culminating in 20th century during and after the World War II, that have never been a subject of official reconciliation similar to – for example - the German-Polish. Issues of the Polish colonization of Western Ukraine, ethnic tensions in the interwar period, massacres of civilians in the 1940's and forced displacement of populations after 1945 still form a space for claims, distrust and misunderstandings, especially when instrumentalized by some actors.

approach to immigration. This has not been, however, the case towards the Ukrainian refugees. They have been approached with a welcoming attitude, which demonstrates that an impact of ethno-cultural understanding of national membership on the immigration policy might be neutralized by some other factors. There might be a variety of reasons behind that, but cultural proximity with Ukrainians, the historical record of Russian imperialism on the Polish soil and continuous perception of Russia as a threat played an important role in triggering solidarity with Ukrainians. Moreover, the Ukrainian diaspora, had largely been perceived in a positive manner before 2022, especially in terms of the contribution of Ukrainian labour into the Polish economy. In such conditions, the ethno-cultural patterns of nationhood might be of secondary importance, and instrumentalizing them to push for anti-immigration agenda is deemed to failure, at least in the short run. Last, but not least, the research on the support for asylum seekers, conducted in 15 European societies in 2016 and 2022, has shown that there is a strong and long-standing social preference for the specific characteristics of refugees that make them more acceptable. It happens that they are possessed by Ukrainian refugees who, as compared to refugees from other countries of origin, were predominantly young, female Christians fleeing the war, who are well-educated, with work experience in middle- and high-skill occupations (Bansak et al., 2023, p. 851). Therefore, we can say that the ethno-cultural inclinations for exclusionary attitudes were overcome by factors specific for Poland and more general attitudinal patterns detected in the European societies.

The domestic politics approach and the network theory have proven to demonstrate better explanatory value and have received stronger confirmation, which still does not mean that historically determined patterns of nationhood should be ignored when studying immigration developments in Poland. In the political system, all of the most important political parties, in addition to local governments and NGOs, used a language of inclusion, support, and solidarity, which translated into actions. The domestic politics in Poland, when it comes to the refugees, were characterized by a remarkable consensus and constituted the main driving force behind the dynamics of reception. The governing coalition, with a record of anti-immigration fear mongering rooted in ethno-cultural nationalism, refrained from that approach and welcomed the Ukrainians. However, there are actors of domestic politics, described in the paper, that undermine this consensus by exploiting the ethno-cultural, exclusionary patterns of nationhood for electoral gain and protecting the economic interests of particular segments of the society. Lastly, the network theory found its tangible example in the case of the Ukrainian diaspora, which became an important facilitator and safety net for Ukrainian refugees. Its economic, institutional and legal position in Poland made it a significant interest group (this is where the domestic politics approach finds common ground with the network theory) advocating in favour of the refugees, providing shelter, money, and organizational structures.

In the above presented context, there are two of the most important findings resulting from this analysis.

First, the successful reception of Ukrainian refugees was possible due to the social mobilization, with the institutions of civil society and local as well as regional government playing the key role. This could be interpreted within the context of the long-term evolution of the Polish society from emigration to immigration, which especially began to accelerate in the last decade, with a significant number of the Ukrainians settling here before the war. Legal and systemic solutions had been following this shift but not quickly enough and in the atmosphere of socio-political conflict around the main priorities of immigration policy. The Russian invasion and the massive flow of refugees catalysed the changes, accelerated them, and for the time being created a remarkable consensus around Ukrainian immigration. The central level reaction was, however, implementable only because of the voluntary mobilization of the local government and society, which clearly demonstrates the importance of decentralization and bottom-up forces for resilience in the time of crisis. The local government, its flexibility and resources allowed for the fast reception of refugees, whose majority migrated to 12 of the biggest agglomerations. Non-governmental organizations were important actors providing their limited resources, with lot of them changing their profiles to help refugees.

Second, over the two years of the war, there has been a wide spectrum of challenges that the refugees have been facing. After the reception phase and basic stabilization, a more systemic and long-term approach to integrate refugees is needed. While the government adopted a special law granting temporary protection together with a variety of entitlements, there were no signs of a strategic approach to the refugee situation in Poland. These were the local governments and civil society organizations that advocated for designing a long-term strategy integrating them, mainly because they are close to the everyday experiences of refugees and face difficulties regarding their integration. Problems like housing, social inclusion and proper, tailored education for children are the most pressing issues, which cannot be handled effectively without the central government's strategy. These problems are accompanied by changes in public opinion and the radicalization of some social and political groups resulting in (still minor but) visible questioning of the dominant hosting forms and methods. After these two years, the public opinion trend is getting worse for Ukrainian refugees, which, together with disinformation campaigns, electoral cycle and historically embedded stereotypes, constitutes fertile ground for future tensions. All these developments, framed in the wider context of transition towards immigration society, demonstrate that Poland has found itself in a historically unprecedented situation calling for well-tailored and consensus-based immigration policy. The massive influx of Ukrainian refugees has opened a window of opportunity for genuine debate about such policy, because it demonstrated the rapidly transformative impact of immigrants on receiving society and produced new tiers of social capital being an asset in such debate.

This investigation sheds light on the dynamics of Ukrainian refugees' presence in Poland. However, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, in the second half of 2024, is still in progress, making the issue of human flows from Ukraine dynamic and requiring further studies and continuous monitoring. Similarly, the desired end of the conflict will create further challenges with the key role of academic analysis and expertise being crucial for a deeper understanding of the processes and finding optimal solutions to be applied.

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