

Prawda, Pravda, Pravda

Polish Public Opinion on Ukrainian Refugees in the Age of Digital
Russian Disinformation

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Abstract

In the years following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, millions of Ukrainians fled to Poland. Although they were met with near-unanimous support in early 2022, Polish public opinion has since shifted, with only half of Poles now supporting the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees from conflict-affected areas. This steep decline in support has largely been attributed to war fatigue and domestic economic pressures, yet these explanations alone are insufficient. This paper argues that Russia's extensive anti-Ukrainian disinformation campaign has significantly contributed to the erosion of public support. Drawing on data from street interviews in Poland and a structured review of fact-checking articles published since the invasion, the author shows how Russian disinformation narratives have been adopted to rationalize increasingly negative attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees. Furthermore, by comparing the stability of European preferences for refugees with the content of anti-Ukrainian disinformation, the study demonstrates that these campaigns strategically target the very traits that initially made Ukrainians a preferred refugee group, using the techniques of *Reframing* and *Recasting*. Finally, the paper establishes how disinformation, by alleviating cognitive dissonance arising from domestic fears and political tensions, becomes more psychologically appealing, and therefore more convincing.

Initial Support

On the day that Russian troops crossed the border in Ukraine, President of the Polish Republic Andrzej Duda addressed the nation in what has since become a historic speech. At its heart was a plea to the Polish people:

We must be prepared to accept many refugees from Ukraine. People who will seek a safe haven with us fleeing the tragedy of war. I am convinced that we will show them solidarity and provide all possible assistance. On many occasions have we demonstrated that in trying times we can always rise to the occasion. That is what we are like as a nation."¹

Indeed, Poland did accept many refugees. 6.74 million Ukrainians would find themselves displaced from Ukraine since the invasion,² and as of June 11 2024, 957,505 were registered as refugees in Poland. This made the country the third largest host of fleeing Ukrainians, behind Germany (1,190,255 refugees

¹ Andrzej Duda, "Message by the President of the Republic of Poland," *Oficjalna strona Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.president.pl/news/message-from-the-president-of-the-republic-of-poland.65161>.

² "Ukraine: Over 6 Million Refugees Spread Across Europe." United Nations Regional Information Center for Western Europe, September 11, 2024, <https://unric.org/en/ukraine-over-6-million-refugees-spread-across-europe>

registered) and Russia (1,227,555 refugees registered).³ Millions more passed through Poland as they made their way further West. The number of crossings peaked on March 7, 2022, when 141,415 border crossings were made on a single day.⁴ Amid the rapid and heavy influx of Ukrainians flowing into Poland, a country with minimal federal frameworks dictating integration processes, Polish citizens united in grassroots initiatives to meet the needs of the displaced. They volunteered money, time, and resources, with many even opening their homes to those fleeing the invasion. This response was completely unprecedented. Within the earliest days of the conflict, individuals and groups like *Kobiety Za Kółko* appeared at the border in private vehicles, offering to shuttle arriving Ukrainians to safety.⁵

These individual efforts quickly expanded to massive aid programs coordinated by NGOs, volunteer groups, and local governments. Motivated both by practical necessity and overwhelming public support, the Polish government poured money into domestic refugee assistance programs. The scale of funding is evident in the data: According to the Kiel Institute's Ukraine Aid Tracker, while Poland lags behind similarly situated European nations in other forms of aid to Ukraine, it far outpaces all but Germany with respect to the amount of aid given to refugees,⁶ and when adjusted for GDP, Poland prevails outright. Between January 2022 and October 2024, they allocated €27.97 billion to "refugee costs"—an amount single-handedly outstripping the aggregate aid given by all other countries besides Germany and the United States. This level of public and municipal support for a refugee group has never before been seen in Poland, a country historically hostile to refugees and migrants.⁷ Even compared to Poles' attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees fleeing prior conflicts, the scale of the support was remarkable. CBOS polling data found that prior to the 2022 invasion, support for Ukrainians fleeing from ongoing conflicts in eastern Ukraine was waning, dropping by 5% from 2017 to 2018.⁸

Theoretical Justification

Literature establishing the initial outpouring of Polish support for Ukrainians has been plentiful, providing a solid foundation for further research examining how and why sentiments have evolved over time.

³Elżbieta Ociepa-Kicińska et al., "Forms of Aid Provided to Refugees of the 2022 Russia–Ukraine War: The Case of Poland." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 12 (2022): 7085.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19127085>

⁴"Dane Statystyczne Dotyczące Sytuacji na Granicy z Ukrainą," *Otwarte Dane*, March 29, 2022.

https://dane.gov.pl/en/dataset/2705_dane-statystyczne-dotyczace-sytuacji-na-granicy-z-ukraina.

⁵Joanna Kakissis, "Polish women band together to give Ukrainian women car rides to safe refuge," NPR, April 21, 2022,

<https://www.npr.org/2022/04/21/1093711322/russia-ukraine-war-refugees-ukrainian-women-poland>.

⁶"Ukraine Support Tracker," Kiel Institute for the World Economy, last updated February 14, 2025,

<https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>.

⁷Justyna Tomczak-Boczko et al., "Who is a 'true refugee'? Polish political discourse in 2021–2022," *Discourse Studies* 25, no. 6 (July 2023): 799–822, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614456231187488>

⁸CBOS, *Raport z badań. Przedstawienie opinii Polaków na temat sytuacji w kraju oraz oczekiwań wobec rządu*, Warszawa: CBOS, 2018, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2018/K_087_18.PDF.

Among the many papers and reports documenting the early support and positive public perceptions, several ventured to explain its social source. Researchers from Jagiellonian University identified three main factors underlying the unprecedented levels of social and material support: A Polish feeling of “closeness” towards Ukrainian refugees, anticipation and fear of Russia or a Russian invasion, and the emergence of help-giving as a social norm.⁹ The third factor is a consequence of the prior two, which together create an in-group, out-group effect. As Russia’s aggression escalates, it appears more dangerous and adversarial, and Ukrainians, by contrast, appear more proximate—more Polish. All insiders face a common enemy, giving them yet another shared trait, and thus a positive feedback loop is created. The nearly unanimous state of national sympathy towards Ukrainians was a manifestation of perceived similarities, their salience heightened by a common enemy.

Besides opposition to Russia, the initial similarities between Ukrainians and Poles include religion, ethnicity, and cultural background. As demonstrated by Kirk Bansak and Jens Hainmüller, these perceived likenesses afford Ukrainians a warmer welcome based on existing European social preferences for refugees of a certain kind.¹⁰ The more culturally, ethnically, and religiously similar a refugee population is perceived to be, the warmer of a welcome they will receive in their host country. Ukrainian refugees fit these criteria much better than previous refugee populations of comparable size. Other factors that influencing European host-country attitudes include education level, economic potential, gender, age, motivations for fleeing, and the perceived vulnerability of the refugee. Here, too, Ukrainian refugees fit the preferred traits better than other groups by virtue of their situation: They tend to be more educated, are predominantly female, hold a greater number of professional occupations, and are perceived as less opportunistic in their movements than prior migrant groups. All of these factors contributed to their comparatively warm reception in Poland and across Europe.

Sharp Downturn in Support

In his invasion-day speech, President Duda warned Poland of the test that lay before them:¹¹

Today, as Western world, we are passing a credibility test. The future of the free world depends on how we respond together to the evil that is unfolding before our very eyes.

⁹Małgorzata Kossowska et al., “The role of fear, closeness, and norms in shaping help towards war refugees,” *Scientific Reports* 13, article no. 1465 (January 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-28249-0>.

¹⁰Kirk Bansak et al., “Europeans’ Support for Refugees of Varying Background is Stable Over Time.” *Nature* 620 (August 2023): 849–854. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06417-6>

¹¹ Andrzej Duda, “Message by the President of the Republic of Poland,” *Oficjalna strona Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.president.pl/news/message-from-the-president-of-the-republic-of-poland.65161>.

We are and will be subject to Russian propaganda and disinformation. Let us not allow anyone to sow discord among us, let us not be divided, let us not be misled.

And yet, despite Duda's warning, despite Ukrainians' perceived closeness to Poles, and despite the initial outpouring of support after the invasion, public opinion polls show that now, only three years later, Polish support for Ukrainian refugees is in steep decline. In October 2024, CBOS reported that only 53% of Poles were in favor of accepting Ukrainian refugees from areas affected by the conflict—just over half of those (94%) who supported acceptance in March of 2022.¹² Complementary to this decrease in support is a rise in antagonism: 40% of Poles now say that Poland should *definitely not* accept Ukrainian refugees, compared to just 3% in March 2022. While the rest of Europe also exhibits a decrease in approval for providing humanitarian aid to people affected by the war, it is far less drastic than Poland's, with 87% of Europeans still supporting refugee aid.¹³ The deeper social attitudes explaining this recent downturn in Poland have yet to be thoroughly studied. Still, the surface catalysts are identifiable.

The Polish 'Grain Scandal' occurred when cheap Ukrainian grain was allowed to flood the Polish market, following the European Union's decision to temporarily liberalize trade with Ukraine after the invasion.¹⁴ The fallout left Polish farmers—whose storehouses were full of unsold crops—protesting and calling for Poland to focus on domestic policy over Ukrainian aid. The Konfederacja party, which joined the farmer's border protests and blockades, won support by championing this issue. Party leaders have since capitalized upon anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, themselves becoming vessels for anti-Ukraine disinformation, as will be discussed later.¹⁵

Rising costs of living and inflation tied to the war increased pressure on the Polish government to redirect resources towards Polish citizens and away from refugees, who are increasingly perceived as 'entitled,' 'demanding,' and 'ungrateful.'¹⁶ 95% of the Polish public now agree that social benefits for Ukrainians should be reduced.¹⁷ Despite their positive contributions to the economy and a measurable boost to GDP,¹⁸

¹²CBOS, *Opinions of Poles on the Social and Political Situation in the Country, the Attitude Towards the EU, and Current Events*, Warsaw: CBOS, 2022, https://www.cbos.pl/EN/publications/reports_text.php?id=6889.

¹³ European Commission, *Eurobarometer 92: Public Opinion in the European Union*, Brussels: European Commission, 2019, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3215>.

¹⁴ Kateryna Pryshchepa, "Seeds of Strife," *IPS Journal*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/economy-and-ecology/seeds-of-strife-7361/>.

¹⁵ Nathan Alan-Lee, "Poland's Far-Right Advances on Anti-Ukraine Sentiment," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, April 13, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/polands-far-right-advances-on-anti-ukraine-sentiment/>.

¹⁶ European Commission, "Poland: Survey Reveals Shifting Attitudes," *European Website on Integration*, June 24, 2024, https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/news/poland-survey-reveals-shifting-attitudes-towards-people-displaced-ukraine_en.

¹⁷ Martin Fornusek, "Polish Attitudes Toward Ukrainian Refugees Deteriorating, Survey Says," *The Kyiv Independent*, June 19, 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/polish-attitudes-toward-ukrainian-refugees-deteriorating-survey-says/>.

¹⁸ UNHCR, *Analysis of the impact of refugees from Ukraine on the economy of Poland*, Geneva: UNHCR, March 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106993>.

the growing refugee population has stoked fears of government overspending, unemployment, and housing shortages.¹⁹ Konfederacja used these fears and dissatisfactions with the sitting government as fodder against Law and Justice (PiS), which was generally supportive of Ukrainian refugees fleeing after the invasion. In the 2023 elections, PiS lost its majority in the Sejm with a reduction of 41 seats, while Konfederacja gained 7, nearly doubling its representation since 2019.²⁰ As this party gains political power, it is generating increased public awareness and support for campaigns opposing the “Ukrainization” and “De-polonization” of Poland.²¹

A decrease in support for Ukrainian refugees might have been expected, if only because the initial outpouring was so exceptionally high. But the nature of this decline raises urgent questions. Why is Poland’s support waning more quickly than the rest of Europe’s? How is it that half of Poland now rationalizes a turn on Ukrainian refugees, whom they regarded to be so deserving and gracious only two years ago? Where do the anti-Ukrainian narratives originate before being amplified by Konfederacja and others? The polls clearly indicate a dramatic turn away from Ukrainian refugees. But how such a strong reversal possible, and in so little time?

Research Objectives

My thesis aims to answer these questions, identifying both a source and psychological motive for Poland’s rapid attitudinal shift away from support for refugees. I examine the impact of strategic Russian disinformation campaigns, deliberately engineered to target the qualities that afforded Ukrainian refugees such a warm welcome in Poland. These campaigns are narrowly tailored to established Polish preferences. Historical responses to past refugee crises and poll data show that Poles have a discerning framework for “good,” or deserving, and “bad,” or undeserving, refugees. Russian disinformation seeks to reposition Ukrainians into the second category, using two strategies that I call *Recasting* and *Reframing*. To identify the narratives Russia is propagating in Polish mediascapes, I have conducted a systematic review of the top Polish fact checking sources’ articles on Ukrainian refugee disinformation. To assess the reach, emotional salience, and perceived credibility of these narratives, I will draw on data from street interviews conducted in three Polish cities.

¹⁹ Michal Gluszak and Radoslaw Trojanek, “War in Ukraine, the Refugee Crisis, and the Polish Housing Market,” *Housing Studies* 40, no. 5 (2024): 1043–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2024.2334822>.

²⁰ Politico Europe, “Poland: Poll of Polls,” *Politico*, April 9, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/poland/>.

²¹ Magdalena Bojanowska, “Stop ukrainizacji Polski! Rosyjska telewizja znowu pokazuje Polaków,” *Gazeta.pl*, October 2, 2022, <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114884,28977297,grzegorz-braun-stop-ukrainizacji-polski-rosyjska-telewizja.html>.

Methodology

In order to assess the causes of the significant decline in public support for refugees, 37 semi-structured street interviews were conducted of Polish citizens and permanent residents. Respondents' answers included both their own opinions on the state of refugees in Poland and their observations of their peers' perspectives and wider public opinion. The interview transcripts were reviewed and coded thematically in order to establish the Poles' main concerns regarding the presence of Ukrainian refugees in their country.

These interviews were conducted in the strategically selected Polish cities of Rzeszów, Stary Sącz, Krakow, and Warsaw. Rzeszów is the nearest city to the Ukrainian border, and has extensive experience interacting with refugees. It served as a thoroughfare for over 1.5 million Ukrainians fleeing west, and some 100,000 still currently live there, making up 1 out of every 3 residents. Stary Sącz is a small conservative town in the south of Poland. It is the only small town that was visited, and served to provide a rural perspectives on Ukrainian refugees. Kraków, the second largest city in Poland, saw its population increase by 23% with the influx of Ukrainian refugees. The final city was Warsaw, the capital of Poland, whose population increased by 15%²².

Street interview methodology was chosen to explore the intricacies of respondents' rationalization processes and gauge the specific degrees of concern about Ukrainian refugees. Where public opinion polls describe the breadth of feelings towards refugees, longform interviews provide an understanding of the depth of concern and the emotional scope of the issue for everyday Polish citizens. Additionally, interviews gauge perceptibility to specific disinformation narratives in person, as opposed to online. Because the sample of respondents was limited by geographic location and language, their responses are not meant to be a universally representative sample of Poles, but rather act as an indication of the presence of narratives, like a litmus test. These interviews lasted between 15 minutes and two hours in length according to the respondent's leisure, and took place in public with voluntarily participants. Their answers were recorded using handwritten notes or with audio recording, according to each respondent's preference. Questions were open-ended and contained no references to any refugee narratives, which means that all topics beneath the 'Ukrainian refugee' umbrella arose organically. The general script can be viewed below. First names were recorded only when participants willingly agreed to provide them. All interviews were conducted in accordance with IRB guidelines and consent was established before commencing each interview.

²² <https://www.eib.org/en/stories/ukrainian-poland-infrastructure-refugees>

Then, in order to gauge the main themes of anti-Ukrainian disinformation in Poland since the invasion, a review was conducted of all the fact-checking articles published by the top eight fact checking organizations in Poland from January 1st, 2022 to March 1st, 2025. All those pertaining to disinformation about Ukrainian refugees were coded thematically. While these articles do not constitute the entirety of anti-Ukrainian disinformation present in Polish mediascapes since the invasion, they represent the most common and viral narratives. The status of false narratives as Russian disinformation is established through open-source intelligence evaluation of the story's source, in addition to comparison of the narrative's dissemination with the hallmarks of Russian disinformation.

The eight fact-checking organizations used were chosen based on their prominence among all Polish fact-checking bodies and the availability of their articles organized in chronological order. The organizations included were as follows:

1. AFP Sprawdzam ("*I'm Checking*"): The Polish arm of the French Press Agency and member of the the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) that verifies information about Covid-19, the war in Ukraine, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and various other topics.
2. Demagog: Established in 2014, Demagog was the first fact-checking organization in Poland. It is also the largest. They use analytical tools including CrowdTangle and Brand24 to monitor online activity and identify suspicious activity, often investigating content by interviewing involved officials directly. IFCN member.
3. FakeNews.pl: The second largest fact-checking agency in Poland, FakeNews.pl was founded in 2020 and systematically reviews content about Covid-19, the war in Ukraine, migration, LGBTQ+ issues, and science. IFCN member.
4. Pravda: Not to be confused with Russian news agencies *Pravda* and *Pravda.ru*, Pravda is another Polish fact-checking organization founded in 2020. Their content generally focuses on disinformation surrounding Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, although they publish on various other topics as well. IFCN member.
5. OKO.press: A Polish news website with a dedicated 'True or False?' department. Often, their analyses are more in depth and cover disinformation narratives from an investigative angle.
6. FrontStory.pl: The Polish website for the Reporter's Foundation, which specializes in investigative journalism on topics of corruption and Russian influence.
7. Konkret24: An association of fact-checking journalists that work for TVN, a free Polish television and media network.

8. FakeHunter: A Polish Press Agency project verifying internet content, founded to fight the spread of Covid disinformation during the pandemic. FakeHunter allows internet users to report disinformation for verification.

