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Event Analysis

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How Refugees Transformed Polish Society During the Past Year (September 2021 – September 2022)

Jakub Stepaniuk*

Abstract: This work is devoted to exploring different political and social reactions to “refugee crises” occurring at Polish borders with Belarus and Ukraine and reverberating across the country. The research is based on media reports as well as a dozen of interviews conducted with people either affected by the “crisis” geographically or those engaged in humanitarian aid. The key motivation stems from contrasting behaviour of the Polish government and society towards both “crises” as if only Ukrainians were to be helped and not Asian or African refugees who came from the Belarussian side as often portrayed in European discourses. The article attempts to offer more comprehensive explanation than just the argument of racism and cultural distance.

Keywords: migrations, refugees, Poland, border, humanitarian aid, integration

Introduction

It has been over 200 days since the first Ukrainian refugees arrived at Polish border checkpoints dramatically searching for shelter from Russian bombs. It has been also roughly a year since the Polish Interior Ministry implemented a state of emergency along the border with Belarus in order to facilitate the construction of physical blockades preventing the entrance of refugees from the Belarussian side. The discourse on the “refugee crisis” has been omnipresent in Polish political and social debates at least since 2015 when it helped Law and Justice (PiS) win the parliamentary election in autumn 2015 by accusing the then ruling Civic Platform (PO) of treason for accepting the relocation of 5,082 refugees¹ from Greece and Italy. Refugees, who in words of Jarosław Kaczyński could bring in their organisms dangerous “protozoa and parasites”² contributing to social unrest and sanitary crisis stirred enough negative emotions to prove that dehumanisation of othered social groups is a great recipe for successful

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¹ GazetaPrawna.pl. *“Targowica, zdrada”? MSW prezentuje fakty i mity o głosowaniu ws. uchodźców* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

² Newsweek. *Kaczyński: Pasożyty i pierwotniaki w organizmach uchodźców groźne dla Polaków* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

electoral mobilisation. When it comes to electoral strategies, experiences from 2015 encouraged PiS to reuse this strategy by waging a discriminatory campaign against LGBT community³ in 2019 and by a recent intensification of anti-German⁴ narratives underpinned by the demand for Second World War reparations.

Indeed, the threat of civilisational clash and Islamic terrorism were of a rather illusionary character. Refugees from time to time emerged in political narratives often serving as proof of the apparent collapse of state structures in “leftist and gay Europe”,⁵ as in the case of famous “54 sharia enclaves in Sweden”⁶ claimed by Kaczyński during parliamentary debate. Nonetheless, a dramatic turn of events emerged in summer 2021 when actual, not imagined refugees arrived at the Belarussian border. The whim of the ruling PiS to repair crumbling political support instrumentalised refugees as the perfect means for rekindling collective sense of insecurity. Since then, the Polish Interior Ministry militarised and closed the whole border area,⁷ ordered border police forces and the army to violate international legal standards and the non-refoulement principle by using push-backs,⁸ criminalised any attempts by activists to save refugees from physical suffering, officially promoted refugees as dreadful individuals inclined to paedophilia and zoophilia.¹⁰ What was the political effect? PiS portrayal of itself as the sole guarantor of security and stability, despite Covid related systemic and economic hardships, managed to rebuild its average support from 31% in July to 35% in September 2021,¹¹ key to hover above majority threshold. Autumn months of 2021 were marked by violence, helplessness, and fear of strangers. This notably collided with the date of 24 February 2022 when the character of a refugee immediately shifted into a poor brother or sister in need, who required sudden support and mobilisation of all available resources.

Based on my short research conducted in November 2021 with inhabitants of Polish-Belarussian borderlands, eight semi-structured interviews held with activists from Warsaw and Poznań in April 2022, ongoing conversations with my Ukrainian friends who are currently staying in Poland, and various media and NGOs reports, I would like to carry out a brief analysis measuring the extent of the “refugee crises”, and how it is affecting and transforming Polish society in the past year. The following analysis is going to be divided into three subcategories: (1) explaining the massive reaction of civil society to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine; (2) exploring dimensions of normalisation of the crisis and gradual slowdown in social mobilisation; (3) investigating contrasting

³ Szymczak, Jakub and Piotr Pacewicz. *Homofobia PiS. Jak rozbudzali nienawiść do LGBT prezydent, prezes, ministrowie, posłowie* [33 CYTATY] (accessed: 7 October 2022).

