

We have a problem, and a serious one at that....

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We have a problem, and a serious one at that. The belief persists in the public sphere that Poles are full of goodwill towards Ukrainians. We have managed to give ourselves medals for this, and we accept thanks from Ukraine. The problem is that this goodwill no longer exists.

It was certainly the case in the first months, when we reacted with compassion to the outbreak of war and Russian violence. Fear of Russia also played its part, which is a strong factor in the integration of Poles and Ukrainians, regardless of sentiment. Unfortunately, sympathy is no longer the dominant emotion among Poles.

On the contrary, resentment is the standard. And this resentment is growing, finding no articulation in the public sphere, neither in the media nor with politicians. There are good intentions behind this lack of articulation, but the consequences can be lamentable.

Our sociological research shows that negative feelings towards refugees from Ukraine prevail in all social groups, of all ages, in large and small cities and with no gender distinction. So we are sitting on a ticking bomb. And if we don't defuse it wisely, it will get into the hands of people who can use it to build political support for themselves. This is exactly what happened in Germany in 2015, where the media and political elite failed to articulate the growing aversion to refugees and a microscopic AfD party suddenly grew out of this to become the third political force in the country.

In our research we explored the psychological reaction of Poles to the outbreak of the pandemic and subsequent war and the accompanying economic and refugee crises. Below we publish the part of the report that shows what Poles think and say about refugees. We conducted the research during the summer of 2022 in all social groups (small and big city, men and women, young and old, popular and middle class). We illustrate the theses with quotes from the group interviews. We include a conclusion at the end. Until we recognize and discuss the swollen problem, the discussion about solutions will not start. The topic will be taken over by the wrong people. And the first victim will be the refugees themselves.

We are united by our dislike of refugees

What united the narratives of our middle-class and popular respondents appeared to be the strong aversion spontaneously expressed in all focus groups towards Ukrainians. There is a resounding concern about losing priority in access to benefits and to public services (health, education, care). Referring to the metaphor of the queue used in previous studies: now it is refugees who are accused of pushing their way to the front (previously Poles blamed other Poles for this). The Ukrainians, it is believed, even get what patiently waiting Poles can only dream of: a place in a crèche or kindergarten, an appointment with a specialist, an imminent surgery.

Poles do not like the extension of PESEL (issue of permanent resident ID numbers), the Family 500 plus programme (which provides a monthly benefit of 500 PLN (106 EUR) for each child under 18 years) and other social benefits to Ukrainians. There is a belief that refugees so 'generously' supported will not want to return to their country, will overburden the already inefficient public service systems, and will take away jobs (in fact, as things stand, there are already more than 400,000 people who arrived in 2022 already working, and according to experts, the market would absorb at least as many again). What these stories have in common is that they are mostly second-hand. In short, now is the 'refugee season' when you need to find someone to blame for your misery.

- This can already be seen from the euphoria at the Ukrainians, that at first willingly, now such hatred has already made, for example, that they take trains for free. Because there has already been a row about that too.

- There is such a fatigue with them. But there are also a lot of such signals... A friend, for example, told me that she goes to a beautician and gets some nails done there. A Ukrainian woman comes and tells her to do her hands for free, because she has to....

- Well.

- I heard the same thing from a hairdresser, that...

- No.

- She has everything for free in Poland and she doesn't have to pay for a hairdresser.

- Even at my place one acquaintance said that she did everything to a Ukrainian woman, and she later said that she would not pay, because it was for free. After the fact. And she left.

- My friend is an orthopedist, he takes them in, these Ukrainians. They are very demanding. They want to be first in line to get a set of tests done for them. They don't care about the rest of the queue and the rest of the people. Whether they are Ukrainians or Poles, it just has to be done and that's it. Not all of them, of course, but there are some immigrants, and that...

- And do you have any personal negative experiences with Ukrainian refugees?

- I don't have personal ones.

- I don't have personal ones either, it's just ...

[men aged 25-40, metropolitan middle class].

These stories are like weeds: they spread quickly, come from nowhere and are hard to eradicate. They are almost always 'from a friend' or 'heard from a hairdresser'. There are more and more of them on social media, where there is no room for political correctness, and where anonymity and spontaneity are the general rule. The storytellers themselves notice this difference and conclude that the traditional media do not want to show 'how it is' because they are on the side of the refugees. Consequently, suspicion grows even more.