Each theme and/or narrative that emerged from interviews was investigated to determine its contextual and factual basis, insofar as it was falsifiable. Themes that overlapped between interviews and fact-checking sources were compared to determine whether the narratives present in the interviews might have been informed by Russian disinformation. For example, an interviewee's specific citation of a false event that can be shown to have been fabricated by Russian sources is an indication of a perspective that has been informed by disinformation. When the themes coincided more broadly, the factual and political context is evaluated to identify alternative sources of the narrative. This systematic review of all main narratives present in interviews and in the Polish disinformation landscape is used to determine to what extent public opinion on each aspect of Ukrainian refugee's presence in Poland may have been manipulated by targeted, Kremlin-affiliated disinformation campaigns.

General Interview Script

Note: Some questions became obsolete, based on interviewee's answers. Open-ended follow-ups were included when appropriate.

Demographic information:

- What languages do you speak?
- What do you do for a living?
- Have you lived in this area for your whole life?

Non-issue contextualizing questions:

- What political party do you most align yourself with, if any?
- What issues are the most important to you at this moment?

Issue specific questions:

- What is your opinion on the Ukrainian refugees living in your city?
- Think back to 2022, the initial Russian invasion into Ukraine. What was your opinion on Ukrainian refugees coming to Poland back then?
- Have you felt your opinion on Ukrainian refugees change since then?
- In that time, what factors have impacted your opinion?
- How much contact do you have with Ukrainian refugees on a weekly basis?
- What is the nature of this contact?
- What do you find you have in common with Ukrainian refugees living in your city? What are the differences that you notice?

How has your experience living in this city changed since the influx of refugees?

Can you think of any benefits that the influx of Ukrainian refugees here has had?

Can you think of any drawbacks that the influx of Ukrainian refugees here has had?

In your opinion, what are the common sentiments around Ukrainian refugees in your city?

What are the sentiments online?

What do your friends, family, and peers think? Do you agree with them?

What, in your opinion, characterizes Ukrainian refugees in your city?

Are you familiar with any common narratives about the kind of refugees who come to Poland, or how they act here? If so, what are they?

How did you view Ukrainian people before the war?

Has the war changed this view?

Has anything else not related to the war changed this view?

In the past, Poland has been hesitant to accept refugees from other countries. Are Ukrainian refugees different? If yes, what is different about them?

Would you be satisfied if the Ukrainian refugees in your city were permanently settled here?

What do you hope for the future of the Ukrainian refugees in Poland?

Results

The majority of respondents reported increasingly negative feelings toward Ukrainian refugees, citing a familiar set of narratives to justify their shift in opinion. When these narratives were falsifiable, they often aligned not with the factual situation of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, but with the thematic content of specific Russian disinformation campaigns targeted against them. This content was not random; It was deliberately engineered to undermine the qualities that initially rendered Ukrainians a preferred refugee group—their demographic characteristics, their educational level, their commonalities with Poles, their reasons for fleeing, and their capacity to contribute economically—using the strategies of *Recasting* and *Reframing*. Taken together, the findings suggest that Russian disinformation has been effective in spreading narratives that erode the once-positive image of Ukrainian refugees, contributing significantly to the rapid decline in Polish public support.

Recasting and *Reframing* describe the methods used to undermine Ukrainians' alignment with the preferred category of refugees within Bansak and Hainmüller's paradigm. *Recasting* narratives seek to convince audiences that Ukrainians do not, in fact, align with the preferred traits where they do. they may exaggerate the number of male refugees to obscure the reality that the majority of adult Ukrainian

refugees are women—a trait associated with greater public sympathy. *Reframing*, by contrast, targets the preference itself, attempting to transform a once-favorable trait a negative one, thereby crippling or eradicating its positive influence. Female Ukrainian refugees, for instance, are portrayed as rivals to Polish women—an effort to render a once-positive trait of being female into one that is undesirable.

Before 2022, Poland was considered relatively resilient to disinformation, but the advent of targeted anti-Ukrainian refugee campaigns has seen this resiliency wane. This is due in large part to disinformation's capacity to alleviate cognitive dissonance in the face of domestic fears and political pressures. In both foreign disinformation and domestic political rhetoric, refugees are painted as a social and economic threat to Poland. These characterizations motivate the conclusion that Ukrainian refugees should no longer be supported, or even accepted into the country. However, it is psychologically challenging on an individual, cognitive level to justify a turn against a group that was once widely regarded as sympathetic and deserving. To do so without sufficient cognitive evidence may even threaten one's personal sense of morality. However, Russian disinformation against refugees allows them to be perceived as undeserving of support, “proving” that they are ungrateful, burdensome, or too dangerous to be accepted into Poland. This solves the moral cognitive dissonance that might otherwise have been difficult to overcome, rendering the narratives all the more effective and Poland as a whole more susceptible to them.

Limitations

The majority of interviews were conducted in English, which slightly limited the pool of eligible participants, and, consequently, the scope of the study. This may also have introduced selection bias because English-speaking Poles have access to a broader range of news and media sources. To mitigate this limitation, interview questions asked respondents to summarize their friends', families', and communities' views in addition to their own. However, because these opinions are recounted secondhand, they cannot convey the emotional nuance of firsthand accounts.

The Rise of Disinformation: Antidote to Cognitive Dissonance

Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Ukrainian refugees have been percolating through Polish media since the outset of the invasion, with little initial impact. However, with mounting tensions from the rising cost of living, inflationary pressures, and dissatisfaction with previous Polish governments, anti-Ukrainian disinformation narratives began to take root in public consciousness. Poles became more receptive to narratives that painted Ukrainians as undeserving and ungrateful, in order to align their political will (a reorientation towards domestic issues) with their moral compasses. This increased

receptiveness to the narratives can be explained by Cognitive Dissonance Theory. Cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual holds two or more contradictory values, beliefs, or ideas at the same time, causing them psychological distress.²³ In order to justify the conflict produced by the contradiction, the individual must find a way to harmonize them. This commonly occurs in refugee situations, when those living in regions not directly involved may simultaneously feel both a deep empathy or moral duty towards those suffering, but simultaneously, a reluctance to act. Usually, individuals will search for an explanation that preserves both their moral sense of self and their desired behavior. If Poles find themselves wanting to support policies taking assistance away from Ukrainians and Ukraine, they must find a rational explanation as to why Ukrainians are no longer deserving of the help of moral people. Here lies the opportunity for targeted anti-Ukrainian narratives. If Ukrainians are believed to be undeserving, ungrateful, and detrimental to Poland, then taking support away makes sense, and then anti-refugee policies can be justified. Unless this shift in framing occurs, Poles seeking to direct aid away from refugees face a psychological barrier: the degradation of their moral sense of selves.

Konfederacja and others capitalized on the need for explanations, wielding anti-Ukrainian sentiments and justifications in order to attract Poles who feel disenfranchised or forgotten in the wake of refugees' entry into Poland. The greater the domestic tensions, the more anti-Ukrainian narratives will be believed, meaning that even a country like Poland, which was originally resistant to anti-Ukrainian disinformation, can become susceptible.²⁴

'Good' and 'Bad' Refugee Frameworks Governing Public Opinion

The Overseas Development Institute found in 2023 that dominant refugee narratives in Poland distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' refugee groups.²⁵ 'Good' refugees, usually those from Eastern European countries who are perceived as ethnically and culturally similar to Poles, were characterized as more deserving of support. Alternatively, 'bad' refugees, usually those arriving from the Middle East and Africa, especially Muslims, were characterized as opportunistic, antagonistic, and undeserving of support. This framework was commonly espoused by PiS and echoed in conservative media in order to explain the difference in treatment of different migrant groups.

²³ Artur Pokropek et al., "Public Opinion on the War in Ukraine: A Cross-Sectional Study of Public Attention, War Anxiety, Susceptibility to Disinformation and Anti-refugee Attitudes.," *ResearchGate* preprint (August 2024), <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383220584>

²⁴ Mateusz Zadroga, "Disinformation Landscape in Poland," *EU DisinfoLab* (December 2023), https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/20231203_PL_DisinfoFS.pdf

²⁵ Karen Hargrave, Kseniya Homel, and Lenka Dražanová, *Public Narratives and Attitudes Towards Refugees and Other Migrants: Poland Country Profile* (London: Overseas Development Institute, May 2023), https://media.odi.org/documents/ODI-Public_narratives_Poland_country_study-revMay23.pdf.

This binary framework is consistent with the stable preferences a team from Stanford and Berkeley found for refugees of a certain type. In a survey conducted in 2016 and again in 2022, researchers found that Europeans' willingness to accept refugees hinged on the refugee's alignment with stable criteria.²⁶ These criteria included religion, cultural fit, previous occupation, vulnerability, reason for migrating, gender, age, and language skills. Europeans preferred refugees who were Christian, with better language skills and more professional previous occupations. They were partial to women over men, younger migrants over older ones, and those who had better language skills in the host country's language. Additionally, they preferred to accept vulnerable migrants fleeing from war, as opposed to those moving for economic reasons or escaping persecution in their home country. Ukrainian refugees tend to fit these criteria much better than previous groups, which means that by virtue of their group characteristics, they were predisposed for a warmer welcome in Europe, especially in countries like Poland with similar cultural backgrounds.

Russian Dissemination of Anti-Ukrainian Narratives

The evidence points to a targeted disinformation effort by the Kremlin to attack the character of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Disinformation is commonly used by Russia to destabilize democracies, polarize domestic politics, and target their enemies abroad, and it has been part of their playbook since Soviet times. The Kremlin's specifically anti-refugee campaign in Poland began just before the invasion and has continued throughout the war. In the days just before Russia crossed the border into Ukraine, disinformation specialists noted a shift towards anti-Ukrainian narratives in the content published by a group of thousands of disinformation-spreading accounts, which has continued in the years following the invasion. Before the conflict, Russian troll accounts were preoccupied with the dissemination of anti-vaccine and COVID-skeptic content in Poland,²⁷ but they conspicuously reoriented their content towards anti-Ukrainian narratives just *before* the invasion occurred—an indication of their strategic coordination with Russia. These are not rogue individual accounts or sources: They are Kremlin employees with a synchronized agenda. A quantitative analysis of Polish social media posts found that on February 21st and 22nd, the publishing of anti-Ukrainian content grew significantly, with no clear reason as to why.²⁸ (The reason was revealed two days later on February 24th, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine and triggered the wave of Ukrainians that fled to Poland.) These early posts included associations such as "UPA" in the context of "Murdering the Poles," "Ukrainian Refugees" with negative connections

²⁶ Kirk Bansak et al., "Europeans' Support for Refugees," (849–854)

²⁷ Michael Pawela, "Ujawniamy: skala rosyjskiej dezinformacji o COVID-19 w Polsce." *FakeNews.pl*, May 4, 2023, <https://fakenews.pl/badania/ujawniamy-skala-rosyjskiej-dezinformacji-o-covid-19-w-polsce/>.

²⁸ "Komunikat w sprawie szerzenia dezinformacji o sytuacji na Ukrainie w polskiej przestrzeni internetowej," IBIMS, December 13, 2022, <https://ibims.pl/komunikat-ws-szerzenia-dezinformacji-ws-sytuacji-na-ukrainie-w-polskiej-przestrzeni-internetowej/>.

to “labor market” and “unemployment,” various vulgarisms referring to Ukrainain citizens, “genocide” in reference to historical contexts between Poland and Ukraine, and “Banderites” in dehumanizing contexts including “they are not people,” they are “dogs,” “murderers,” and “child killers.” Such circulations were predominantly disseminated on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, where approximately 2 million Poles were reached by these posts. However, Poland’s overwhelmingly warm support for Ukrainian refugees in the early days of the invasion proved that they were largely resistant to this first wave of disinformation. In fact, the Polish government took notice of the Kremlin’s aggressive anti-Ukraine campaign. They delivered a series of ad-hoc advisories against Russian disinformation threats, increasing awareness and making Poles temporarily more vigilant. But as the war drags on and approaches the three-year mark, Poles have become easier targets for narratives delivered by Russian disinformation networks. Anti-Ukrainian narratives are rising again. Russian channels of disinformation are already deeply embedded in Polish information spaces and have no trouble spreading seeds of Ukrainian hate across Polish platforms. With many Polish citizens looking for justification to pull back refugee support, the narratives are far stickier than they initially were. Once the seeds are planted, they quickly grow, shared both by individuals and far-right politicians, specifically those in the Konfederacja party.²⁹

Poland as a Strategic Target

“Poland has been at the forefront of aid to Ukraine. Both the military and humanitarian one. That is exactly why we are the target of an organised, cynical Russian propaganda and disinformation.”

– *President Andrzej Duda, one year the invasion*³⁰

Poland’s unique geography, political influence, and relationship to the West make it a key and strategic target for Russian disinformation.³¹ Firstly, Poland has championed Ukraine’s accession into the EU, something Russia is vehemently opposed to. President Andrej Duda was responsible for personally lobbying leaders of Southern European countries to support Ukraine’s candidacy status for EU membership, a move lauded at the time by Polish voters.³² Secondly, Poland plays a key logistical role in the delivery of military equipment, weapons, and humanitarian aid into Ukraine. The city of Rzeszow is often the point of departure for many of these supplies, meaning that Poland’s support of Ukraine in the war bolsters and aids the efforts of the rest of the world, on top of the aid it gives on its own.³³ And

²⁹ “Populist Politicians Provoke Vitriol Against Ukrainian Refugees,” Debunk.org, February 21, 2023, <https://www.debunk.org/populist-politicians-provoke-vitriol-against-ukrainian-refugees>.

³⁰ Andrzej Duda, “Message by the President of the Republic of Poland,” *Oficjalna strona Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.president.pl/news/message-from-the-president-of-the-republic-of-poland.65161>.

³¹ Jehhen Mahda, “Strategiczny wróg Kremla,” *StopFake.org*, September 26, 2023, <https://www.stopfake.org/pl/strategiczny-wrog-kremla/>.

³² “Poland’s President Lobbies EU Members to Grant Ukraine Candidate Status,” *Ukrainian World Congress*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.ukrainianworldcongress.org/polands-president-lobbies-eu-members-to-grant-ukraine-candidate-status/>.

³³ “Polish Aid for Ukraine,” *President.pl*, February 23, 2025, <https://www.president.pl/news/polish-aid-for-ukraine.93908>.

thirdly, as has already been discussed in detail, Poland offers an escape route for Ukrainian refugees hoping to flee into Europe. Underlying all of this is Poland's position on NATO's eastern wall against Russia. Moscow seeks to exploit the large number of refugees in Poland by exacerbating tensions and using them as a scapegoat for domestic issues, which will undermine Polish public support of Ukraine as a whole. In the wake of the 2023 parliamentary elections, it is clear that anti-refugee campaigns are effective in polarizing Polish politics, dethroning pro-Ukrainian parties, and diminishing public sentiments of solidarity with Ukraine as a whole.

Personalized Anti-Ukrainian Playbook: Recasting and Reframing

The distinct set of narratives wielded against Ukrainian refugees in Poland is not random. Russian propagandists seem to have an understanding of exactly which characteristics make Ukrainians fit the 'good' refugee paradigm, and as the review of Polish fact-checking organizations will demonstrate, they attack those characteristics aggressively. For each characteristic, one or multiple narratives are designed either to undermine Ukrainians' fit in the preferential category or, if it cannot be denied, to attack Ukrainians on the basis of it. The first method, *Recasting*, seeks to change the perception of Ukrainians as fitting into a certain preferred category—for example, questioning their whiteness, accusing them of coming to Poland for financial gain, or stating that the refugees are predominantly Muslims, not Christians. The second method, *Reframing*, seeks to shift an existing stable preference by raising fears about the category. An example of this can be seen in the attacking of female refugees (a preferred category) with narratives accusing them of being promiscuous, superficial, and exploitative of benefits.

Almost every positive preference identified in Bansak and Hainmüller's report aligns with the population of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, with the exception of age. Given that these qualities are what elevate Ukrainians' reception above previous refugee welcomes, it's no coincidence that these are specifically targeted by Russian disinformation.

The rest of this paper is dedicated to a discussion the specific themes observed in interviews. Each theme is contextualized within the facts pertaining to it, insofar as it is possible to compare the narrative to factual information (sometimes, the themes are non-falsifiable). Then, each interview theme is compared to its counterpart narrative from the review of Russian disinformation fact-checks in order to establish how closely related the two may be, and, when they align, how the narrative deploys either the Recasting or Reframing strategy against refugees.

UKRAINIANIZATION

On July 14, 2022, Member of Polish Parliament Grzegorz Braun presented a legislative proposal titled “Stop the Ukrainianization of Poland” (“Stop ukrainizacji Polski”) in a meeting of the Sejm’s Parliamentary Group for International Relations and Interests of Poland and the Polish Diaspora³⁴. Braun argued that the proposal would shield Poland from “ethnic, political, and perhaps territorial disintegration” that could result from the influx of Ukrainian refugees, and suggested legislative changes including the adoption of an antidiscrimination law to protect Poles against minorities and restrictions on citizenship pathways for Ukrainians living in Poland³⁵. He detailed the “complex threat” that the influx of Ukrainian refugees posed in Poland, which was reportedly hurting the Polish economy, healthcare system, education, social services and the integrity of Polish politics. He cited many anti-Ukrainian tropes in his speech: That Ukrainians are more violent than Poles, that they would displace Poles from housing and employment opportunities, and that they would increase the risk of “old diseases” like HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis in Poland. The “Stop ukrainizacji Polski” launch was attended by pro-Russian columnists, anti-Ukrainian political activists, and public figures like Professor Bogusław Paż, who has previously been investigated for anti-Ukrainian hate speech³⁶. At least one Russian spy also showed up: Mateusz Piskorski, a disgraced former MP arrested in 2016 for “cooperating with Russian intelligence services,”³⁷ was attempting to attend the meeting when he was stopped by the Sejm’s Marshal Guard.