⁴ Wieliński, Bartosz. *Walka o reparacje wojenne to kampania PiS na grobach ofiar nazistowskich Niemiec* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

⁵ Nizinkiewicz, Jacek. *Zbigniew Ziobro: Trwa wojna o naszą polską duszę* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

⁶ Wyborcza.pl. *Szwedzi próbują zapytać Kaczyńskiego o szariat. 'Pan prezes jest nieuchwytny'* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

⁷ Chołodowski, Maciej. *Granica polsko-białoruska. Stan wyjątkowy w praktyce nadal obowiązuje* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

⁸ Forceful return of a refugee beyond the border by state services

⁹ Hrw.org. *Przemoc i push-backi na polsko-białoruskiej granicy* | *Human Rights Watch* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

¹⁰ Sitnicka, Dominika. *"Krowa Kamińskiego" to stare nagranie z internetu. A w dodatku to klacze* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

¹¹ Ewybory.eu. *Sondaże - ewybory.eu* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

treatment and perception of the refugees at the Belarussian and Ukrainian borders.

What can explain the massive mobilisation of Polish civil society to the outbreak of war in Ukraine?

The first information regarding the full-fledged Russian military assault against Ukraine in February 2022 profoundly affected Polish social and urban spheres. In a matter of hours, grassroots neighbourhood initiatives, CSOs and city councils established numerous chaotic and overlapping networks of humanitarian aid. Immediately any public infrastructure facilities, especially railway stations, cultural institutions or exhibition halls were turned into refugee reception centres. My interviewees from Warsaw and Poznań told me that they rushed together with the whole wave of people offering anything that could have been useful, limiting their working hours or even taking unpaid leave. Any skills believed to be of use in helping meet the needs of Ukrainians were offered up. Whether it was preparing litres of soups to be delivered to the railway station, the collection of clothes, hygiene products, and canned food, volunteering at reception centres created at train stations by either NGOs or city councils, helping with translations and communication, or even opening their private houses to accommodate Ukrainian families, Polish citizens were eager to lend a helping hand. The majority of billboards in urban spaces were covered with slogans calling for solidarity. The atmosphere of crisis and need to help was at every corner.

Interestingly enough, the 24th of February suddenly filled the pit of social cleavages between polarising government and opposition for the past years. The famous words of historian Norman Davies, proved to be relevant once again, that “crisis”¹² is paradoxically the key source of a united collective life in Poland. Not since the 2010 Smolensk plane crash had social unity exceeded the framework of ideological tensions on such a scale. How was it possible that the government, state institutions, and army received praise from those who during past seven years were classified by Kaczyński as the “worse sort of Poles”.¹³ Namely, those who had conflicted with PiS over the independence of Constitutional Court, abortion rights, influence of the Church, excessive logging, the ideologisation of media and education, and many more?

My interviewees admitted that the war in Ukraine and the call to help surpassed ideological divisions, which in turn enabled collective action regardless of political preferences or stances towards, for instance, the role of the Church. Based on my interviews, I was able to identify five various factors that explain why the reaction towards the conflict and mobilisation was immediate, massive, and conducted emotionally without the estimation of available resources. Firstly, the historical and geographical awareness of neighbouring Russia and the memory of being attacked by the Soviet Union on 17 September 1939 or during 1919-1920 is still vivid in Polish collective memory. Many people realised that help is necessary, as Ukraine is the only element of a buffer zone protecting

¹² Kamiński, Sławomir. *Portret Polaka* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

¹³ Jałoszewski, Mariusz. *Sąd: Kaczyński nie musi przeproszać za "gorszy sort"* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

Poland from direct vicinity to Russia. “*If Ukraine falls we will be next*”¹⁴ was an oft repeated sentence which motivated numerous activists as if “*helping Ukraine was to secure whole Europe of which Poland serves today as the critical security wall*”. The words of the late President Lech Kaczyński in Tbilisi in 2008 “*today Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, then Baltic states or Poland*”¹⁵ resound as the dark prophecy of this envisaged fate. Feeling its burden encouraged thousands to join humanitarian voluntary service.