- The media tends not to show such things. They are more likely to show all the time that they are disadvantaged to help them.

- More maybe on the internet such videos of individuals.

- On Facebook, on Instagram?

- There's a lot of that on TikTok.

- Either they put a headline underneath and people put comments underneath, that's where they get filmed and that's where people argue, riot.

[Women aged 25-40, folk class, small town].

We counted more than twenty repeated stories heard from neighbours, friends, hairdressers and so on. For example, about Ukrainian refugee women being privileged in access to schools, kindergartens, nurseries, a doctor. About situations where Ukrainians allegedly did not pay for the service provided, claiming it was due to them. Or about the abuse of benefits and others of this nature. These concerns can be ignored as unfounded, but it will be a mistake, because also fictitious beliefs have real consequences.

- A friend of mine was in a pharmacy, someone from the Ukraine came in, acquired a number of medicines and the lady in the pharmacy says, well you have to pay. No, because I care. She: well no, because it's only for medicines that are on prescription. So he supposedly took it and ran away.

- I had a situation like that, I was at my hairdresser's and three Ukrainian ladies came in and said they wanted to have their colour done, have their hair cut, and it came out to about 300 zloty a head, where they were supposed to pay about 1,000 zloty; they got their hair done and left. This hairdresser says: "Wait a minute, who's going to pay?". "She says: "Well, who is going to pay? So she called the police, the police came and they just paid.

- In the arena too, where I volunteered there, there was one lady from Ukraine who thought she was entitled to everything. It's known, people themselves bring food, clothes and everything, it's a private initiative. After a month in that arena, when this lady was leaving the arena for some flat rented for her, she brought 35 suitcases and probably 15 mobile phones.

- Who gave her so much?

- But from where?

- From that volunteering, she hoarded.

[Women aged 50+, metropolitan middle class].

Ukrainians a victim of the economic situation

Ukrainians have become victims of dissatisfaction with the deteriorating economic situation of Poles, fears of state paralysis and low levels of public services, rampant inflation and skyrocketing energy prices. **The majority of respondents, and in some groups all of them (especially the popular class), believe that refugees are privileged, entitled and treated better than Poles.**

The government's propaganda, which explains all problems by the war in Ukraine, is reflected in the refugees.

- People will simply hate them [...].

- What do you think might happen?

- People will beat each other, kick each other, murder each other, they will eat each other, I have no idea, that's how it will be.
- That's how it's going to be, it's at our expense. [...]
- There will be nothing to buy with, there will be more theft, there will be such hatred just for them.
- It is known, not every Ukrainian is equal to another. Nor can everyone be lumped together.
- But since they appeared, things started to go wrong with us.

[...]

- They are taking away our jobs, they are taking away our housing, let them go to their own place, let everyone live at their own place. I understand that we also go to Germany, to England to work, I understand everything.
- But not in the millions.
- That's right.
- But all at once people fell like this.

[Women aged 25-40, popular class, small town].

Cynical calculations

The only class difference in the assessment of the state's refugee policy is that middle-class respondents happen to see an opportunity in the fact that refugees from Ukraine will take up service jobs for lower wages, which will have a positive impact on the labour market and inflation. But this calculation is essentially purely pragmatic, not to say cynical: they can stay as long as they work for us.

- *Who will shout the most that the Ukrainians are taking our jobs? The blue-collar workers who sit around and do nothing. Who will soon be taking 700 plus.*
- No, they are not a threat against the Poles. They are the cheaper jobs, the ones Poles no longer want and that's what agriculture, construction are based on.
- Just like in the West.

[Men aged 50+, metropolitan middle class]

For interviewees from the popular class, the mass influx of desperate people from across the eastern border is potential competition in manufacturing and non-specialised services, and on top of that the threat of reduced access to state support.

- *Younger people were more afraid of jobs, that Ukrainians would come and there would be a lack of these jobs for us. Like me especially, who works in construction, and the workers come, they were afraid that they would come and there would be a problem.*

[Women aged 25-40, folk class, small town].