This was not the first time that “Ukrainization” (“ukrainizacja”) was introduced as a concept in Poland. The term first appeared on the Polish web in May 2016, when the Kremlin-aligned *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny* published a text titled “Islamization of the West, Ukrainization of Poland,” that was subsequently diffused by other Russian disinformation channels (namely *Dziennik Narodowy*, *Prawicowy Internet*, and *Sputnik*). In February of 2022, online activity of “Ukrainianization” and “Ukropolin” (“Ukrainian-Poland”) began increasing from nearly no mentions to several dozen a day, but they did not immediately take off within wider Polish discourse. This activity suggests that Kremlin-affiliated accounts were pushing the narrative since the early days of the war, but for the first few months, it had remained relatively fringe.

³⁴ Grzegorz Braun, “Stop ukrainizacji Polski - posiedzenie zespołu parlamentarnego,” *YouTube*, uploaded July 14, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRpFfk0eW6A>.

³⁵ Digital Forensic Research Lab, “Polish Right-Wing Party Proposes Anti-Immigration Bill to ‘Stop Ukrainization of Poland,’” Atlantic Council, July 22, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-russia-accuses-ukraine-of-creating-monster-troops-in-bi-olabs/#Polish-right-wing-party-proposes-anti-immigration-bill-to-stop-Ukrainization-of-Poland>.

³⁶ Julia Dauksza and Anna Gielewska, “Ukrainizacja w kolorze Braun,” *Frontstory.pl*, August 5, 2022, <https://frontstory.pl/ukrainizacja-grzegorz-braun-propaganda-rosja-ukraina-dezinformacja/>.

³⁷ Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), “The Russian Laundromat Exposed,” March 20, 2017, <https://www.occrp.org/en/project/the-russian-laundromat-exposed/the-russian-laundromat-exposed>.

Braun's "Stop ukrainizacji Polski" movement changed this. It introduced the concept of "Ukrainianization" to the mainstream, and soon the topic achieved explosive virality on Polish social media. Brand24's disinformation monitoring tool estimated that within 24 hours of Braun's meeting, posts featuring the term had been viewed by an audience of 5 million Polish speakers. While Braun's own accounts were among the primary vessels of "Ukrainianization" content, his reach was surpassed by that of pro-Russian columnist Marcin Skalski, who writes for Kremlin-friendly news portals including *kresy.pl* and *Wprawo.pl*³⁸. After his proposal in the Sejm, Braun made 6 posts mentioning "Ukrainianization." Skalski made 95³⁹. The narrative of "Ukrainianization" was taking off, and propagandists like Skalski were hard at work exploiting its popularity as much as possible. Within days, Braun's proposal was being covered by News Front channels, which have been officially recognized as Russian assets and are blocked in Poland⁴⁰. Not only was the narrative popular in Poland, it was also garnering attention from Russian audiences.

A little over a month later on August 24, 2022, the #StopUkrainizacjiPolski hashtag began suddenly trending on Twitter. In two days, over 46,000 tweets containing the tag were posted. Grzegorz Braun remarked that it had become "the most popular hashtag on the Polish internet" thanks to his party's ability to "accurately recognize the political reality."⁴¹ However, expert analysis of the accounts publishing with the hashtag revealed that its popularity was largely artificial. The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab found that the ten most active accounts promoting the hashtag had posted or reposted it 7,385 times between August 24th and August 27th, accounting for over 16% of the tag's total mentions.⁴² These accounts had been relatively dormant before commencing their superhuman publishing activity within the hashtag. Calculations for the tag's Coefficient for Traffic Manipulation (CMT) gave further indications that its popularity was manufactured. Whereas "organic" human behavior typically achieves a coefficient of 12 or lower, #StopUkrainizacjiPolski's coefficient was 46.4, indicative of heavy manipulation by bot accounts.

³⁸ Andrei Yeliseyeu, Veronica Laputka, Pavel Havlíček, et al., "Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Narratives and Their Transmitters in Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia," *AMO*, June 2023,

https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/AMO_Pro-Russian-Narratives-in-Czech-Republic-Slovakia-and-Poland.pdf.

³⁹ Dauksza, "Ukrainizacja w kolorze Braun."

⁴⁰ Adam Haertle, "Dlaczego nie działa mi strona, czyli jak ABW walczy z kremlowską propagandą," *Zaufana Trzecia Strona*, April 29, 2022.

<https://zaufanatrzeciastrona.pl/post/dlaczego-nie-dziala-mi-strona-czyli-jak-abw-walczy-z-kremlowska-propaganda/>.

⁴¹ Grzegorz Braun (@GrzegorzBraun), "#StopUkrainizacjiPolski - najbardziej popularny hashtag w polskich internetach....," *X*, August 26, 2022, <https://x.com/GrzegorzBraun/status/1563097876737118209>.

⁴² Givi Gigitashvili, "Twitter Campaign Pushes Anti-Ukraine Hashtag into Poland's Trending List," *Digital Forensic Research Lab*, August 30, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfirlab/twitter-campaign-pushes-anti-ukraine-hashtag-into-polands-trending-list-90ccc9474a60>.

The reason “Ukrainianization” had been so vehemently promoted in Poland by pro-Russian sources and twitter bots is because it is an emotionally salient anti-Ukrainian narrative that advances Russian objectives while masquerading as a Polish political topic. It is a broad accusation that creates a scarcity mindset to serve the interests of both Kremlin propagandists and fringe politicians. The latter wield the threat of “Ukrainianization” against mainstream political parties, whom they accuse of favoring Ukrainians over Poles. Konfederacja has gained a reputation for being the anti-Ukrainian party in Poland, whereas the center-right PiS and center-left PO remain supportive of Ukraine. The Center for European Policy Analysis asserts that this unique attitude towards Ukraine is to thank for the party’s recent surge in popularity⁴³. Among groups that feel that their needs and interests have been compromised in favor of pro-Ukrainian policy (including farmers, women, and the economically disadvantaged), Konfederacja has gained the most support since the war began.

The term ‘Ukrainianization’ is deliberately broad to increase its mainstream appeal. In mild cases, it refers to any situation where Ukrainians are perceived to be privileged over Poles in Poland. At its extreme, it is “the little sister of Judeopolonia, a conspiracy theory about Jews planning to dominate Poles and create their own state on the Vistula.” This version insists that Ukrainians are systematically overtaking Poland in order to create a “Ukropolin,” where Poles will “become second-class citizens” subjugated to the political will of Ukrainians. While the most intense rhetoric about the dangers of ‘Ukrainianization’ remains within the far-right ecosystem, disinformation narratives attempting to “prove” as much were often referenced by interviewees with less political conviction.

“We don’t feel at home in our own country anymore,” stated a Konfederacja supporter in Warsaw. “The way [the refugee situation] is currently handled is just terrible, especially because [Ukrainians] are effectively being made into a privileged class... We don’t want Poles to become second-class citizens in their own country.” Another supporter criticized the Polish government’s “too generous” approach to refugee aid: “Ukrainians are now treated better than Polish people... It’s absurd!” He recalled how the Polish state opened its arms to Ukrainian refugees when they were first arriving, and yet all his life he’d only observed bureaucracy in Poland being unkind to its own citizens. Seeing the refugees get everything so quickly, he was confused. “In just one moment, [the Polish government] said, ‘Welcome! Welcome! How can I help you?’” to Ukrainians, and Poles were left thinking, “‘What? Why, why, why didn’t you do that for Polish people?’” The real danger in this, he maintained, is that “it’s the first step to processes which we can see in Western countries, like France and Germany... Poland is afraid to be a second nation of hosts in our own country.”

⁴³Alan-Lee, “Poland’s Far-Right Advances on Anti-Ukraine Sentiment.”

This narrative has been used in Polish political discourse to attack politicians displaying solidarity with Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. On February 24, 2022, Warsaw mayor Rafał Trzaskowski posted a photo of a Ukrainian flag flying on the Warsaw City Hall building captioned, “Long live free Ukraine! Friends, we are with you!”⁴⁴ By April of that year, his photo had been reposted by Polish facebook accounts claiming that it proof of the impending Ukrainian occupation of Poland⁴⁵. This flag conspiracy was mentioned in interviews with Konfederacja supporters, who maintained that the prevalence of Ukrainian flags in Warsaw demonstrated the “tidal wave of Ukri-philia washing over [Poland’s] political establishment.” In their view, the Ukrainian flag on buildings belonging to the Polish state was Ukrainianization. “There used to be a massive Ukrainian flag next to the Polish flag on one of the institutional buildings, and next to the entrance to the Parliament as well,” recalled one young man. “This is the country of Poland, not Ukraine. This kind of invasion has never been allowed to happen before.”

In the first few months after the war, Polish politicians expressing solidarity with Ukraine were still adamant that Poland’s interests would always come first. Nonetheless, they were accused of ‘Ukrainianization’ by Braun and other Konfederacja affiliates for seeking to aid Ukraine. In a speech delivered on April 13, 2023, Minister of Foreign Affairs Zbigniew Rau, a member of the Law and Justice Party, affirmed that Poland’s foreign policy on the war would be informed by three key priorities: The preservation of Polish “peace and security,” a respect for “the sovereign equality of all states and nations,” and compliance with international law—in that order⁴⁶. He emphasized the primacy of Polish interests repeatedly during his speech, stressing that “the most fundamental imperative of Polish politics is the permanence and survival of the Republic in freedom and development...an indispensable condition for the prosperity of all Poles at home and abroad.” Grzegorz Braun responded by tweeting #StopUkrainizacjiPolski alongside an article published by “Najwyższy Czas” (a source that actively distributes pro-Russian conspiracy content⁴⁷). In the article, he was quoted criticizing Rau’s speech as a “long-winded display of blindness and servility” that would soon make “Poles hostages of someone else’s decisions.”⁴⁸ Despite Rau’s numerous reiterations that Poland would always come first on the foreign

⁴⁴Rafał Trzaskowski, "Niech żyje wolna Ukraina! Przyjaciele, jesteśmy z wami!" Facebook, February 24, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=499725014842800>.

⁴⁵Demagog, "Wywieszanie ukraińskiej flagi dowodem na okupację Polski? Fake news!" *Demagog*, July 4, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/wywieszanie-ukraińskiej-flagi-dowodem-na-okupację-polski-fake-news/.

⁴⁶"Informacja Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych na temat zadań polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2023 roku (pełny tekst wystąpienia)," Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, About the Sejm, April 13, 2023, <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm9.nsf/komunikat.xsp?documentId=ED6FB84A24918883C1258990002EC43A>.

⁴⁷Piotr Bajor, ed., *Information Security Policy: Conditions, Threats and Implementation in the International Environment* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2022), 53–65, <https://doi.org/10.12797/9788381388276.0354>.

⁴⁸MMC, "Rau przedstawił wizję polskiej polityki zagranicznej. 'Beck 2.0 za dychę,'" *Nczas.com*, April 14, 2023, <https://nczas.com/2023/04/14/rau-przedstawil-wizje-polskiej-polityki-zagranicznej-beck-2-0-za-dyche/>.

policy, he was still accused of Ukrainianization. This demonstrates that how the term operates as a political weapon as well as a Russian narrative, and helps explain why it became so popular with the alt-right Konfederacja.

Konfederacja is far from the sole fount of 'Ukrainianization' narratives: Russian-linked sources consistently originate fake stories about the Ukrainianization of Poland. Konfederacja and Kremlin propagandists' activities often overlap, and have since before the war when both were championing anti-vaccination rhetoric. Coordinated or otherwise, they maintain a symbiotic relationship. Each spreads the others' content, as was observed with the bot-boosted fame of the #StopUkrainizacjiPolski hashtag. For example, in late 2024, claims that more Ukrainian children than Polish children had been born in Poland were spreading across alt-right mediascapes, inciting fears that Ukrainians would take over demographically⁴⁹. They referred to a screenshot of alleged data from the Ministry of Digital affairs, which showed that the most popular names for baby boys in Poland during November of that year were all Ukrainian: Taras, Bogdan, and Stepan. The screenshot was not legitimate, but had been carefully forged to imitate official Ministry data using the Ministry's real logo. Though the fake screenshot was not definitively traced to Russian sources, the method suggests that they were involved, as impersonation of official Polish agency correspondence is a very serious crime not commonly attempted by domestic originators⁵⁰.

⁴⁹ "W Polsce urodziło się więcej Ukraińców niż Polaków - to dezinformacja," Polskie Radio, December 31, 2024, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/399/7977/artykul/3465483,w-polsce-urodzilo-sie-wiecej-ukraincow-niz-polakow-to-dezinformacja>.

⁵⁰ "Odpowiedzialność karna za fałszowanie dokumentów – art. 270 k.k.," Szurman Dusko Law Office, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://www.szurmandusko.pl/odpowiedzialnosc-karna-za-falszowanie-dokumentow-art-270kk/>.

UKRAINIANS ARE PREFERRED

The less conspiratorial version of ‘Ukrainianization’ omits tales of a hostile, coordinated effort to conquer Poland. Instead, it simply suggests that Ukrainian refugees have become privileged above Poles by the Polish government. This is the mainstream version of the narrative, and manifests in relation to every benefit (real and perceived) that Ukrainian refugees receive in Poland. (scarcity framework, upticks during times of economic struggle.)

Getting things for free

Raymond, a young man living in Rzeszow, stated that he stopped liking Ukrainians because “they are getting everything for free and leaving less resources for the Poles.” Bus tickets, clothing— he wasn’t sure about the extent of the charity and aid given to Ukrainian refugees in Poland, but he was worried about the strain it put on government resources. This sentiment was repeated by other Poles, who spoke of Ukrainian’s demanding attitude about receiving aid. “They are taking benefits. They act like they deserve everything, everything for free, just because of the war.” Other interviewees made the distinction between aid given early on in the conflict and continued benefits. “Poland did a really great job,” said Olaf, living in Krakow. “We gave them rent-free houses, apartments for free, and jobs... But now, the Ukrainians are not thankful...they act like everything [is due] to them... and it’s too much. The Poles are tired and cannot keep giving.” In Warsaw, feelings were much the same. “In the beginning, it was fine: They have a war, and it [was] okay to feel bad for them and give them help... We gave them everything: Food, housing, school, all for free... But after a few months, we were giving too much.” One Polish mother, thinking about her future, worried that government resources might be stretched thin by the amount given to refugees, “who are getting so much for free or at a smaller price.”

At the beginning of the war, Polish citizens were indeed extremely generous with their time, money, and resources. Interviewed Poles spoke of hosting refugees in their homes for months or years at a time, collecting and distributing donations, teaching Polish and English lessons, and taking off of work to volunteer at the border. One young man in Rzeszow founded a free shuttle service and spent months driving Ukrainians to safety in Poland and further West. “Basically everyone was doing something to help, and everyone felt really good about it at the time,” remembered Gosia, a mother in Krakow. In a nationwide OKO survey, 61% of Poles reported that they had personally taken part in an aid campaign⁵¹, and only 18% reported not knowing anyone who had personally volunteered. This grassroots effort

⁵¹ Piotr Pacewicz, "Aż 91 proc. Zaskoczonych, Że Tak Pomagamy Uchodźcom. Kobiety Robią Więcej, a Konfederaci...", OKO.press, March 12, 2022, <https://oko.press/az-91-proc-zaskoczonych-ze-tak-pomagamy-uchodzcom-kobiety-robia-wiecej-a-konfederaci>.

alleviated the initial strain on governmental aid programs, which were poorly equipped to deal with such a large and rapid influx of refugees. While the private sector bore the brunt of the initial wave of refugees, the public sector quickly reorganized its funding infrastructure in order to take over refugee accommodation efforts. The Polish government established the Aid Fund less than one month after the invasion, which was granted 2 billion euro loan by the European Investment Bank to finance “all activities and projects necessary to help and integrate Ukrainian refugees” in Poland.⁵² In the months and years that followed, Ukrainian refugees relied less on private citizens and more on Polish government resources.

This unique situation may have resulted in a psychological confounding of private and public support for refugees. At the beginning of the invasion, Poles personally and directly sacrificed time, money, and resources in order to help refugees. They did so voluntarily, and therefore could decide on an individual basis whether and how much they could afford to help. But when the public sector took over, it was not always clear where funds to support the refugees were coming from, or how much was being allocated to them. Crucially, the support given to Ukrainian refugees in Poland was no longer an individual decision, but a legislatively determined policy. In most European Union member states, this would have been the case from the beginning, but because Poland’s integration apparatus had been exceedingly disorganized, government control was not the status quo. Russian disinformation capitalized upon this perceived loss of freedom by vehemently publishing content engineered to create a scarcity mindset. The Polish government, it suggested, will give so much to Ukrainians that it will have to cut programs for Poles: In other words, Ukrainians are preferred or “privileged” over Poles, who become “second class citizens in their own country.” This is among the most common anti-Ukrainian narratives in Poland according to the EU Disinfo Lab⁵³ and Demagog⁵⁴.

The ‘Preferred’ narrative sees Russian disinformation exploiting every angle of refugee aid: Housing, cash benefits, transportation, and education. It also suggested that Ukrainian refugees are prioritized in the healthcare system. Interview evidence indicated that the more scarce Poles believe a resource to be, the more concerned they are likely to be with Ukrainians receiving it over them.

⁵² Fusiek, "A Solidarity Package Helps Poland Integrate Ukrainian Refugees."

⁵³ Zadroga, "Disinformation Landscape in Poland," 7.

⁵⁴ Demagog, "Ukraińcy Bogacą Się Kosztem Polaków? To Element Dezinformacji," *Demagog*, April 4, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/ukraincy-bogaca-sie-kosztem-polakow-to-element-dezinformacji/.

Monetary Assistance

Ukrainian refugees living in Poland are eligible for limited monetary and cash assistance if they meet certain conditions. Most of their eligibility is the same as Poles: They are equally entitled to unemployment benefits and social benefits for families with children. They have 12 months of eligibility within the Individual Integration Program (*Indywidualny Program Integracyjny*, IPI), a temporary cash assistance program, if their income is less than 776 PLN a month (or 600 for someone in a family)⁵⁵. The total amount of cash benefits that a single refugee receives per month to cover all living costs and Polish language learning expenses is capped between PLN 721 and PLN 1,450, based on the individual's circumstances. This amount is meant to provide access to the bare necessities while refugees rebuild their lives in Poland, and barely clears the cost of living in some cities.