Secondly, the majority of my interviewees told me that the geographical vicinity of the conflict made it more tangible.

“Looking at burnt and bombed households immediately resembled to me the streets and buildings of my town in Poland. Syria, Africa... I never felt the intimacy with the people living there, it was always so far away, architecture and culture was too distant to imagine it, I knew these bombs cannot affect my homeland. The war was either there on sands of some remote deserts or in the history textbooks. But this time the suffering in Odessa or Kharkiv hit me and my family, we couldn’t passively observe it without reacting.”

This reflection tells a lot about the relevance of social psychology that might be simplified as the more we identify with the more responsibility and compassion we feel. Stories of others included experiences of travelling to Ukraine, having some business or friendly networks. These connections demonstrate that many Poles were well connected with Ukraine and its citizens which additionally strengthens tangibility of the war. One of my interviewees added as well, in connection with the first factor, that he simply wants to avoid his town sharing the same fate as Ukrainian towns. Repetitive conversations on “*how would you react if Putin attacked Poland*” also turned an abstract scenario into an imaginable reality that everyone wanted to prevent. Therefore, the threat of real, easily imaginable suffering explain this mobilisation of civil society.

Thirdly, even if someone would not have any direct connections with Ukraine and its people living there before February 2022, Poland was already the place that accommodated many economic migrants from Ukraine. According to the statistical data, around 1.3 million Ukrainians stayed¹⁶ in Poland at the end of 2021 mostly due to economic reasons, whereas such cities as Wrocław¹⁷ already in 2017 had 10% of its population holding Ukrainian citizenship. Worth mentioning is also the case of repetitive abuses of labour rights, meaning that many Ukrainians who worked in Poland did so unofficially, this would suggest that the official numbers were lower than reality. Empirically speaking, the widespread presence of Ukrainian migrants deeply ingrained into Polish sociocultural landscape, without whom the state economy would suffer, strengthened the perception of Ukrainian refugees as “our” people who deserved help in their time of need. The outbreak of war very often resembled a family exchange, namely, when working male migrants decided to join military forces

¹⁴ All unreferenced quotes come from interviews conducted in November 2021 and April 2022

¹⁵ Polskieradio24.pl. *Mija 14 lat od pamiętnego przemówienia Lecha Kaczyńskiego w Tbilisi. Gruzini są za to wdzięczni do dziś - Historia* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

¹⁶ Olender, Łukasz. *Górny: Liczba Ukraińców w Polsce wróciła do poziomu sprzed pandemii: statystyki mogą być zaburzone* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

¹⁷ Newsweek. *Już co dziesiąty mieszkaniec Wrocławia to Ukrainiec. Co miesiąc przyjeżdża kolejne 5 tys* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

and leave Poland their place was usually taken by their wives and children. Refugees and their families were already familiar to many Poles, *“family of your cashier or carpenter was not a strange refugee but a person you know you should help.”* This awareness again served as an additional factor why people in Poland felt such compassion.

The fourth factor, despite not being a key one, is still worth mentioning. Knowing that state structures were completely unprepared for the upcoming humanitarian crisis many volunteers believed that system capacities would completely collapse without their help. The overall attitude towards governmental decisions and actions was twofold. On the one hand, public opinion welcomed the decision of the border police to accept anyone attempting to cross the border regardless of documents possessed, allowing Ukrainians to use public transportation and state railways free of charge or open personal identity number (PESEL) that eventually enabled them to enjoy social and family allowances. On the other hand, accommodation of refugees in private houses was possible only due to the goodwill of individuals, knowing that the government lacked resources in this matter, whereas coordination of humanitarian aid was mostly managed by local self-government units, which very often overloaded their own capacities and budgets. Some of my interviewees regarded PiS being praised on the international level for showing solidarity and providing humanitarian assistance as a blatant exploitation of indispensable work done by the volunteers across the country. What is important here is the construction of adequate social atmosphere and physical conditions encouraging society to join voluntary services.