Therefore, **fearful of the financial crisis and the collapse of the public service system, the**

middle class expects such support for Ukrainian refugees that does not burden the state budget (it is hard to say what that would be).

- I think we are overstepping the mark, and the help the state is able to give in addition to this 500 plus, I don't know why they gave it, for me it's a surprise. I'm in favour of any kind of aid, except one that is a burden on the budget.

- It can't be that all of a sudden there have to be beds reserved in the hospital for Ukrainians, so what, a Pole has to die and the beds stand empty because they are for Ukrainians.

- The same for nurseries.

- Same in the clinic.

[Women aged 50+, metropolitan middle class].

The popular class believes that social support is to be offered first and foremost to Poles, and Ukrainians should manage without it, possibly - have access second.

- Here they have food.

- And here they have everything substituted.

- And if they don't, they will fight.

- Where they go to the doctor, where there is no place for us to go to the doctor, and they go and there is, there always is, the doctor accepts them. They have no problem here.

- And they're picky terribly.

[...]

- It's the same with Poles, there are those who live on welfare, and there are those who don't use it. You know, there are people and people - that's my opinion.

- But if they are to live on welfare, then let Poles use it first, in the first place.

- Well, yes, then I agree. They are with us and they should adjust to that as well.

[Women aged 25-40, folk class, small town].

When the state fails

This resentment will grow because the state is failing. **The goodwill and public commitment of Poles to refugees in the first few months should have acted as first aid, rather than a systemic solution to the problem over an extended period.** Poles had reason to assume that this would happen. The spontaneous involvement of citizens gave the state time to prepare and then take over the responsibility for helping refugees: getting them into the labour market, mediating with schools and deeper forms of integration. The government did not address this at all.

What worked against the refugees was the same thing that had previously pitted Poles against other Poles. This quasi-welfare state of ours is so poor and trust in the state, public institutions and others so low that it is difficult to find more helpers willing to guarantee refugees a permanent place at the

table. Certainly, **deliberate disinformation on the part of those cooperating with Russia** plays no small part in the spread of false stories proving Ukrainian claimants and dishonesty and intended to confirm their alleged privileged access to benefits and services. If the spontaneously growing resentment is not defused but continues to grow, it will become an invitation to systematic disinformation on a massive scale on the part of Russia.

Resentment towards refugees from Ukraine is not matched by resentment towards Ukraine itself. Nor do accusations related to history (for example, the Volhynia massacre) come up. And if someone does raise them, the group usually rejects this line of reasoning:

- *They had already arrived before the war.*
- Just let's not forget the history.
- What kind of grudge do I have against a Ukrainian who lives next door about Volhynia? What kind of grudge can I have?
- I am not saying: to him. But let us not forget it. If we forget it, we will lose our nationality.
- What nationality?
- Polish.
- Will we forget that we fought against the Teutonic Knights?
- That women and children were shot at.
- But, people dear, do you understand that young people don't give a damn anymore?

[Men aged 50+, folk class, small town].

We are still united by a common enemy. **We are so frightened by the Russian threat that we have no choice: no disputes with the Ukrainians. Or rather: no exposure of growing resentment.** The reality, however, is that Ukrainians are already facing and will continue to face more and more resentment, harassment and obstacles in schools, at work, in offices. In these places they are vulnerable. And there will be no question of any real integration beyond the superficial. Before 2022. Ukrainians lived with Ukrainians, Poles with Poles. At school, for years a Ukrainian child might not have established any bond with a Polish one, which sooner or later ended badly for him.

The Poles are genuinely and actively in favour of the Ukrainians, which does not prevent them from feeling resentment towards the newcomers at the same time. However, social control in the public sphere in this case remains almost ironclad and resentment towards refugees does not flow beyond the traditional situations that foster it, such as gossip and table talk. In the public sphere, this aversion does not find its expression.

Neither the Law and Justice Party nor any other party apart from the Confederation is playing up the growing concerns about the worsening economic situation and the influx of refugees from Ukraine. No major political force is trying to make political capital out of these sentiments, but neither is it trying to address them properly. This may be changing, however - public emotions are strong, as is the temptation to point the finger at the culprit for declining living standards.