Many refugees do not accept any financial assistance at all in Poland. Narodowy Bank Polski found that 43% of Ukrainian refugees had not benefited from any Polish assistance program other than accommodation⁵⁶. Even those who did accept assistance were not a burden on Poland's budget for long, because the tax revenue collected from the aggregate economic activities of refugees more than offset public refugee expenditure. A joint report by Deloitte and UNHCR estimated that refugees' income taxes, private consumption, and imported capital from abroad increased Polish tax revenues by 10.1-13.7 billion PLN in 2022, and 14.7-19.9 billion PLN in 2023⁵⁷. Compared to the 15 billion and 5 billion PLN that were spent on refugees during those respective years, it is evident that they increased the total wealth of Poland. This balance will only grow in the future: As the Ukrainian refugees integrate financially in Poland and rely even less on Polish government programs, their economic contributions will continue to boost tax revenues by an estimated 0.85-1.3%. This should eliminate any concerns among Polish citizens regarding a scarcity of government resources. However, Russian disinformation has focused on cash benefits and convinced many Poles that they are a large burden.

Kremlin-affiliated narratives purporting that Ukrainian refugees use cash benefits to enrich themselves at the expense of Poles are ubiquitous. Examples of these false claims include: Programs to help the homeless in Poland are being defunded to afford aid to Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees⁵⁸; the Law and

⁵⁵ Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, "Social Assistance for Foreigners: What Kind of Support in Poland Can They Expect?" *Gov.pl*, last modified August 26, 2021, <https://www.gov.pl/web/family/social-assistance-for-foreigners-what-kind-of-support-in-poland-can-they-expect>.

⁵⁶ Narodowy Bank Polski, *Ukrainian Refugees in Poland: Economic and Social Impacts*, (Warsaw: NBP Department of Statistics, 2022), <https://nbp.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ukrainian-refugees-2022.pdf>

⁵⁷ UNHCR, *Analysis of the Impact of Refugees from Ukraine on the Economy of Poland*.

⁵⁸ Demagog, "Polska Pomaga Ukraincom a Polskim Bezdolnym – Nie? Fałsz!" *Demagog*, April 1, 2023, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/polska-pomaga-ukraincom-a-polskim-bezdomnym-nie-falsz/.

Justice party gives non-refugee Ukrainians cash benefits in exchange for their votes⁵⁹; Refugees receive over 5,000 PLN per month of “pocket money”⁶⁰; Ukrainian refugees will receive higher benefits than struggling Polish citizens under an EU mandate⁶¹; and Ukrainians are visiting Poland on “benefit tours” to collect cash before returning to Ukraine⁶². These five rumours alone were viewed over one million times online.

In nationwide surveys, cash benefits have proven to be among the least popular forms of aid given to Ukrainian refugees. In mid-2024, an overwhelming 95% of Poles stated that assistance benefits to refugees should be reduced. A further 62% were against the transferral of the 800+ benefit to Ukrainian children⁶³, despite experts maintaining that this benefit would allow Ukrainians to work more and integrate faster⁶⁴. Poles similarly disapproved of financial assistance for refugees in interviews, repeating untrue narratives to support their position. “Refugees are putting a strain on Poland when they don’t work and rely on Polish money and donations to live,” said Isa, a college student studying finance. “It’s not possible to keep helping the refugees... The resources have simply run out.” An middle aged man reiterated these concerns about the drain on Polish state resources: “The Ukrainians are taking money from taxpayers who already don’t have a lot of money... Poland has already given so much and they can’t give any longer.” When asked what he hoped would happen to the future of refugees, one young man stated, “I think that Polish government ... must stop giving Ukrainians our money. So there should be no more benefits.” A different man answered, “[I] hope the war just ends, but regardless, the Ukrainians cannot stay and continue to receive benefits.” A Warsaw woman, summing up public opinion, stated, “People are just exhausted of the Ukrainians, because they are absorbing so much money.”

The misconception that the Polish economy is no longer able financially able to justify refugee benefits was often cited to explain why the benefits should stop. “We should help, but inside some limits of the power of our economy,” said a Konfederacja supporter named Jurek, expressing genuine sympathy at this fact. “We just passed this line, and it has become dangerous for our economy [to continue helping] in this moment.” For Poles like Jurek, disinformation narratives making an economic appeal as to why Ukrainian refugees cannot be helped in Poland help resolve cognitive dissonance: ‘Of course my country would help

⁵⁹ Paul Cymbor, “PiS nie pomaga Ukraińcom, by zdobyć ich głosy,” Fakenews.pl, April 19, 2023, <https://fakenews.pl/spoleczenstwo/pis-nie-pomaga-ukraincom-by-zdobyc-ich-glosy/>.

⁶⁰ Demagog, “Cudzoziemcy Będą Dostawać 5 Tys. Zł Kieszonkowego? Rządowe Resorty Dementują,” *Demagog*, February 7, 2025, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/czy-cudzoziemcy-beda-dostawac-5-tys-zl-kieszonkowego-rzadowe-resorty-dementuja/.

⁶¹ Maja Czarnecka, “Nie. Nowa Dyrektywa Nie Wprowadza Równych Świadczeń dla Migrantów w Całej Unii,” *Sprawdzam*, July 2, 2024, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34ZP8EE>.

⁶² Zadroga, “A trip to Poland for benefits” is a narrative that is part of Russian propaganda,” September 1, 2023.

⁶³ European Commission, “Poland: Survey Reveals Shifting Attitudes.”

⁶⁴ Anton Ambroziak, “Wykluczyć Ukraińców z 800+? Ekspert: Nie...” *OKO.press*, January 31, 2025, <https://oko.press/wykluczyc-ukraincow-z-800-ekspert-nie-ma-ekonomicznych-podstaw-to-niebezpieczna-gra>.

those in need, if we could,’ it allows them to maintain, ‘But we can’t, because we ourselves lack the resources to do so.’ Because this argument is contingent on the premise that Poland cannot afford to host refugees any longer, narratives supporting this are likely to be remembered and believed more than arguments to the contrary. And if it is believed that Poland truly does not have the resources to afford offering benefits to refugees, then the fact that the ruling party continues to do so is evidence of their ‘preferred’ status.

The image of a cash-benefit-absorbing Ukrainian extends to suggest that Ukrainian refugees are economic migrants⁶⁵ who come to Poland to take advantage of welfare systems. This is a sinister narrative engineered to accomplish two Kremlin objectives simultaneously: It decreases support for Ukrainian refugees by aligning them with a disfavored category of migrants, and it suggests that there is no other pressing reason why they would leave Ukraine, downplaying or denying the danger posed by Russia’s aggressive military presence. In other words, it is simultaneously anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian.

Healthcare

On February 26, 2022, the Polish government announced that all Ukrainians who had crossed the border since the outbreak of the war would have free access to Polish healthcare systems “under the same rules and in the same scope as persons covered by obligatory or voluntary health insurance in Poland.”⁶⁶

Poland’s healthcare system has long been plagued by provider shortages and long waiting periods, and this announcement immediately caused concern about resource sharing. In 2022, Poland had one of the lowest doctor-to-inhabitant ratios in Europe: 2.4 doctors for every 1000 residents⁶⁷. (Compare to Austria’s 5.3, or the Czech Republic’s 4.1). In November of that year, the average wait time to see a specialist was 4.1 months⁶⁸.

Suspicious accounts immediately began publishing articles and posts to suggest that Ukrainians were being prioritized over vulnerable Polish patients in Polish hospitals. The first one to generate significant attention was published on February 28th, 2022, just four days after Russia’s invasion. “Polish children

⁶⁵Mateusz Zadroga, "Czy Uchodźcy z Ukrainy to Tak Naprawdę Imigranci Ekonomiczni? Analiza," *Fakenews.pl*, November 14, 2022, <https://fakenews.pl/spoleczenstwo/czy-uchodzcy-z-ukrainy-to-tak-naprawde-imigranci-ekonomiczni-analiza/>.

⁶⁶Krzysztof Lewtak, Anna Poznańska, Krzysztof Kanecki, et al., "Ukrainian Migrants’ and War Refugees’ Admissions to Hospital: Evidence from the Polish Nationwide General Hospital Morbidity Study, 2014–2022," *BMC Public Health* 23 (2023): 2336, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-17202-5>.

⁶⁷Daria Smarżewska, et al., "Assessment of the Health Care System in Poland and Other OECD Countries Using the Hellwig Method," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 24 (2022): 16733, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192416733>.

⁶⁸WHC, *Raport dotyczący zmian w dostępie do gwarantowanych świadczeń zdrowotnych w Polsce*. November 2022, <https://www.google.com/search?q=STAN+NA+LISTOPAD+2022+Raport+dotycz%C4%85cy+zmian+w+dost%C4%99pie+do+gwarantowanych+%C5%9Bwiadcze%C5%84+zdrowotnych+w+Polsce.+POLACY+W+KOLEJKACH>

are being thrown out of oncology hospitals because there has to be a place for Ukrainian children,” wrote the author, adding that she had heard about this happened firsthand to her neighbor. The originating account featured a stolen profile picture and has been exclusively publishing anti-Ukrainian and covid-skeptical content every day since joining in March of 2021—characteristics common of fake profiles dedicated to Kremlin disinformation. Demagog confirmed that this user’s story was impossible, as additional, separate oncology wards had been prepared for Ukrainian children, and therefore no Polish children’s treatment was in danger of being interrupted⁶⁹. The Polish Society of Pediatric Oncology and Hematology confirmed this in a statement, writing: “We help responsibly and to the extent that our human resources, financial resources, infrastructure and equipment allow us. In no case is this at the expense of Polish patients.” Other false claims about Ukrainian’s superior access to the Polish system insinuated that they were paying subsidized pharmaceutical prices on the dime of the Polish government⁷⁰ and that convoys of ambulances were transporting wounded Ukrainian soldiers into Europe for treatment⁷¹. The latter was definitively originated by Russian sources. In a more personal attack, videos of a warehouse ablaze in Katowice began circulating on X and Facebook alongside claims that Ukrainians had set fire to a pharmaceutical warehouse⁷². The same post was duplicated in Czech and Slovak language versions, which can indicate that the post was manufactured by propagandists. AFP confirmed that the fire had been accidental, no Ukrainians were involved, and the building contained electric scooters instead of medicine. Though less focused on the prioritization of Ukrainians, this post was meant to suggest that they pose a threat to the security of the Polish healthcare system.

The most popular version of the ‘Ukrainians prioritized in healthcare’ narrative claims that they receive faster treatment than Poles, cutting in front of Polish citizens and increasing the total wait times for services. This narrative has been spread by mainstream influencers like Thomas Kreft, a self-described motivational speaker who broadcast to his 89,000 Facebook followers that Poles must wait two years for procedures that Ukrainians can have “right away.”⁷³ The claim is popular enough to have made it into the discourse surrounding the upcoming presidential election: Candidates Sławomir Mentzen of Konfederacja and PiS’s Karol Nawrocki echoed similar sentiments on the campaign trail⁷⁴. Speaking at a convention in

⁶⁹Demagog, "Polskie Dzieci Są Wyrzucane Ze Szpitali Onkologicznych? Nie Ma Dowodów," *Demagog*, March 3, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/polskie-dzieci-sa-wyrzucane-ze-szpitali-onkologicznych-nie-ma-dowodow/.

⁷⁰Dominika Chronowska, "Czy Polski Rząd Dopłaca do Leków Dla Ukraińców?" *Pravda*, October 23, 2023, <https://pravda.org.pl/czy-polski-rzad-doplaca-do-lekow-dla-ukraincow/>.

⁷¹Maja Czarnecka, "Wideo Pokazuje Karetki Pogotowia dla Ukrainy, a Nie Konwój Wiozący Rannych Ukraińskich Żołnierzy na Leczenie do Europy," *Sprawdzam*, January 17, 2025, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.36U874Q>.

⁷²Ladka Morkowitz, "Posty Fałszywie Winią Ukraińskich Uchodźców za Pożar Magazynu w Katowicach," *Sprawdzam*, April 29, 2024, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34QB8Y7>.

⁷³Tomasz Kreft, "Dołącz do grupy ludzi myślących..." Facebook post, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/reel/879014170219752>.

⁷⁴Gabriela Sieczkowska and Michał Istel, "Karol Nawrocki i Sławomir Mentzen..." *Konkret24*, February 27, 2025, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polityka/karol-nawrocki-i-slawomir-mentzen-ukraincy-wydluzaja-kolejki-do-lekarza-to-operowanie-st-rachem-st8324134>.

Bełchatów, Mentzen declared, “They come from Ukraine to Poland, register with a doctor, make our queues longer, then [accept] reimbursement for medicine and go back home. They organized medical tourism for themselves with our money.” Mentzen had previously claimed to possess evidence that Ukrainians were “taking advantage of state reimbursement and paying less for medical services,” but when asked by fact-checking agency Konkret24 to provide a source, he replied, “Unfortunately, I don't know which clinic the friend I spoke to was talking about.” The rumor that Ukrainians are given priority in healthcare queues was denied in 2023 by the Ministry of Health: “There is no question of treating Ukrainians better,” the ministry said in a statement to Demagog⁷⁵. “The rights of patients from Ukraine ...are subject to exactly the same restrictions as the rights of insured Polish citizens.” Nonetheless, interviewed Poles expressed a genuine belief in Ukrainian’s priority status in the healthcare system, which perhaps should be expected given that the topic has become a talking point in mainstream Polish politics. Hugo, a young man living in Krakow, had heard that Ukrainians “have access to better medical coverage in hospitals. They get to jump the line to get a doctor’s appointment.” “Things like this hurt [Polish people],” lamented another Krakow resident. “There are long waits at the hospital now because Ukrainians get put in front of poles.” A young Grzegorz Braun supporter in Warsaw used this to emphasize his point about the unjust prioritization of Ukrainians. “There was talk of them being granted access to doctors earlier than Poles, so...they could cut the line...They’re effectively being made into a privileged class.” Because the medical system was strained in Poland before the war began, it’s unsurprising that the introduction of over one million Ukrainians caused concerns about Poles’ access to healthcare. This fear created fertile ground for disinformation to spread, and as a result, many Poles still believe that Ukrainians are prioritized over Poles in their own healthcare system.

Education

In May of 2022, it was reported that 200,000 of the 700,000 school-age Ukrainian refugee children living in Poland had enrolled in Polish schools⁷⁶. Mandating all children to attend Polish schools had been politically popular, but was not legally required until September 1st, 2024, as Ukraine worried that Polish schooling would decrease refugees’ odds of returning after the war. As of early 2025, all Ukrainian children granted temporary protection in Poland attend Polish schools⁷⁷. Unicef estimates that they

⁷⁵Demagog, “Polak Czek na Zabieg 2 Lata, a Ukrainiec Ma Od Ręki? To Fałsz,” *Demagog*, December 12, 2023, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/polak-czeka-na-zabieg-2-lata-a-ukrainiec-ma-od-reki-to-falsz/.

⁷⁶ “New Chapter for Ukrainian Refugee Children as Tens of Thousands...” *Notes from Poland*, September 24, 2024, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/09/24/new-chapter-for-ukrainian-refugee-children-as-tens-of-thousands-start-to-attend-polish-schools/>.

⁷⁷Vanessa Gera, “Ukrainian Children in Poland Are Now Required by Law to Attend School After Years of Online Learning,” *Associated Press*, September 2, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/poland-ukrainians-refugees-war-kids-education-48c6ef5f1d05e054abf486b847127bcc>.

account for over 200,000 students in Poland, or about 4% of the total student population of Polish schools⁷⁸.

This integration effort has been used as a smaller stage for the ‘Preferred’ narrative. The Eu DisinfoLab reported in 2023 that one of the notable anti-Ukrainian disinformation topics in Poland was the claim that Ukrainian refugees are favored in the Polish school system, and Polish children discriminated against⁷⁹. A comparable narrative emerged for university-aged students. In one case, a post receiving over 500 likes from a notoriously anti-Ukrainian, anti-vaccine, and anti-LGBT account claimed that the National Science Center launched a scholarship program exclusively for Ukrainian students, who would be given 5,000 PLN per month to cover tuition that is only 1,200 PLN. “To receive the scholarship, there are no education requirements,” the post read. “You just have to be Ukrainian... These students won't even have to be physically in Poland!!” Demagog found this post to be false: While the National Science Center does offer a scholarship, it is not awarded on nationality, but through a competitive application process and can only be used at Polish universities.⁸⁰ Another false post purported to show a list of unusual rules for Ukrainian students in a Polish primary school, insinuating that they had been behaving in an unsafe manner, stealing other students’ supplies, and bullying their Polish peers⁸¹.

Unlike other ‘Preferred’ narratives, the educational angle was not commonly mentioned in interviews: Only two of the 40 Poles who participated brought it up. Both were Warsaw students concerned about the “Ukrainians’ priority to attend school over Poles,” and they remarked that it was unfair that “some Polish students had to be moved to other schools to accommodate [Ukrainian students].” While no evidence was available to verify that this had happened, it’s not totally unlikely, given the additional 18,000 students that had to be integrated at the beginning of the 2024-25 school year⁸². If true, concerns about Polish students being shuffled between schools to make room for Ukrainian students are an understandable concern. And although the students did directly mention the ‘preferred’ narrative in relation to the Polish educational system, they mentioned it as an afterthought, far less pressing than concerns about the monetary benefits conferred to Ukrainian refugees.

⁷⁸UNICEF, "Educational Integration of Refugee Children," *UNICEF*, January 29, 2025, <https://www.unicef.org/eca/press-releases/educational-integration-refugee-children>

⁷⁹Zadroga, “Disinformation Landscape in Poland,” 7.

⁸⁰Demagog, "Aby Dostać Stypendium, Wystarczy Być Ukraińcem? Fałsz!" *Demagog*, February 6, 2023, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/aby-dostac-stypendium-wystarczy-byc-ukraincem-falsz/.