The fifth and final aspect suggested by my interviewees that can explain the massive mobilisation is deeply ingrained Russophobia in Polish society.

“Whoever is the victim, if the victim suffers from Russia then the victim is immediately a friend of ours, a friend that deserves solidarity and support. This happened with Chechens, this happened with Georgians or Belarussian oppositionists, this is happening now with Ukrainians”,

one of my interviewees explained. Moreover, February 2022 might be recognised as a breakthrough in relations between Poland and Ukraine. On a political level, ties between PiS and Poroshenko were definitely not the friendliest ones especially when it comes to interpretation of events taking place during Second World War in Volhynia. Ethnic cleansings committed by the Ukrayins'ka povstans'ka armii (UPA) or Ukrainian Insurgent Army in English, led by Stepan Bandera between 1943 and 1945 cost approximately 100,000¹⁸ Poles their lives. Despite the attempts at a mutual historical dialogue both sides suspended cooperation, with both sides doggedly commemorating UPA as either national heroes or war criminals depending on the side of the border. Polarised historical narratives dwarfed such aspects as the interwar discrimination of the Ukrainian minority seeking autonomy under Second Polish Republic (1918-1939), or the Vistula Action of 1947 during which 140,000 Ukrainian and Ruthenian civilians were forcefully expelled from Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands to territories regained from Nazi Germany. Historical grievances also affected

¹⁸ TVN24. *Narodowy Dzień Pamięci Ofiar Ludobójstwa i 79. rocznica rzezi wołyńskiej. Upamiętnienie ofiar* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

the problematic situation of the Polish minority in contemporary Ukraine which did not receive adequate protection of minority rights and served as additional obstacle to Polish/Ukrainian relations. Therefore, the most logical explanation suggested by my interviewees towards all these national resentments suddenly evaporating is the perception of Russia as Poland's eternal enemy, with Russia's enemies immediately becoming friends of Poland. One of the interviewees also showed me a meme saying that "*the Hungarian stopped being my brother, now the Ukrainian is my brother*" which tells a lot about the effect of 24 February on regional geopolitics.

How the crisis got gradually normalised while mobilisation faltered?

The second aspect which I addressed with my interviewees was the effect of the passage of time on the normalisation of the crisis. It is interesting to see how their perspective two months since the outbreak of war interpolates across the summer in various media reports and how their doubts turned out to be represented in awaited reality. "*What are the limits of Polish hospitality?*" was quite a common topic in the media during past weeks. According to Ipsos polling, in September 65%¹⁹ of respondents believed that Ukrainian refugees staying for many years would be a good thing for Poland. This is only a drop of two percent compared to the same poll conducted in May. These polls demonstrate that the overall perception of Ukrainian refugees in Poland remains positive. 47% of respondents with the lowest level of education and 49% of people without any income answered positively. This proves that the groups most vulnerable economically are the most sceptical about the risks posed by Ukrainians on the labour market and economic security. It is important to emphasise that the arrival of Ukrainians drastically affected rental market, which was especially painful for students, or people earning below average incomes. In cities including Cracow or Gdańsk²⁰ the number of available flats for rent dropped by 75%, while rent prices skyrocketed by more than fifty percent. Ipsos results correspond to a great extent with the research²¹ conducted by the Faculty of Political Sociology at the University of Warsaw in June. 81% of Poles declared that they do not have anything against Ukrainians living in Poland, 64% would not protest if their children married a Ukrainian. The perception is a bit different if we take into consideration economic aspects. Only 59% support access to free public healthcare for Ukrainians and barely 28% support access to family allowances.