It is fortunate that the resentment towards refugees from Ukraine is not dehumanising or

met with hate speech. It is easy to see the difference if we recall the recent crisis on the border with Belarus, when refugees from the Middle East were met with humiliating treatment, desensitisation or just plain racism, and this among the broad masses of society. Against the background of migrants from other cultural backgrounds, Ukrainians are even becoming welcome guests:

- *This is another problem, climate migration.*
- Lots of refugees from different parts of the world.
- If these migrations, even of young Ukrainians or Belarusians, well, someone will work for our pension.
- Ukrainians yes, but if they come from Africa, they'll be on welfare like the Islamists in Germany, a bunch of kids.
- So all in all, maybe it's a good thing that these Ukrainians.
- This is a very good thing.

[Women aged 50+, metropolitan middle class].

Towards Ukrainians, Poles do not use aesthetic categories. They hardly even point out cultural differences, another thing: minor ones. So there is no subsoil for potential forms of open aggression against them. **Rather, refugees have been cast in the negative role previously fulfilled in Poles' complaints by other Poles**, which some respondents are aware of. They note that behind the negative opinions about refugees is a process of stereotyping.

- This is such a typical psychological process, that at the beginning you help, and then problems start to arise, soon they will pull out [that] some Ukrainian will rape, and - oh, everyone rapes. Or [that] one took out \$1,000 from a Porsche. Oh, they're all rich. And it starts... These Ukrainians this, and that, they're about to start taking out bandits, that's not the point, it's a normal process, there's a war, people are fleeing. There's always a thief among them, there's always a crook among them, out of millions of people, it's not 100 000, it's a couple of million people! But generally these are poor people, fleeing from war, and it seems to me that there is nothing to envy them.

[men aged 50+, metropolitan middle class].

However, this state of affairs may change if no one addresses the swelling resentment systemically.

Conclusion: defuse this bomb as soon as possible

The most urgent need in the public sphere today is to defuse, before it explodes uncontrollably, the resentment towards refugees that has swollen to enormous proportions. This emotion must be allowed to articulate, because it is really not so much about Ukrainians per se, but about a lack of trust in the state and in people amongst themselves.

Ukrainians are in real danger of harassment and humiliating treatment (school children and young people are particularly vulnerable). If the subject is not addressed thoughtfully by the opposition, it will be exploited by populists. Not necessarily those in power in Poland, because their hands are tied by the self-conferred title to glory for Poland's generous behaviour towards refugees from Ukraine. This argument is used by PiS in its foreign policy.

Thus, the situation is somewhat reminiscent of that in Germany 2015, when genuine public fear of refugees found no articulation either in the media or in the mainstream parties, until the marginal AfD party took it up and suddenly grew into the third force in the country. In Poland, a year before the elections, the same could happen.

The basis for defusing this ticking bomb should be a message: you have a right to be afraid (of rising housing prices, lack of a place to go to the doctor or a nursery), you have a right to be tired of help. And patiently explaining and showing that the real threat is not refugees. And from below, this should be supported by real, not just legal integration, so that Poles really get to know Ukrainians, Belarusians and other refugees from the East. This, too, is not discussed and integration remains superficial. This is a task for the media, NGOs and public authorities.

Politicians, journalists, NGOs should be a bit like therapists in an anxiety society: helping to work through bad emotions in public debate. Otherwise, there will be the impression that “the media are deliberately not talking about it”, which will be taken as further evidence of a conspiracy, and the distance of Poles from politics and the public sphere as a whole will increase even further. Just naming existing but unarticulated public concerns would be a good safety net.

It is a mistake both to flatter the Poles and repeat what a fantastic turn out they have had on the refugee issue (because it was different and now it is worse rather than better), and the contempt from enlightened Poles towards ‘those primitives who go after refugees’. Both approaches can be dangerous. It is necessary to speak directly about the genuine fatigue of the Poles, the problem with rising housing prices and access to public services. Because politicians prefer to keep quiet about it, the much-needed public discussion about solutions has still not begun. We would like our report to contribute to changing this state of affairs.

You can read the entire report, in which we also examine other areas of social life (e.g. Poles’ attitudes to psychotherapy or inflation) and the opportunities for politicians in the new reality, here: <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/polacy-za-ukraina-ale-przeciw-ukraincom-raport-z-badan-socjologicznych-sadura-sierakowski/>

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