⁸¹Demagog, "Zasady ‘dla Ukraińców’ w Polskiej Szkole? To Fake News, Który Uderza w Dzieci," *Demagog*, November 29, 2024, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/zasady-dla-ukraincow-w-polskiej-szkole-to-fake-news-ktory-uderza-w-dzieci/.

⁸²UNICEF, *Educational Integration of Refugee Children in Polish Schools: Where Do We Stand After the Introduction of Compulsory Schooling?* (New York: UNICEF, 2025), <https://www.unicef.org/eca/press-releases/educational-integration-refugee-children>.

Education's low ranking in the list of Poles' concerns is likely attributable to the fact that the majority of Poles support mandatory Polish schooling for refugees. A University of Warsaw study found that in June of 2024, while enthusiasm for helping refugees declined in almost every area, Poles remained firmly convinced that Ukrainian children should be allowed to attend Polish schools: 82% supported their admission⁸³. Half believed that it should be mandatory, which became the law three months later.

The 'Ukrainianization' and 'Preferred' narratives accomplish multiple things at once. Firstly, they overstate the amount of support given to Ukrainian refugees in Poland by *recasting* them as opportunistic economic migrants, who flee to Poland not because they are escaping violence, but because they seek to enrich themselves upon Poland's overgenerous benefit programs—a dispreferred category in Bansak's paradigm. The 'Preferred' narrative falsely suggests, both explicitly and implicitly, that refugees are an economic and social burden on the Polish state, when in reality, they have contributed positively to the country's GDP, spending money and filling jobs in a country that desperately needs workers. Additionally, by claiming that refugees are 'Preferred' over Polish citizens, a scarcity mindset surrounding public and private resources is generated, advocating for an 'us-or-them' conclusion. The 'Ukrainianization' narrative takes all of these themes to an extreme, touting conspiratorial views that Ukrainians are taking over Poland. Poles are put into a defensive position, believing that their country and sovereignty may be at stake. The 'Ukrainianization' narrative, originating from Kremlin sources, is a case study of how the far-right Konfederacja party scapegoats Ukrainians in the country, and in doing so, wins the approval of both Poles who feel that they are being left behind, and Russian affiliates themselves. This symbiotic relationship allows the Konfederacja to use Russian disinformation as cannon fodder, and Russian bots will gladly prop up the party's messaging in return.

⁸³European Commission, "Poland: Survey Reveals Shifting Attitudes."

GENDERED NARRATIVES AGAINST WOMEN

After the Russian invasion in 2022, martial law banned Ukrainian men aged 18 to 60 from leaving the country, with few exceptions. As a result, the vast majority of refugees who fled Ukraine were women and children—90%, according to the European Investment Bank.⁸⁴ This circumstantial quality aligns with Europe's strong preferences for female refugees over male, which should theoretically contribute positively to their reception as a group.

Disinformation campaigns seeking to *recast* this characteristic of the Ukrainian refugee population in Poland find it difficult to reverse or undermine such obvious statistics. Instead, they devise narratives to *reframe* the gender preference, attacking Ukrainian women directly in an attempt to render them intrinsically undesirable. The main thrust of these narratives boils down to one of two, sometimes overlapping, themes. The first attacks the character of Ukrainian women, depicting them as hypersexual, immoral, and superficial. This narrative is meant to portray Ukrainian women in opposition to traditional gender rules and undermine their potential contributions to the host country. The second narrative is meant to exacerbate economic fears about money and resources given to Ukrainian women. It accuses Ukrainian women, particularly mothers, of being opportunistic migrants who come to Poland to take advantage of benefits. Both depictions have been popular on Polish social media, and given the unusual hostility of young Polish women towards Ukrainian refugees, it is clear that they have played a significant role in the overall trend of decreasing support.

Piotr Panasiuk, the former leader of the Konfederacja Party in Lublin, shared one such false narrative on X. In a post that received over 384,000 views, he claimed in Polish that a Ukrainian had become the “world champion in sex among women,” attaching a picture of a woman wrapped in a blue and yellow flag.⁸⁵ Two days earlier, a similar post and photo had been published by the English language arm of Pravda.⁸⁶ The real woman in the picture was identified by AFP as a Swedish model with no ties to Ukraine, revealing the story to be a Kremlin fabrication in its entirety. Nonetheless, it had garnered significant attention on Polish social media and circulated in five other languages.⁸⁷ Though the Kremlin often attacks individual women using the hypersexual trope, this article was written to smear Ukrainian women as a whole. The photo was chosen not because the woman in it was an enemy of the Russian state,

⁸⁴ Dawid A. Fusiek, "Helping Ukrainian Refugees in Poland with Better Infrastructure," *European Investment Bank*, November 28, 2022, <https://www.eib.org/en/stories/ukrainian-poland-infrastructure-refugees>.

⁸⁵ Piotr Panasiuk (@Piotr_Panasiuk), “*Ukrainka Olesya Prikhodko (etap Nausi Love) została mistrzynią świata w seksie*,” X, April 10, 2024, <https://perma.cc/XRF9-HL3N?type=image>.

⁸⁶ Pravda EN, “A Ukrainian Woman Won the World Sex Championship, Which Was Held in Spain,” *Pravda EN*, April 8, 2024, <https://perma.cc/7M9Y-2ML3>.

⁸⁷ Rossen Bossev, “Nie, ukraińskie dzieci w Polsce nie otrzymują 5000 zł miesięcznie,” *AFP Sprawdzam*, May 6, 2024, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34QV2N6>.

but rather because it could be cropped to make the Swedish flag appear plausibly Ukrainian. Then, it was published to amplify the stereotype that Ukrainian women in general are hypersexual and to undermine their moral character.

This incidence is just one in a wave of articles, posts, and webpages that flooded European mediascapes in February 2022. A revealing report published by the Center for the Study of Democracy found that the number of Bulgarian news articles mentioning “Ukrainian women” jumped from 374 in the two years before the outbreak of the war to 34,313 in the two years after. The highest volume of these articles originated, unsurprisingly, from pro-Kremlin news sites and aggregators like Novini247.⁸⁸ This analysis found that the most common narratives portray Ukrainian women as cheaters or “gold-diggers” attempting to steal husbands, as superficial and obsessed with their looks, or as vectors of deadly sexually transmitted diseases.⁸⁹ In an interview, a senior security official at NATO confirmed this finding, reporting that Russian disinformation against Ukrainian refugees most commonly sought to characterize them as “only fans, video chat type women” who come to Europe to “steal men, break up families, and undermine religious values.” Though no study comparable to the CSD’s Bulgarian analysis has been published examining these narratives in Poland, many interviewees reported familiarity with them and noted their frequency on digital platforms. One man living in Krakow noted that he often observed Ukrainian women portrayed as promiscuous or referred to as ‘whore’ online.

Disinformation attacking Ukrainian women also employs an economic angle in Poland, either by accusing Ukrainian women of coming to exploit benefits, or accusing the Polish government of “Ukrainianization,” by giving Ukrainians preferential treatment. These narratives are framed by a tone of scarcity implying, explicitly or implicitly, that what is given to Ukrainian women will be taken away from Polish women. In one video that received 1.7 million views on TikTok, a graphic purported to compare the benefits available to a Polish mother of two and a Ukrainian mother of two living in Poland. According to the graphic, Ukrainian mothers can expect to receive 4.6 thousand zlotys per month in addition to free housing and other benefits, while Polish mothers only receive one thousand zlotys per month and no other benefits. The video was captioned: “Dyskryminacja Polaków we własnym kraju,” or in English, ‘Discrimination against Poles in their own country.’⁹⁰ The video broke down where the alleged 4.6 thousand zlotys was coming from, claiming that Ukrainian women receive 40 zlotys per day of

⁸⁸ Center for the Study of Democracy, *Gendered Disinformation* (Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2024), 4, <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/gendered-disinformation-targeting-ukrainian-women-refugees-in-bulgaria/>.

⁸⁹ CSD, *Gendered Disinformation*, 5-6.

⁹⁰ “Ukrainki dostają wyższe zasiłki niż polskie matki? Sprawdzamy to,” *Demagog*, June 14, 2024, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/ukrainki-dostaja-wyzsze-zasilki-niz-polskie-matki-sprawdzamy-to/.

“maintenance” allowance. In reality, this amount is not paid to refugees, but is instead allocated to the people and organizations hosting them. As determined by Article 13 of the Act on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine, all “host entities” who provide food and accommodation to Ukrainian refugees may receive a cash reimbursement of 40 zloty per person, per day. Additionally, this allotment is finite. It is valid “no longer than for a period of 120 days from the date of arrival of a citizen of Ukraine on the territory of the Republic of Poland,” meaning that in most cases, it has likely expired.⁹¹ The rest of the money was attributed to 500+ benefits, a universal cash benefit distributed to all families in Poland with two or more children. On January 1st, 2024, this amount was increased to 800 zlotys per child—a move which itself triggered a wave of articles and posts accusing the PiS government of favoring Ukrainians over Poles, despite the fact that the benefit was increased universally. While it is true that Ukrainian refugees are eligible to receive this benefit, they must meet strict conditions in order to qualify. Furthermore, the amount per child is only equivalent to about \$200 and falls far short of the amount needed to live on, to say nothing of profit. Numbeo estimates that the average cost of living for a family of four in Poland is just under 10,000 zlotys per month, without including housing costs.⁹² This means that if a mother with three children living in Poland was to receive the full benefit for each child, she would still need to come up with 7,600 zlotys per month in addition to rent. Nonetheless, narratives accusing Ukrainian women of coming to Poland to take advantage of the 500+/800+ benefit are among the most mainstream. In December 2023, 29% of Poles reported having heard this narrative, according to a study published by the National Democratic Institute.⁹³

Often, the 500+/800+ narrative is combined with Russian propaganda that downplays the situation in Ukraine, implying that Ukraine as a whole or certain territories therein are perfectly safe and that those who leave do so not because of the danger, but for other reasons—in this case, to collect benefits in Poland. In August 2023, a photo began circulating on Polish social media with captions claiming it was proof of a Ukrainian scheme to exploit Polish benefits. The photo featured a advertising poster titled “FLIGHT TO RECEIVE REFUGEE, UNEMPLOYMENT, MATERNITY AID (ROUND TRIP)” in Ukrainian, with a photo of a tour van and a few vague details underneath (cities of origin and destination, purpose of the trip, and an offer to provide legal assistance).⁹⁴ The first accounts to debut this post were profiles who had previously spread Kremlin propaganda, and identical posts were already circulating on Russian telegram channels and news outlets including VK. Łukasz Warzecha, a right-wing commentator who often

⁹¹ Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. “Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r. o pomocy obywatelom Ukrainy w związku z konfliktem zbrojnym na terytorium tego państwa.” *ISAP*, 2022. <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20220000583>.

⁹² “Cost of Living in Poland,” Numbeo, 2024, https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/country_result.jsp?country=Poland.

⁹³ National Democratic Institute, Public Opinion Research (Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute, 2024), <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Public%20Opinion%20Research.pdf>.

⁹⁴ Mateusz Zadroga, “A trip to Poland for benefits” is a narrative that is part of Russian propaganda” *Fakenews.pl*, September 1, 2023, <https://fakenews.pl/spoleczenstwo/turnus-po-swiadczenia-do-polski-to-narracja-bedaca-elementem-rosyjskiej-propagandy/>.

republishes pro-Russia and anti-Ukrainian content, posted the photo on his X account where it gained national attention. Poland's system of social distribution renders such "welfare tourism" impossible, as Zakład Ubezpieczeń Społecznych (ZUS, Poland's Social Insurance Institution) immediately suspends all child benefits to refugees who leave the country for any reason.⁹⁵ Nonetheless this narrative garnered such widespread attention in Poland that ZUS and the Ministry of Family and Social Policy both released statements confirming that it was false.⁹⁶

Though less explicitly gendered, this portrayal resonates with perceptions of Ukrainian women because they are more likely than their male counterparts to be able to accept benefits in Poland, as men are still barred from leaving Ukraine in most cases. That said, other false stories hoping to convince Poles of Ukrainian "benefit tourism" have attacked women in particular. For example, a photo of two women waving Ukrainian flags was shared on Facebook after the 500+ benefit was increased to 800 zlotys, with a caption claiming that "Thousands of Ukrainians living in Ukraine and receiving social benefits from Poland took to the streets of Kiev" to celebrate the increase. The AFP found that the photo had originally been published in 2022 by several Ukrainian newspapers, and actually depicted Kherson residents in Odessa celebrating the liberation of their hometown.⁹⁷ This story hoped to capitalize on the political moment and stoke fears about the benefits given to Ukrainian women, accusing the government of "Ukrainianization." Similarly directed narratives focus on non-monetary benefits using the same scarcity framing.

Disinformation about the money and benefits given to Ukrainian women usually operates by taking a broad truth (for example, that Ukrainian refugees can be eligible for the 800+ benefits, or that local Polish governments have allocated housing resources to help Ukrainians) and exaggerates it or adds false context. Narratives attacking the character of Ukrainian women, on the other hand, are based on non-falsifiable stereotypes. For any claim about the nature of Ukrainians, there are likely to be individuals who it describes, and many it doesn't. Sometimes, these narratives operate on widely-held neutral conceptions, taking a stereotype that may seem harmless or even funny on its face and twisting it to push a damaging one.

⁹⁵ MM, "Ukraińcy skarżą się na ZUS. Jest odpowiedź," Business Insider Polska, April 4, 2023, <https://businessinsider.com.pl/wiadomosci/ukraincy-skarza-sie-na-zus-jest-odpowiedz/8evhxz1>.

⁹⁶ "Jednodniowe Wycieczki z Ukrainy po Polskie Zasiłki?" Business Insider, August 29, 2023, <https://businessinsider.com.pl/gospodarka/jednodniowe-wycieczki-z-ukrainy-po-polskie-zasilki-zus-ostzega-przed-fake-newsami/htytz0s>.

⁹⁷ Natalia Sawka, "Te Kobiety z Flagami Ukrainy Nie Świętują w Kijowie Planowanej przez PiS Podwyżki Świadczenia 500 Plus," Sprawdzam, June 14, 2023, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33JE6DC>.

Narratives about Ukrainian vanity are one example. The director of the Rzeszow Integration Center described a “large beauty culture in Ukraine” where women generally dress up more and pay greater attention to their appearances in public. She joked, “On the train, you can always tell when you’ve gotten to Ukraine because the women are so much better looking.” True or not, the idea that Ukrainian women put more effort into their appearance is a common conception in Poland, and a neutral one on its face. However, it is almost never mentioned neutrally. In an interview, a young woman living in Warsaw asserted that Ukrainian women “spend a lot of money to look good so that they can get a husband,” and that a Ukrainian woman can be distinguished from a Polish one because she has more plastic surgery and wears too much makeup. Here, the ‘beauty culture’ stereotype is perceived in a negative light, with judgements being made about the priorities of Ukrainians in Poland. A different young woman in Krakow spoke with disdain about how Ukrainians love to shop and spend their money, or the Polish Government’s money, on beauty products. She stated that “a lot of [Ukrainian women] have money anyways,” and shouldn’t be taking it from the Polish government. This conception combines concerns about the amount money given to Ukrainian refugees with perceptions about their character, creating a sense that Ukrainian women are undeserving of the aid they receive. The inclusion of the “rich” narrative is a clue that some, if not all, of these perceptions were informed or exacerbated by Russian disinformation.

These beliefs explain the pronounced hostility of young Polish women towards Ukrainian refugees, which is evident in survey data. A report from the Polish Academy of Sciences found that Polish women are significantly less likely than men to hold a favorable outlook towards Ukrainian refugees,⁹⁸ with young women feeling the most averse to accepting them. This trend is surprising, as young women have historically been the most enthusiastic supporters of refugee groups in Poland. CBOS suggested, in an April 2023 report, that the lower levels of support could be due to the perception of Ukrainian women as rivals in areas including dating, obtaining governmental resources, and employment.⁹⁹ At that time, only 47% of women aged 18-24 agreed that Poland should accept Ukrainian refugees from areas affected by the conflict, compared to 77% of their male counterparts. If the trend wasn’t catalyzed by Russian narratives of promiscuity, vanity, man-stealing, and exploitation of refugee aid, it was certainly exacerbated by them, driving a wedge between young Polish and Ukrainian women.

Inevitably, this discourse seeps into daily interactions between Poles and Ukrainian refugees. Two high school students in Warsaw recounted how Ukrainian girls placed in their class were bullied: “When [the

⁹⁸ Artur Pokropek et al., “Public Opinion on the War in Ukraine,” *ResearchGate* preprint, August 2024, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383220584>.

⁹⁹ CBOS Polish Public Opinion, *Attitude Towards Ukrainian Refugees*, Warsaw: CBOS, April 2023, https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public_opinion/2023/04_2023.pdf.

girls] initially came, most people said bad words about them and beat them up. They would call them dogs, whores, and sluts, saying, ‘Go back to Ukraine, we don’t want you here.’” This disheartening account illustrates exactly what disinformation campaigns against Ukrainian women are trying, and to a degree succeeding to do: Dehumanize Ukrainian women—or girls, in this case— and isolate them from their host community. This dynamic blocks opportunities for positive connection between refugees and their Polish neighbors, catalyzing tensions that erode support for Ukraine as a whole.