Based on the interviews, I would like to suggest three dimensions that explain the normalisation of the crisis and declining enthusiasm to help. The first one regards volunteer burnout. As observed already in April, many reception centres suffered from the lack of voluntary labour capacities. In the first days of war the will to volunteer and help out was in abundance. People changed their daily schedules or spent considerable parts of their savings to help as much as possible. However, many of them were quickly overwhelmed by the scale of need.

¹⁹ Theus, Julia. *Czy po pół roku wojny niechęć do Ukraińców rośnie? "Tego się obawialiśmy" [Sondaż OKO.PRESS]* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

²⁰ Wójcik, Piotr. *Szukanie dachu nad głową staje się drogą przez mękę. A to dopiero początek* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

²¹ Kacprzak, Izabela. *Benefitów Ukraińcom dać nie chcemy* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

A report²² from the reception centre in Warsaw Modlińska mentions the serious decline of volunteers, and also the decline of gifts that people were more willing to distribute right after the outbreak of war.

Secondly, many volunteers also realised the burden accommodating a person or a family in own private house.

“We really thought we could help this family but then we noticed they completely don’t respect our good-heartedness. They don’t want to integrate, they don’t want to learn the language or look for a job. They also buy expensive things as if they had money to stay somewhere without our generous contribution.”

The lack of gratitude, willingness to learn Polish, and find a job, problems with communication and financial challenges after support from the government was terminated in June (around 10 euro per refugee daily) are among the most common issues faced by families hosting Ukrainians in their homes. In an interview with the Polish Cities Association²³, its representatives expressed the fear of many Ukrainians currently living in private accommodations could be exposed to the risk of homelessness in upcoming months as city councils will be unable to help everyone with current capacities of available public housing. Stories of people awaiting the moment when their guests would eventually move out escalate together with increasing inflation, which had already reached 16%²⁴ in August. Soaring gas prices also proved to be a compounding factor.

The final dimension of normalisation regards the burden put on state level services, especially the sector of education. Out of the estimated 800,000 Ukrainian children currently staying in Poland, barely 185,000²⁵ went to Polish schools in September, while the rest decided to continue their online education from Ukraine. Currently the educational system in Poland is undergoing a serious crisis due to the ongoing conflict between the Teachers’ Trade Union and the Ministry of Education. According to statistics, the number of vacancies has increased every year, not only due to demographic shifts, but also due to teachers resigning and changing professions. It can be estimated²⁶ that 600,000 teachers cover almost 800,000 positions. This portrays the system in even a more tense condition, taking into consideration the presence of Ukrainian pupils. The lack of adequate coordination when it comes to examinations or the challenges with communication serve as the ground for potential conflicts between Ukrainian pupils and Polish teachers.

²² Rodowicz, Agnieszka. *Czy ktoś tu robi interesy na uchodźcach? Reportaż z centrum pomocy* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

²³ Przyborska, Katarzyna. *Tymczas: w Ukrainie wojna, w Polsce bezdomność* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

²⁴ TVN24 Biznes. *Inflacja w Polsce - sierpień 2022. Wstępne dane GUS* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

²⁵ Potocka, Joanna. *Ukraińskie dzieci w polskich szkołach. Minister podał liczbę* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

²⁶ Nowosielska, Paulina and Patrycja Otto. *Suche fakty o nauczycielach: Ilu ich jest, ile jest wakatów i godzin nadliczbowych IOPINIA!* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

Why the differing reactions of the state and society at the Belarussian border?

Regardless of all the emerging problems affecting Polish society when it comes to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, the massive mobilisation and grassroots help were completely different than how refugees from Asia and Africa were welcomed and treated by Polish state services at the Belarussian border. Are the following poll results conducted by Ipsos sufficient evidence of systemic and societal racism expressed towards non-European refugees? According to September 2021 survey²⁷, only 41% of people claimed applications for asylum status should be examined, whereas 52% favoured push-backs as the correct strategy. In a May 2022 poll²⁸, barely 35% of respondents believed the refugees entering through the Belarussian border deserve the same treatment as the ones arriving from Ukraine. Moreover, it was reported²⁹ that non-Ukrainian refugees coming from Ukraine also experienced discriminatory treatment, especially Roma refugees. Can these phenomena be explained by simple racism or are there any other factors? Based on the stories I heard from my interviewees, there are at least three other issues contributing to the completely different approaches to humanitarian aid.