GENDERED NARRATIVES AGAINST MEN

In the months following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, tens of thousands of Ukrainian men rushed to voluntarily enlist in the army, inspired to fight to protect their country.¹⁰⁰ From day one of the invasion, martial law went into effect banning Ukrainian men of fighting age (18 to 60) from leaving. Mandatory conscription forcibly drafted many of them into the army, enlisting over 1 million men between February 2022 and October 2024.¹⁰¹ The combination of voluntary enlistment, forced conscription, and departure restrictions meant that only a small fraction of Ukrainian men could make it past the Ukrainian border guard into Poland. Indeed, between April and May of 2023, a UNHCR survey of Ukrainian refugees in Poland suggested that less than 1 in 10 were men aged 18-60.¹⁰² They represented the minority eligible for exemption from the draft: Men with moderate to severe disabilities, fathers with three or more children, single fathers, those who suffered the death of a close family member due to the war, and a few other rare cases.¹⁰³ However, an estimated 1.35 million Ukrainians had already been living in Poland before the outbreak of the war, about two-thirds of whom were men.¹⁰⁴ Some did return to Ukraine support their families or voluntarily enlist after February 2022,¹⁰⁵ but some remained in the country, and those without temporary legal residents had to apply for refugee status themselves. As of October 2023, the number of Ukrainian men aged 18-64 with active PESEL numbers was about 143,550, representing 15% of the total number of Ukrainians in Poland.¹⁰⁶

Despite the relatively small number of military-age Ukrainian men in Poland, narratives targeting this group are among the most pervasive, both in terms of the volume of disinformation and its salience in the Polish consciousness. Because Ukrainian men already occupy a less favorable position relative to other demographics of Ukrainian refugees, disinformation campaigns disproportionately focus on them, aggravating existing fears and stereotypes. This excessive coverage overstates the prevalence of Ukrainian men in Poland, *recasting* the population as a whole to appear more male be proportion. As established by Bansak and Hainmüller, male refugees are already significantly less preferred to their female counterparts¹⁰⁷. Additionally, because the majority of pre-invasion Ukrainians in Poland were male

¹⁰⁰ Nathan Rott, Claire Harbage, and Hanna Palamarenko, "Ukraine Needs More Soldiers in War with Russia, but Some Don't Want to Fight," *NPR*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/31/1226251649/ukraine-russia-war-conscription-military>.

¹⁰¹ <https://kyivindependent.com/160-000-people-planned-to-be-drafted-into-ukrainian-forces-nsdc-secretary-says/>

¹⁰² UNHCR, *Analysis of the impact of refugees from Ukraine on the economy of Poland*, March 2024.

¹⁰³ "Which Men Are Eligible..." *Visit Ukraine*, accessed April 10, 2024, <https://visitukraine.today/blog/3154/which-men-are-eligible-to-travel-abroad-in-2025-and-what-documents-are-required#documents-for-crossing-the-border-by-men-accompanying-sick-children>.

¹⁰⁴ Maciej Duszczak and Paweł Kaczmarczyk, "The War in Ukraine and Migration..." *Intereconomics* 57, no. 3 (2022): <https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2022/number/3/article/the-war-in-ukraine-and-migration-to-poland-outlook-and-challenges.html>.

¹⁰⁵ UNHCR, *Analysis of the Impact of Refugees from Ukraine on the Economy of Poland*, March 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Based on Deloitte's elaboration of the PESEL database, which recorded 957 thousand active PESEL UKR holders in October 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106993>

¹⁰⁷ Kirk Bansak et al., "Europeans' Support for Refugees," 850.

migrant workers, Ukrainian men's reason for being in Poland is perceived to align more closely with the motives of economic migrants than with forcibly displaced refugees. The preference for refugees fleeing from 'war' over those migrating for 'economic reasons' was the strongest shown in Bansak and Hainmueller's paper, meaning that this distinction crucially impacts the degree to which a refugee population is welcomed.

Russian disinformation accuses Ukrainian men and women alike of exploiting Polish benefits offered to refugees. The difference between the two gendered narratives is that while disinformation targeting women focuses predominantly on child benefits, the narratives targeting men exploit fears about unemployment resources given to men who are undeserving. Again, the portrayal seeks to characterize refugees as opportunistic and immoral, calling into question the deservedness of support given to them. And just as with women, the narratives against men go a step further to accuse them of being dangerous to Polish society. The entirety of the disinformation campaign against Ukrainian men is diffuse and piecemeal, with each instance usually focusing on a specific event (real, exaggerated, taken out of context, or completely fictional) to highlight a handful of negative qualities. Evidence from interviews reveals that these individual, qualitative stereotypes coalesce to paint a clear picture of a 'bad Ukrainian man,' which was reiterated consistently during interviews.

This sketch features a healthy man of working age who takes advantage of Polish hospitality, spending "all day long on the couch, drinking, not fighting for [his] country in the war," as one interviewee put it. Because these men "feel like there is nothing to lose, they want to take risks," which usually amount to crimes, violence, or angry outbursts against Poles. Interviewees commonly referred to this depiction of Ukrainian men, citing both their own perceptions and those observable in their communities. This depiction is supported by individual narratives that are created specifically to degrade public opinion of Ukrainian men: Stories about drunkenness, violence against women, anti-Polish speech or violence, draft dodging, and public disorderliness, among others.

Alcoholism

The stereotype of drunkenness came up consistently in interviews, and was often used to explain bad behavior. A woman named Magda from Rzeszow recounted a video that she had seen circulating online of a heavily intoxicated man in a gas station verbally attacking a Polish woman who refused to sell him more alcohol. A different woman in Krakow described how her father had warned her to be careful of Ukrainian men at night: "They have reputation of drunkenness, [and of being] a bit violent when they are drunk. These are the men who are not fighting for their country. They have a bad reputation." The

connection between draft dodging and drinking was particularly salient in Krakow, where two students noted that the stereotype of “lazy...men [who] are just drinking and not fighting” had become more common since the war. They deemed this stereotype to be the single most significant factor in reversing the “emotional” level of initial support for Ukrainians. However, the ‘drunk Ukrainian’ trope is nothing new to Poles. It was commonplace enough that one Polish man recalled how liberal circles around Warsaw initially worried that they actually would see Ukrainian refugees drinking publically and causing trouble in the streets. “Luckily, I don’t see that... I’ve never seen a drunk Ukrainian man in Warsaw, but I know that it’s still a stereotype.” One woman from Warsaw noted that she had seen drunk Ukrainian men, but only at bars and clubs. Nonetheless, it made her worried, because she had heard rumours about Ukrainian men spiking Polish girls’ drinks to kidnap them. Interestingly, Ukrainian drinking culture was mentioned positively when interviewees were asked about the commonalities between Poles and Ukrainians. Madga, after citing a number of concerning videos online, reflected that “culturally, there is a lot in common between Poles and Ukrainians...more than [she] expected, especially with jobs and drinking.” Shrugging, she explained: “We are all Slavic.” Drinking as a cultural aspect of shared Slavic culture was mentioned by several other interviewees, including the director of the Rzeszow Integration Center.

Russian disinformation narratives include alcohol to suggest that Ukrainians, once slightly inhibited, are more prone to exhibit disorderliness, violence, and nazi ideologies. One such example was the circulation of an Al Jazeera doppelganger video purporting to describe the arrest of drunken Ukrainian fans after they defaced a poster with nazi slogans.¹⁰⁸ The video was first shared on Telegram by prominent pro-Kremlin TV presenter Vladimir Solovyov, who is currently sanctioned by the European Union. It received 300,000 views and was republished in six other languages. Polish posts on Facebook, X, and Telegram were accompanied by the caption, “Drunk Ukrainian fans drew Hitler's mustache and wrote 'Sieg Heil' on Qatar's World Cup poster. Unfortunately, Qataris have no sense of humor and detained Bandera supporters.” Ukraine was not playing in the 2022 world cup, and the Ministry of the Interior of Qatar denied arresting any Ukrainian fans. Both AFP¹⁰⁹ and Al Jazeera¹¹⁰ debunked the video, which used a combination of stock footage, old photos of Ukrainian fans from 2019, and a digitally doctored image of a Qatari poster. This ‘drunkenness’ narrative has been generally successful in exploiting a preexisting stereotype about Ukrainians to erode support for refugees.

¹⁰⁸Soloviev Live (@SolovievLive), “Пьяные украинские футбольные фанаты пририсовали символу ЧМ в Катаре Лаубу усы Гитлера и написали «Зиг Хайль»,” Telegram, November 22, 2022, <https://perma.cc/5VP4-UV44?type=image>.

¹⁰⁹ Alexis Orsini, “Al-Jazeera nie opublikowała filmu o aresztowaniu pijanych ukraińskich kibiców w Katarze,” *Sprawdzam* AFP, November 30, 2022, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.32W24XR>.

¹¹⁰ Mansur Mirovalev, “Fact Check: A Fake Video of ‘Ukrainian Nazi Fans’ Circulates Online,” *Al Jazeera*, November 24, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/24/fact-check-a-fake-video-of-ukrainian-nazi-fans>.

Draft Dodging

The problem of Ukrainian draft-dodging has been featured consistently in Russian disinformation since the war. These narratives accomplish many things at once: They lower Ukrainian morale, they erode international confidence in Ukraine's military capabilities, and they add to the negative portrayal of Ukrainian men. For these reasons, Kremlin-affiliated propagandists have focused on publishing "proof" that draft dodging is an existential threat to Ukraine's military odds. Often, Polish and Ukrainian officials are impersonated in forged documents discussing the matter. Prominent Polish fact-checking organizations including Konkret 24¹¹¹ and AFP¹¹² have reported on an influx of Russian forgeries circulating on Polish social media. In one case, a series of documents allegedly intercepted by Russian hackers claimed to prove an arrangement between Ukrainian and Polish authorities to "search for, identify and detain Ukrainian male citizens aged 18 to 60 who avoid service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine." The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was itself impersonated by the letters, issued a statement to Konkret 24 confirming them to be fake. The images can be traced back to various Russian Telegram channels and had been republished in eight languages—indicative of an attempt to publicize the false story in Western media. The goal of the forgeries was to imply that the number of Ukrainian draft dodgers in Poland was so significant, and perhaps their presence in Poland so negative, that the Ukrainian and Polish authorities would collaborate on a massive deportation project. No such project ever existed. It would violate of Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights by forcing conscientious objectors to fight, and (perhaps more importantly, as Ukraine has already been accused of domestically violating Article 9) the number of Ukrainian draft dodgers residing in Poland is so small that such an operation would be inconsequential.

Secondary or tertiary accusations of draft-dodging commonly appear in disinformation media through the use of strong language, even when the content of the specific article or post has nothing to do with draft dodging. This can be seen in an article published by Dziennik Polityczny, a Polish political journal placed on the International Security Agency's "Russian propaganda blacklist."¹¹³ The article, titled "Bohaterzy za wschodniej granicy pobili niepełnosprawną osobę," ("Heroes from the eastern border beat up a disabled person") falsely claimed that three Ukrainian men had beat up a disabled man in in Poznań¹¹⁴. "Heroes

¹¹¹ Konkret24, "Polska ma deportować 'ukraińskich obywateli płci męskiej' do Ukrainy?" *TVN24*, June 20, 2022, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polityka/polska-ma-deportowac-ukrainskich-obywateli-plci-meskiej-do-ukrainy-uwaga-na-rosyjskie-falszywki-ra1109485-ls5791446>.

¹¹² Natalia Sawka and Ladka Mortkowitz, "Fałszywe listy rozpowszechniają dezinformację o tym, że Polska ma deportować ukraińskich mężczyzn w wieku 18–60 lat," *Sprawdzam AFP*, July 13, 2022, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.32EA86A>.

¹¹³ Adam Haertle. "Dlaczego nie działa mi strona, czyli jak ABW..." *Zaufana Trzecia Strona*, April 29, 2022.

<https://zaufanatrzeciastrona.pl/post/dlaczego-nie-dziala-mi-strona-czyli-jak-abw-walczy-z-kremlovska-propaganda/>.

¹¹⁴ "Bohaterzy za wschodniej granicy pobili niepełnosprawną osobę," *Dziennik Polityczny*, June 10, 2022, <https://dziennik-polityczny.com/2022/06/10/bohaterzy-za-wschodniej-granicy-pobili-niepelnosprawna-osobe/>.

from the eastern border” is used to ironically describe Ukrainian men, who are hailed as heroes for their efforts in the war but in “reality” commit crimes against helpless Poles. (The fact-checking organization Demagog confirmed with Poznań police that the nationality of the men was unknown, as they had not been identified, and there was no reason to believe that they were Ukrainian.¹¹⁵) Within anti-Ukrainian circles, this sarcastic use of the word “hero” is used to refer to Ukrainian men as a group.

There’s no question that Ukraine, like all countries with conscription, does deal with draft dodging. However, the number of Ukrainian men who actually circumvented military obligations and fled abroad is a miniscule percentage of male Ukrainian refugees: At maximum, about 2.5 percent, according to numbers from Eurostat and the BBC Eye. Nonetheless, Ukrainian authorities have cracked down on men who seek to evade conscription both domestically and abroad, rendering a relatively small problem even smaller.

One of the most popular ways to avoid the draft, according to the Ukrainian State Border Guard Service, was for men to obtain false medical documentation to explain why they were unfit for service.¹¹⁶ These so-called “white tickets” would allow holders to enter and exit Ukraine freely, and were therefore highly desirable. However, in August 2023, President Zelensky launched a campaign against corruption in Ukraine’s medical military commissions, making it much more difficult for men to obtain falsified medical exemptions. He replaced all the country’s regional conscription officers, in addition to opening over 100 criminal investigations and charging 30 people with high treason (accepting bribes during wartime) for their role in providing false medical exemptions.¹¹⁷ Then in April of 2024, Zelensky signed a law on mobilization (No. 10449)¹¹⁸ and a draft law (No. 10379)¹¹⁹ which suspended consular services and increased fines for military-aged men who did not register for the draft or update their personal data within two months. This move meant that non-refugee Ukrainian men living abroad stood to lose legal status, and was meant to compel them to return to Ukraine to fight. Whether or not it was successful in drawing those abroad back to Ukraine, it certainly made it more difficult for men to leave Ukraine in the first place, curbing further efforts to flee.

¹¹⁵ “Ukraińcy pobili niepełnosprawnego? Informacja z niewiarygodnego źródła,” *Demagog*, June 20, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/ukraincy-pobili-niepelnosprawnego-informacja-z-niewiarygodnego-zrodla/.

¹¹⁶ Martin Fornusek, “Zelensky: Ukraine to Review Decisions on Unfitness for Military Service Made by Medical Commissions,” *Kyiv Independent*, August 30, 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/zelensky-ukraine-to-review-decisions-on-unfitness-for-military-service-made-by-medical-commissions/>.

¹¹⁷ “Ukraine's Zelenskiy Decries Corruption in Military Medical Exemptions,” *Reuters*, August 30, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraines-zelenskiy-decries-corruption-military-medical-exemptions-2023-08-30/>.

¹¹⁸ Oleksandra Opanasenko and Sofiia Telishevska, “The Law on Mobilization Came into Force in Ukraine: The Main Points,” *Babel*, May 18, 2024, <https://babel.ua/en/news/107226-the-law-on-mobilization-came-into-force-in-ukraine-the-main-points>.

¹¹⁹ Olha Bereziuk, “Zelensky Signed a Law on Increasing Fines for Evasion of Military Registration,” *Babel*, May 17, 2024, <https://babel.ua/en/news/107198-zelensky-signed-a-law-on-increasing-fines-for-evasion-of-military-registration>.

Since the early days of the conflict, the number of draft dodgers has been small relative to those who chose either to leave Ukraine legally or to stay and enlist in the draft. In the 18 months following the invasion, the Ukrainian Border Guard stopped 21,113 men trying unlawfully to flee Ukraine. During that same time, only 19,740 successfully crossed into Romania, Moldova, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, according to a BBC Eye investigation¹²⁰. This means that before ever leaving Ukraine, over half of men trying to flee in attempts to avoid conscription were caught. Those who had successfully reached neighboring countries only made up 2.44% of the total number of adult Ukrainian men receiving temporary protection in EU countries during this time (810,431, according to Eurostat data)¹²¹. At that time, Ukrainians who crossed the border illegally were eligible for temporary protection, but as of July 1st 2024, this is no longer the case. Fedir Venislavskyi, Zelensky's parliamentary representative, disclosed that the percentage of Ukrainian men who try to escape mobilization is between one and five percent of the total number of those eligible for conscription—"definitely not critical to the defense of Ukraine."

While there are almost certainly Ukrainian refugees living in Poland who fled to avoid mobilization, it is evident that they make up a very small percentage of the total population of male Ukrainian refugees. In most cases, the Ukrainian refugees living in Poland have a legal reason for exemption from services, even healthy men who are of military age. However, because many military exemptions are situational, it's impossible to tell based on appearance alone whether or not someone qualifies. Russian disinformation uses this ambiguity to overemphasize the severity of draft dodging in Ukraine. If disinformation is capable of convincing Poles, who might be unfamiliar with Ukrainian conscription rules and exemptions, that a large percent or even the majority of Ukrainian men seen outside of Ukraine are draft dodgers, then this characterization can come to define Ukrainian men as a group and can easily be applied alongside other narratives. Based on interviews, there is evidence to believe disinformation campaigns has been successful in achieving this.

Draft dodging was a commonly cited feature of Poles' descriptions of Ukrainian men. This aspect of their depiction appeared in tandem with other negative characteristics, creating an emotionally salient image of a Ukrainian man with no prospects, no desire to fight for his own country, no desire to contribute to Poland, and nothing to lose. "There are rumours in the villages about men coming to Poland to dodge the draft," recalled a shop owner in Krakow. "When they get to Poland, they stay at home all day and get

¹²⁰ BBC Eye. "BBC Eye Investigation: Nearly 20,000 Men Have Fled Ukraine to Avoid Being Drafted." *BBC*, November 17, 2023. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/2023/bbc-eye-ukraine-draft-dodgers/>.

¹²¹ Eurostat. "Nearly 4.2 Million People Under Temporary Protection." *European Commission*, October 6, 2023. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20231006-2>.

drunk. All day long on the couch, drinking, not fighting for their country in the war.” Beyond idleness, cowardliness, and exploitation of Polish hospitality, Ukrainian draft-dodgers are viewed as dangerous to Poland. A Rzeszow resident spoke of his fears about the “men who come to Poland to avoid fighting. These are the men who already left everything they know behind, so they don’t care any more about their life.” This is why, he explained, they are dangerous. “They think they are still in Ukraine, or that the laws don’t apply to them.” This sentiment was repeated, almost verbatim, by Hugo, a young man living in Krakow. “There are a lot of men who should be fighting, but are hiding out from the war in Poland instead. They are scary. They feel like there is nothing to lose, and they want to take risks. So they make Poland less safe.” Given that only a small percentage of the Ukrainian men in Poland broke Ukrainian martial law by coming, the dominance of the draft-dodging narrative suggests that Poles have been misled in this belief by Russian disinformation of the kind described above.

Violence

In order for the ‘bad Ukrainian man’ stereotype to achieve full emotional gravity, his presence must present a particularized, personal threat to the wellbeing of each Pole. For while the image of a drunk, lazy draft-dodger may be morally repulsive, a violent criminal incites real fear. Russian disinformation focuses acutely on portraying Ukrainian men as dangerous to Polish society, leveraging concerns about women’s safety, anti-Pole hate crimes, and nazism. The subliminal messaging in these narratives suggests that Ukrainian criminals may be even more dangerous than Polish criminals, motivated by radical ideologies and backwards worldviews. The topic of anti-Pole hate crimes is covered in detail in the Crime chapter.

The ‘Shadow of Sexual Assault’ theory posits that women’s heightened fear of sexual victimization explains their greater fear of crime relative to men¹²². Women, especially young women, fear rape more than any crime, including murder and assault¹²³. This is thought to arise from the fact that rape is perceived as both relatively likely and highly serious, and because it is often coupled with other serious crimes. Disinformation narratives capitalize on the emotional salience of stories about crimes against women in order to generate engagement, consistently publishing stories about the threat Ukrainian men pose to women in Poland. The topic of violence will be investigated in-depth in the Crime chapter, but it is important to note that the fear of violence against women specifically is almost always associated with male perpetrators.

¹²² Helmut Hirtenlehner and Stephen Farrall, “Is the ‘Shadow of Sexual Assault’ Responsible for Women’s Higher Fear of Burglary?” *The British Journal of Criminology* 54, no. 6 (November 2014): 1167–1185, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu054>.

¹²³ Mark Warr, “Fear of Rape Among Urban Women,” *Social Problems* 32, no 3 (February 1985): 238–250, <https://doi.org/10.2307/800684>

This came up constantly in interviews. “I don’t feel this way because I am a man, but women feel threatened by Ukrainian men,” said one Krakow resident. A woman from Krakow spoke of how her father warned her to be careful of Ukrainian men, especially when “going out in the dark” at night. A woman from Warsaw recalled that she had heard rumours of Ukrainian men, sometimes posing as Bolt drivers, who drive girls around and do “very bad things to them.” She stated that because of this, she and her friends now refrain from using rideshare apps, or if they do, they have to check the driver.

Russian disinformation against Ukrainian men comes up more frequently than disinformation against their female counterparts. This may be because the accusations against Ukrainian men are much more serious than those made against women: While both are attacked on a moral and economic level, Ukrainian men are also accused of being dangerous to the very health and safety of Polish society. By publishing extraordinary amounts of Polish language content against Ukrainian men, Russian disinformation aims both to suggest that they comprise a much bigger part of the population than they do, to accuse them of being a large burden on the Polish state, and to suggest that they have all fled Ukraine to escape the draft. Some of the narratives even give explanations as to why Poles may see a disproportionately large number of women while a significant number of men are supposedly in the country: They’re not seen on the street and in public because they’re at home, “all day long on the couch, drinking, not fighting for [their] country in the war,” of course. These narratives have been widely accepted by the Polish public, despite the evidence to believe that many are inconsistent with fact. As they were often cited to explain the frustration with the continued presence of Ukrainian refugees in the country, it is likely that the gendered narrative against Ukrainian men alone significantly contributed to waning public opinion on Ukrainian refugees as a whole.

CRIME

Since long before the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin has published anti-immigration disinformation in Europe and North America to achieve its geopolitical objectives. The threat immigrants pose to public security is among the most cliché narratives, having been used against almost every migrant and refugee group within the past twenty years. Narratives about crime and violence work both emotionally and logically. They simultaneously degrade the moral characterization of Ukrainians, rendering them less ‘deserving’ of support, and they motivate a pragmatically framed argument as to why support should be curbed. For if it can be shown that Ukrainians as a group are an existential threat to the safety of Poles, a strong case can be made against accepting them in Poland *even if* it is accepted that many of them are guiltless, harmless, and genuinely in need. To conclude otherwise would be to prefer the life and health of Ukrainians over Poles, the political unthinkable dubbed “Ukrainianization.”

Disinformation accusing migrant and refugee groups of crime is both effective and easy to produce. False or misleading context can be added to real videos and photos in order to “prove” that the targeted group is inherently criminal. Statistics can also be taken out of context or framed in a misleading way to imply that migrants spike crime rates. This exact method was used in Germany after an influx of Syrian refugees in 2016, when Russian-affiliated news sources reported that the number of non-Germans suspected of a crime in Germany increased by 52.6%.¹²⁴ This was a true statistic, but without context, it led readers to a false conclusion: Namely, that migrants living in Germany were becoming more criminal. While the nominal count of immigrants suspected of a crime had increased, so too had the number of total immigrants. The statistic failed to prove that the number of crimes committed *per person* by non-Germans increased, which is what would show an increase in criminality. German Minister of Interior Thomas de Maizière emphasized that among young men (who represented the majority of perpetrators), the demographic with the highest proportion of criminals was in fact German natives. Syrians, on the other hand, were proportionally underrepresented¹²⁵.

Another example comes from Sweden, which is often targeted by Russian propaganda because of its liberal immigration policy. In 2013, Sweden hosted the highest number of refugees per capita¹²⁶, most of whom came from Syria, Eritrea, and Somalia. During this time, a litany of articles from pro-Russian

¹²⁴ "Egyre Több Migráns Követ El Bűncselekményt Németországban." *Hidfo Russia*. Accessed April 10, 2025.

<http://www.hidfo.ru/2017/04/egyre-tobb-migrans-kovet-el-buncselekmenyt-nemetorszagban/>.

¹²⁵ "Neue Kriminalstatistik: Bayern ist das sicherste Bundesland." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 24, 2017.

<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/kriminalitaet/neue-kriminalstatistik-bayern-ist-das-sicherste-bundesland-14985597.html>.

¹²⁶ George Arnett, "Sweden—the OECD's Highest Per Capita Recipient of Asylum Seekers," *The Guardian*, December 2, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/dec/02/sweden-oecd-highest-per-capita-asylum-seekers-syria>.

sources began reporting on Sweden's status as the "Rape Capitol of Europe."¹²⁷ These articles compared the total number of cases of sexual assault and rape among European countries and, finding Sweden's nominal rates to be the highest, they concluded that Sweden's immigration and refugee policy was causing a huge spike in sexually motivated crimes. On top of a false correlation, this coverage failed to account for three key factors which make international comparison of crime statistics difficult. Sweden's legal code is written in a way that amplifies each instance of sexual assault's impact on the total number of reports. They count every reported case as a crime, even in the event that authorities find that the report was false. Attempted crimes are counted as if they had been successful, and each time a crime of the same kind is committed against an individual in Sweden, it is recorded as a new case.¹²⁸ Additionally, Sweden changed their legal definition of rape in 2005 to encompass a much wider range of crimes.¹²⁹ These peculiarities mean that sexually motivated crimes and attempted crimes committed in Sweden contribute more to the country's aggregate number of cases than the same crimes would for other countries. Furthermore, between 2006 and 2015, the number of people convicted of sexually motivated crimes in Sweden hardly changed¹³⁰, meaning that Sweden's implementation of liberal immigration policy did not significantly impact the incidence of rape and other sex crimes. Of course, Russian disinformation intentionally disregards these nuances in order to make its point—in this case, that Western values promoting multiculturalism and immigration present a grave danger to women's safety. To this day, posts and articles comparing Poland and Sweden's disparate statistics on sexual violence are prevalent on Polish social media¹³¹, making this same false comparison while posing the rhetorical question: "Do we need any more arguments against mass immigration?"¹³²

For Russian disinformation to generate anti-refugee crime narratives is by now a time-honored tradition. Like previous migrant and refugee groups, Ukrainian refugees fleeing the invasion have been accused of increasing crime rates and posing a threat to women since their arrival. Further situationally specific narratives claim that Ukrainians in Poland commit crimes because they are angry at Poles for historical events, or for not being generous enough. The subtext of many of the articles—not published outright, but

¹²⁷ Sputnik International. "More Swedish Women Haunted by Fears of Rape." *Sputnik*, January 11, 2017. <https://sputnikglobe.com/20170111/swedish-women-rape-fears-1049464215.html>.

¹²⁸ Political Capital. *Fake News and Migration: A Study on the Impact of Disinformation on Migration Policies in Europe*. Budapest: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Political Capital, June 7, 2017. https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES_PC_FakeNewsMigrationStudy_EN_20170607.pdf.

¹²⁹ Ruth Alexander, "Sweden's Rape Rate under the Spotlight," BBC News, September 15, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-19592372>.

¹³⁰ Political Capital. *Fake News and Migration: A Study*, 2017.

¹³¹ Marcin Żółtowski, "Niska liczba gwałtów w Polsce to manipulacja," Fakenews.pl, June 29, 2023, <https://fakenews.pl/spoleczenstwo/niska-liczba-gwaltow-w-polsce-to-manipulacja/>.

¹³² Marek Tucholski (@tucholski_marek), "Prawie czterokrotnie mniej liczna Szwecja notuje 12 razy większą liczbę gwałtów niż Polska," X, June 19, 2023, https://x.com/tucholski_marek/status/1670730990468190210.

reiterated in numerous interviews—is that Ukrainians are predisposed to violence and criminal behavior because they come from a less civilized country and even a subordinate culture.

Increasing Crime

When asked in an interview how Ukrainians living in Poland have changed the country since the Russian invasion, Polish MEP Grzegorz Braun did not hesitate to answer: “Crime. It’s very problematic.”

He explained how Poland has become “more dangerous [in terms of] public security; public safety in the streets. More robbers, killings...And this is not my prejudice, this is not my theory, it’s statistics.” Braun and others spreading anti-Ukrainian messaging claim that Ukrainians have caused crime rates in Poland to spike.

Statistics from the Policja, Poland’s national police force, do not support this claim. If Ukrainians were causing a spike in crime, this should be visible in comparisons of 2022 with previous years, since the greatest number of refugees were arriving in and passing through Poland during this time¹³³.

The number of robberies committed by perpetrators of all nationalities in Poland has been steadily decreasing since 2003, and the influx of refugees in 2022 did not change this trend¹³⁴. From 2021 to 2022, reports of robbery decreased from 4,089 to 4,014, and confirmed cases dropped from 3,353 to 3,327. This trend continued in 2023, with reports and confirmed cases each achieving all-time lows of 3,942 and 3,278 respectively. The fact that the total number of cases dropped despite the addition of over one million Ukrainians is frankly remarkable.

In subsequent years, crimes of all varieties have continued to fall. Total cases of confirmed ‘criminal offenses’ in Poland (a category encompassing theft, burglary, robbery, extortion, damage to property, bodily harm, fighting, and assault) dropped by 38,810, from 236,386 in 2023 to 197,576 in 2024¹³⁵. Simultaneously, the proportion of crimes solved out of the total reported increased by 0.6%, meaning that the decrease in total solved crimes was not due to cleverer criminal evasion or poorer policing.

Murder in Poland is a more complicated story. After decades of decline, murder rates began to increase gradually in 2017, which may have been due to reorganizations of the Polish prosecutor’s office and a widening of the type fatal events that could be legally classified as murder. In 2020, murder spiked

¹³³ Duszczyk et al., “The War in Ukraine and Migration to Poland.”

¹³⁴ “Rozbój, kradzież rozbójnicza i wymuszenie rozbójnicze,” *Statystyka (Policja)*, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://statystyka.policja.pl/st/przestepstwa-ogolem/przestepstwa-kryminalne/7-wybranych-kategorii-p/rozboje-wymuszenia-i-kr/122274.Rozboj-kradziez-rozbojnicza-i-wymuszenie-rozbojnicze.html>.

¹³⁵ “Zwalczanie przestępczości kryminalnej,” Policja.pl, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://policja.pl/pol/aktualnosci/255117.Zwalczanie-przestepczosci-kryminalnej.html>.

suddenly, with a total of 641 reported and 631 solved cases in Poland¹³⁶. This rapid increase aligned with the global trend of increased domestic violence during the pandemic¹³⁷¹³⁸. But by the end of Poland's lockdown and throughout the initial influx of Ukrainian refugees, the murder rate was declining for the first time in nearly a decade, with 625 cases reported in 2021 and 499 reported in 2022: an incredible 20% reduction during the year that saw the most Ukrainians cross into Poland. This positive trend appeared to wane in 2023, when Policja data showed that number of reported murders rose to 559, a 12% increase from the previous year. However, this coincided with the introduction of a new cold cases unit, the Department of Undetected Crimes of the Criminal Bureau of the Police Headquarters, "Archiwum X."¹³⁹ Established on May 15, 2023, the X-files unit has focused on reopening old missing persons cases and unsolved murders in Poland in order to make use of modern forensic methods and techniques. Although data is not available for their work in 2023, in 2024 they reported having analyzed 149 cases "concerning the most serious crimes against life and health" that had previously been dismissed due to lack of evidence¹⁴⁰. If any of these cases were solved or re-classified as a murder in 2023 or 2024, it's possible that they would be counted in the total number of filings reported by Policja statistics, creating the impression that murder rates are rising significantly when it's only clear that *investigations* of murder are.

Statistics showing declining crime rates are accompanied by greater public feelings of safety in Poland. A CBOS survey¹⁴¹ found that the percentage of Poles unafraid of becoming the victim of crime was 64% in April 2024, higher than ever recorded since the survey question was introduced in 1996. This response had been decreasing throughout the pandemic, hitting 58% in 2021, before it began to rise again during 2023, 2023, and 2024, a positive indicator. A similar trend was observed regarding the percentage of Poles who agreed that Poland is a safe country to live, 88% in 2024. When asked whether the place where they lived was "safe and peaceful," 96% of Poles said yes in 2024.

Ukrainians, like people of all nationalities, do commit crimes in their home country and abroad. Crimes committed by foreigners are highly publicized in the Polish media, and even Poles who are careful about the legitimacy of their news sources may come to believe that Ukrainians living in Poland contribute

¹³⁶ "Zabójstwo," *Statystyka* (Polish police portal), accessed April 9, 2025,

<https://statystyka.policja.pl/st/przestepstwa-ogolem/przestepstwa-kryminalne/zabojstwo/64003.Zabojstwo.html>.

¹³⁷ United Nations, "UN Chief Calls for Domestic Violence 'Ceasefire' Amid 'Horrible Global Surge'," UN News, April 6, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>.

¹³⁸ "Murders Fell 19% in Poland in 2022, Largest Decline on Record," Notes from Poland, January 25, 2023, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/01/25/murders-fell-19-in-poland-in-2022-largest-decline-on-record/>.

¹³⁹ "Archiwum X," *Policja.pl*, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://policja.pl/pol/dzialania-policji/archiwum-x/203413.Archiwum-X.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Zwalczanie przestępczości kryminalnej," *Policja.pl*.

¹⁴¹ CBOS, *Polish Public Opinion May 2024: War in Ukraine and the possible extension of the conflict* (Warsaw: CBOS, 2024), https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public_opinion/2024/05_2024.pdf.

disproportionately to crime rates because of media bias. However, Ukrainians living in Poland may be less likely to commit crimes than Polish citizens.

The recent nominal increase in crimes committed by foreigners in Poland was covered by mainstream media sources including TVP and Rzeczpospolita. In one article, TVP states that 2,288 Ukrainian citizens out of the 1.5 million legally residing in Poland were suspected of a crime in 2023¹⁴². This works out to a criminality rate of 0.15% for Ukrainians living in Poland. During that same year, GUS reported a population of 37,637,000 Polish citizens and permanent residents of the country¹⁴³ (this number does not include the 1.5 million temporary residents¹⁴⁴), while Policja's statistics department recorded a total of 474,525 proceedings initiated for criminal offenses. Data to determine the criminality rate of Polish citizens in 2023 is not available. However, given the number of proceedings versus the population of citizens and permanent residents, each Polish criminal would have to represent 8.4 proceedings in order for the Polish criminality rate to match that of Ukrainian refugees. While some of the criminals prosecuted in 2023 likely were undoubtedly prosecuted for more than one crime that year, it seems highly unlikely that the average number of proceedings would be over 8 per criminal. This suggests that the criminality rate of Ukrainian refugees is likely lower than that of Polish citizens and permanent residents.

Reality has never been a concern for Kremlin propaganda. Despite evidence that crimes have been decreasing in Poland, Russian-affiliated sources have consistently pushed content claiming that Ukrainians have made Poland the “criminal capital of the European Union.”¹⁴⁵ One such article was published on November 9th, 2023 by *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny*, the Polish-language ‘Independent Political Journal’ known for reproducing propaganda at such a prolific rate that it earned a spot on the International Security Agency’s ‘Russian Propaganda Blacklist.’ Without any citations, it claimed that “official data” showed that Ukrainians “have increased the number of crimes in Poland by 46% compared to pre-war statistics in 2021,” which is patently false. This increase was alleged to be the work of “powerful Ukrainian gangs” who transformed Poland into a hub of money laundering, child and drug trafficking, and black-market arms sales. Typical anti-Ukrainian language featured prominently, including references to “so-called refugees” and the “Ukrainian nationality of criminals” which are meant to

¹⁴² TVP World, "Police reveals stats of crimes committed by foreigners in Poland," *TVP World*, March 18, 2024, <https://tvpworld.com/76492004/police-reveals-stats-of-crimes-committed-by-foreigners-in-poland>.

¹⁴³ Główny Urząd Statystyczny (GUS), *Sytuacja demograficzna Polski do 2023 roku* (Warsaw: GUS, September 30, 2024), <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/ludnosc/ludnosc/sytuacja-demograficzna-polski-do-2023-roku.40.4.html>.