First of all, almost everyone I interviewed told me that even if they had thought of helping, they had no clue how this help could have been delivered. The only possible way to help would denote moving to the border area. However, police, border guards, and the army did everything to criminalise voluntary activism by outlawing entrance to the area, ranging from two up to twelve kilometres from the border. Any pro-refugee activism was associated with attempting human smuggling. The fear of legal consequences successfully discouraged many potential activists from providing humanitarian aid, moreover the overall societal atmosphere and pressure to help Ukrainian refugees was completely absent for the refugees at the Belarussian border.

Secondly, the government managed to construct the narrative of a “hybrid war” likening the arrival of refugees at the Belarussian border to “bullets” of the Lukashenko regime, aimed at destabilising Poland and the wider EU.

“From a humanitarian point of view maybe these people should be treated better. However, crossing the border in wrong places was illegal, you shouldn’t be surprised if illegal crossing was then punished. Anyway, all these people came because they were sent by Lukashenko, it was a quiet war against our security. I was very happy with the activity of Polish state services, they defended our border from this attack”,

I heard this from one of my interviewees in Poznań. Negative attitudes towards the refugees were more justifiable taken into consideration that they were inscribed into the narrative of a hybrid war. Interestingly enough, media discourses completely avoided the topic of why the refugees decided to trust Lukashenko and travel to the Polish-Belarussian border. Their motivation was

²⁷ Pacewicz, Piotr. *52 proc. za wypychaniem uchodźców. Mezczyźni na zimno, kobiety ze współczuciem* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

²⁸ Danielewski, Michał. *Uchodźcy gorszego sortu: chcemy pomagać Ukraińcom, ludziom na granicy z Białorusią już nie [SONDAŻ]* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

²⁹ Mikulska, Anna. *Romowie z Ukrainy traktowani jako uchodźcy drugiej kategorii* (accessed: 7 October 2022).

reduced to the sole desire of accessing European welfare as if “*the war in Syria was over, you should stay there*”. Media also circulated the belief that refugees crossed the border solely in illegal places and not at checkpoints without realising that border guards working at these checkpoints ignored their applications for asylum. All these discourses affected the perception of refugees at the Belarussian border.

Thirdly and finally, the government also succeeded in constructing a threatening narrative of fear by militarising the whole border area.

“Every day we saw tens of armed vehicles, soldiers, checkpoints were established on the roads between our villages. It resembled me an armed conflict. One day a policeman came to the shop saying to be aware of the refugees as they were carrying so long knives. I know plenty of old women living alone in their wooden houses were afraid of going to the garden”,

I heard this from one of my interviewees in November 2021. Treating the refugees as a source of evil and physical threat did not create the image of people in need of help. Presumably, if the government had welcomed the refugees in the same way from the very beginning, societal attitudes towards the refugees at the Belarussian and Ukrainian borders may have not been completely different.

Conclusion

What are the key takeaways when it comes to assessing the effect of the “refugee crisis” on Polish society during the past year?

- 24 February 2022 proved again that Polish society can immediately mobilise under crisis circumstances and set aside divisive issues.
- Imaginability and geographical vicinity of the conflict, the construction of solidarity narratives, and cultural intimacy with Ukrainians served as the key factors motivating people to help.
- Skyrocketing inflation and looming economic crisis might influence the attitude towards Ukrainian refugees and contribute to discriminatory behaviour especially in cases of welfare distribution and the depletion of resources.
- Militarisation, discourses of a “hybrid war” with Belarus, and criminalisation of humanitarian aid are responsible for the rise of societal racism and hostile attitudes towards the refugees at the Belarussian border.

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