¹⁴⁴ Główny Urząd Statystyczny (GUS), *Migracje zagraniczne na pobyt czasowy – wyniki NSP 2021* (Warsaw: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, August 31, 2023), <https://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechne/nsp-2021/nsp-2021-wyniki-ostateczne/migracje-zagraniczne-na-pobyt-czasowy-wyniki-nsp-2021.4.1.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Marek Gałaś, "że Polska stała się przestępczą stolicą Unii Europejskiej," *Dziennik Polityczny*, November 9, 2023, <https://dziennik-polityczny.com/2023/11/09/galas-jest-calkiem-jasne-ze-polska-stala-sie-przestepcza-stolica-unii-europejskiej/>.

undermine the severity of conflict that Ukrainians in Poland have fled and to reinforce the notion that Ukrainians do not respect the laws.

In addition misleading and false crime statistics, photos and videos of violent crimes are commonly taken out of context and attributed to Ukrainian refugees in order to “prove” their criminality. On numerous occasions, nationally covered news stories were republished by Kremlin-affiliated news sources and on Polish social media with false claims that the perpetrators were identified as Ukrainian. There is often no way to tell whether someone in a photo or video is Polish or Ukrainian, and therefore real coverage of events taking place in Poland can easily be misattributed with the addition of false context.

This was the case for a famous murder committed on Nowy Świat, a historic commercial avenue in downtown Warsaw. On May 8th, 2022, a fight broke out between a group of men that resulted in the stabbing death of a 29-year-old Pole. Graphic footage of the incident had been captured on surveillance cameras, and soon the video was circulating among pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian social media accounts, claiming that because an East Slavic language could be heard during parts of the recording, the attackers were Ukrainian. This triggered an explosion of anti-Ukrainian hashtags including ‘Ukropolin’ (Ukrainian-Poland), ‘Ukropadlin’ (a combination of the derogatory term ‘Ukrop’ and ‘padlin,’ meaning decay), ‘Polakożercy’ (Poland-eaters), and variations of ‘Banderites.’¹⁴⁶ Five days later, prosecutor Aleksandra Skrzyniarz said in a media statement that there was no indication that foreigners were involved with the crime. Incredibly, this media statement was used as fuel to propel the conspiracy that the suspects were, on the contrary, Ukrainian. High-profile journalists and politicians including Grzegorz Braun claimed on Twitter that the authorities had decided not to release information about the suspects in an attempt to cover up the “fact” that they were Ukrainian¹⁴⁷. On May 20th Attorney General Zbigniew Ziobro identified the murder suspects as Polish citizens¹⁴⁸¹⁴⁹, but the damage had already been done. When the WP published the mugshots of the men who had been charged with the crime, the majority of the comments expressed doubt that the Polish men pictured were the true offenders, even suggesting that they had been framed or computer-generated in order to obscure the truth¹⁵⁰.

¹⁴⁶ Mariusz Sepiolo, "Nienawiść pod mikroskopem. Jak wygląda walka z mową nienawiści," *Frontstory*, June 29, 2023, <https://frontstory.pl/mowa-nienawisci-badacze-przestepstwo-uchodzcy-lgbt-radykalizm/>.

¹⁴⁷ Katarzyna Lipka, "Nie, podejrzanymi o zabójstwo na Nowym Świecie nie są obcokrajowcy," *Fakenews.pl*, May 20, 2022, <https://fakenews.pl/spoleczenstwo/nie-podejrzanymi-o-zabojstwo-na-nowym-swiecie-nie-sa-obcokrajowcy/>.

¹⁴⁸ TVN Warszawa, "Zabójstwo mężczyzny na Nowym Świecie. Ziobro zapowiada nadzór Prokuratury Krajowej," *TVN24*, May 14, 2022, <https://tvn24.pl/tvnwarszawa/srodmiescie/warszawa-zabojstwo-mezczyzny-na-nowym-swiecie-ziobro-zapowiada-nadzor-prokuratury-krajowej-st5710780>.

¹⁴⁹ Zbigniew Ziobro (@ZiobroPL), "Śledczy ustalili tożsamość dwóch podejrzanych o zabójstwo na Nowym Świecie," *Twitter*, May 20, 2022.

¹⁵⁰ Radosław Opas, "Zabójstwo na Nowym Świecie. Policja publikuje wizerunki poszukiwanych," *WP Wiadomości*, May 23, 2022, <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/zabojstwo-na-nowym-swiecie-policja-publikuje-wizerunki-poszukiwanych-6772025933126624a>.

A similar scenario occurred in 2023 following the axe-armed robbery of a Lubin bar. Originally, the story had been covered by *Gazeta Wrocławska* and did not include any indication that the suspects were Ukrainian¹⁵¹. Within days, a different version of the article was circulating on Polish social media. It resembled the original publication but was titled, “Ukrainian refugees armed with an axe robbed a bar in Lublin,” and claimed that nine Ukrainians had been arrested. AFP traced the manipulated version back to an article from a Russian news site¹⁵², which had been subsequently disseminated in Polish by a Twitter user known for republishing Kremlin propaganda¹⁵³. The press officer of the Lubin police confirmed that all the suspects were of Polish nationality,¹⁵⁴ but this did little to curb the spread of the false story.

“It’s sad that 70% of [the Ukrainian refugees] are acting this way,” a young man in Krakow said in an interview, “being ungrateful and violent, committing crimes.” Another young man, a soldier from Rzeszow, stated that he had “stopped liking Ukrainian refugees about a year ago” and thinks they should all be sent back to Ukraine. Why? “Because they are rude and violent.”

Magda, a young woman living in Rzeszow, described how videos on social media had changed her opinion about Ukrainians. “I thought they actually liked us. That reversed.” She recalled familiarity with Ukrainians before the war, who often came to her city to shop. “Back then they were normal...” But since the war began, she changed her mind. “I saw videos where Ukrainians were attacking Polish people online...I hope they leave.” It is clear that Russian disinformation informs Poles’ perceptions of the criminal tendencies of Ukrainian refugees, especially when it is delivered in a memorable and emotionally salient medium (like a video recording).

Motivated Anti-Polish Violence

Criminality narratives pushed by anti-Ukrainian disinformation are designed to suggest dangers beyond crime itself by leveraging themes of anti-Polish hatred, women’s safety, and nazism. The subliminal messaging conveys that Ukrainian criminals, motivated by radical ideologies and backwards worldviews,

¹⁵¹ Monika Fajge, “Napał w centrum Lubina. Sceny jak z gangsterskiego filmu w centrum miasta. W ruch poszedł topór,” *Gazeta Wrocławska*, June 10, 2023, <https://gazetawrocławska.pl/napad-w-centrum-lubina-sceny-jak-z-gangsterskiego-filmu-w-centrum-miasta-w-ruch-poszedl-topor/ar/c1-17620711>.

¹⁵² RF-SMI, “Ukrainian refugees armed with an axe robbed a bar in Lublin.” *RF-SMI*, June 12, 2023, https://rf-smi.ru/vkr/85536-ukrainskie-bezhency-vooruzhennye-toporom-ograbil-bar-v-lyubline.html?fbclid=IwAR1J6HITj0xOKMrRATpHNq6cJE_5rOzxH6D_IEDIXWEVZY06bGetwtIL7So.

¹⁵³ Maja Czarnicka, “Napał z siekierą nie dokonali uchodźcy z Ukrainy, tylko Polacy,” *AFP Sprawdzam*, June 30, 2023, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.33LV4B3>.

¹⁵⁴ Krzysztof Jabłonowski, “Ukraińscy uchodźcy uzbrojeni w siekiere obrabowali bar? To dezinformacja,” *Konkret24*, June 22, 2023, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polska/ukrainscy-uchodzczy-uzbrojeni-w-siekiere-obrabowali-bar-to-dezinformacja-st7185099>.

are even more dangerous than Polish criminals. Simultaneously, these themes are intended to generate universal conclusions about the culture and ideology of all Ukrainians.

The narrative that Ukrainian refugees are angry at Poles manifests in stories about violence, and was commonly cited in interviews. “There are lots of fights between Poles and Ukrainians,” said one Polish man, admitting that he had never seen one with his own eyes but had heard about them online or from friends. Usually, Ukrainian’s anger at Poles is attributed either to historical Ukrainian-Polish tensions or described as a severe manifestation of ungratefulness. The Ukrainian refugees, it is suggested, are unhappy that they haven’t gotten more support from Poles, despite what has already been given to them. This kind of story typically involves a Polish person who temporarily loaned resources to help a refugee who, once asked to give the resource back, becomes enraged.

One such account was shared about a 2022 shooting in Rzeszów¹⁵⁵ which was falsely attributed to Ukrainian refugees. Posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram told the story of 23-year-old Zuzanna, a Polish woman, who had been renting an apartment to two men. When the lease agreement expired she arrived to pick up the keys, but the tenants refused to leave or open the door. While entering with spare keys, the woman was pepper-sprayed and shot. Real images of the blood-spattered stairwell were included to emphasize the posts’ legitimacy. Posters falsely claimed that one of the men was identified as 24-year-old Ukrainian “police academy student.”¹⁵⁶ The Rzeszów Police, District Prosecutor’s Office, and NASK (Polish National Research Institute operating at the Ministry of Digital Affairs) all gave statements warning that “rumors that [the suspects] are foreigners are untrue,” and that both men detained in connection with the crime were Polish citizens¹⁵⁷. However, the source of the falsified story had anticipated this, and preemptively included a conspiratorial explanation as to why official statements on the arrested mens’ nationality should be doubted. “The deputy head of the district prosecutor’s office,” reads the post’s last sentence, “appeared at the scene and forbade talking about the [arrested Ukrainian’s identity] publicly, because Ukrainians are brothers to Poles.” The Polish prosecutor’s office, it is implied, would be attempting to downplay violence caused by Ukrainians in order to obscure the truth and minimize harsh feelings towards Ukrainian “brothers.” This adds a layer of “Ukrainianization,” the alleged process of systematic preference for Ukrainians over Poles within Polish legal and social institutions, to a story meant to frame Ukrainians as violently ungrateful.

¹⁵⁵ Municipal Police Headquarters in Rzeszów, “Śledztwo w sprawie usiłowania zabójstwa mieszkanki Rzeszowa,” *Policja Podkarpacka*, July 18, 2022, <https://podkarpacka.policja.gov.pl/rze/komendy-policji/kmp-rzeszow/wydarzenia/110938.Sledztwo-w-sprawie-usilowania-zabojstwa-mieszkanki-Rzeszowa.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Krzysztof Wrobel, “UKRAJNCY ZATAKOWALI POLSKA RODZINE,” *Facebook*, July 19, 2022, <https://archive.ph/JVhSy>.

¹⁵⁷ Natalia Sawka, “Treści w mediach społecznościowych fałszywie oskarżają obywatela Ukrainy o postrzelenie kobiety w Rzeszowie,” *Sprawdzam*, July 21, 2022, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.32F392M>.

Besides ungratefulness, Ukrainians are accused of being violent towards Poles because of historical tensions. The narrative of Banderism, Nazism, and historical tensions is among the most concerning to Poles, and is discussed in detail subsequently. In interviews, the threat of Banderist refugees and their hate for Poland loomed large in the minds of Poles. “There has been a huge surge of Bandera’s popularity in Ukraine,” said one young Kofederacja supporter while attending a protest in Warsaw. “This will lead to a surge of coordinated violence against the Poles... There are already more Banderist hate crimes and this rate will continue to go up.”

Hate crimes were indeed higher in 2022 after the influx of Ukrainian refugees. 1,180 were recorded by the Policja in 2022, compared to 997 in 2021¹⁵⁸. Available data from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)’s civil reporting on hate incidents in Poland suggests that this spike does not come from acts committed by Ukrainians, but rather, from crimes committed against them. In 2021, 18.2% of the 44 racist and xenophobic hate incidents reported by civil society organizations were of an anti-Ukrainian nature. In 2022, the total number of incidents increased to 55, 47% of which were committed against Ukrainians. These 26 anti-Ukrainian reports detailed crimes of a serious nature including death threats, online harassment, rape, beatings, and attempted murder. Six additional hate incidents were carried out against Polish politicians who supported Poland’s military aid to Ukraine, aid workers who were assisting refugees, and private citizens who stood up to anti-Ukrainian hate speech in public. In 2023, the reported number of hate incidents of a racist or xenophobic nature decreased, dropping to 24. However, half of them targeted Ukrainians. In 2021, 2022, and 2023, no OSCE civil report detailed any hate incident committed by Ukrainian nationalists against Poles.

Ironically, the protest the young Konfederacja supporter was attending was in support of an act that had itself been classified as hate incident by the OSCE. On December 12, 2023, then-member of the Polish Sejm and current Member of European Parliament Grzegorz Braun used a fire extinguisher to put out the candles on a large menorah in the lobby of the parliament building¹⁵⁹. The “Never Again” and CZULENT Associations of Poland reported that during the incident, “a Jewish woman was pushed and had a fire extinguisher sprayed in her face” by Mr. Braun, after which she “lost consciousness and was taken to hospital.”¹⁶⁰ This was only the second OSCE-classified hate incident carried out by Mr. Braun

¹⁵⁸ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), “Poland,” *ODIHR*, 2023, <https://hatecrime.osce.org/poland?year=2023>.

¹⁵⁹ Vanessa Gera, “Far-right lawmaker extinguishes Hanukkah candles in Polish parliament,” *Associated Press*, December 12, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/poland-hanukkah-menorah-lawmaker-antisemitism-ee59331c34e51d949fde794b3453886b>.

¹⁶⁰ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), “Poland,” *ODIHR*, 2023, <https://hatecrime.osce.org/poland?year=2023>.

that year, who had previously interrupted a renowned Polish-Canadian history scholar Jan Grabowski's lecture on Holocaust denial by grabbing the microphone from the speaker's hand, smashing it against the lectern, destroying the loudspeaker, and then calling for the Grabowski to leave Poland.¹⁶¹ Five other hate incidents occurred as a result of Mr. Braun's actions in the parliament, including death threats sent to the victim and bomb threats sent to other members of the Sejm in the days following the attack. These events alone made up 11% of all the anti-semitic hate incidents reported to OSCE by civil society organizations in Poland 2023. So while Grzegorz Braun himself activated a significant wave of hate activity in Poland, or a "surge of coordinated violence" as the young Konfederacja supporter put it, there is no available evidence to suggest that Ukrainians, banderist or otherwise, caused any comparable increase in hate crimes. And yet, Braun supporters carrying fire extinguishers in front of the Sejm spoke of the threat of Ukrainians refugees who "increase the crime rate" and would soon "destabilize the network of the country and the Polish nation."

Lawlessness and Lower Culture

Narrower accusations of anti-Pole violence fueled by ingratitude and banderism broaden to an impression of Ukrainian refugees as inherently lawless, lacking in empathy, and even incompatible with civil society. The least extreme version of this narrative is the conception that Ukraine's laws and enforcement are less advanced than Poland's, and therefore when Ukrainians come to Poland they behave badly either because they don't understand the Polish law or because they don't believe it applies to them. A man in Rzeszow explained that the anti-Ukrainian sentiment on he observed social media was a result of refugee's criminal attitudes. "We've all seen the videos of Ukrainians being violent... they do not respect the rule of law in Poland and are spreading bad ideologies." Other Rzeszow residents spoke of "Ukrainians who refuse to obey the Polish law," who are dangerous because they "think they're still in Ukraine, or that the laws don't apply to them." According to one young woman, this lawless attitude was the source of crime rates "spiraling out of control." In Krakow and Warsaw it was much the same: Ukrainians were said to be "acting like they're above the law in Poland." "There is a danger of having them in the country, because they are used to a different way of life. They have a different law," explained a retail worker in Warsaw, who was very worried about crime, "But we don't allow [that behavior] here."

The most extreme version of this narrative is deliberately dehumanizing. It makes the case the Ukrainians are culturally or morally inferior to Poles as a fact of their birth or upbringing, and are therefore

¹⁶¹ Jacek Lepiarz, "Polish radical right-wing MP disrupts lecture on Holocaust," *DW*, June 1, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/polish-radical-right-wing-mp-disrupts-lecture-on-holocaust/a-65795483>.

predisposed to uncivil behavior. This ‘lower culture’ narrative is among the few that has been positively linked to declining public opinion in recent scholarship. A 2024 survey of Poles conducted by the University of Warsaw found that a perceived ‘Eastern mentality’ among Ukrainians, which supposedly “manifests in a lack of concern for the common good,”¹⁶² was among of the most influential factors changing public opinion on refugees. Similar sentiments appeared in the street interviews. “Ukrainians have a different culture,” stated one Pole living in Warsaw. “They are not giving. They view everything as a predator-prey relationship... Ukrainians are a separate race from Poles, really.” In a separate Warsaw interview, a man described the “vulgar things” that “some Ukrainians, not all” do as proof of their “lower morals, lower level of culture.” To illustrate his point, he recounted having watched a Ukrainian man buy water bottles at the shop to cook with, because the man had not believed tap water could be drinkable—supposedly indicative of having lived in an underdeveloped country. Another Warsaw resident explained the difference between his country and Ukraine as follows: “Ukraine is a different kind of civilization. [Poles and Ukrainians] don’t have common rules... [Poles] are a different kind, a Latin civilization. We are on the higher level: We have empathy, we are a common society, nationality, and we have fought many times for others... But this [Ukrainian] kind of civilization doesn’t understand if you are good, if you are social... If you invite them with an open hand, then they think you are weak.”

One of the many ways Russian disinformation attempts to exploit this conception is by publishing media alleging violence committed by Ukrainian children. In one instance, a recording began circulating on Polish twitter in which a Russian-speaking teenager was seen choking, punching, and screaming at a bloody classmate in a school bathroom. The original post, captioned “Ukrainians are already SLAUGHTERING POLES in Polish schools!!!!” was viewed over 425 thousand times¹⁶³. FakeNews.pl and Demagog both verified that the video had not been recorded in Poland, but rather in Turochak, Russia¹⁶⁴¹⁶⁵. The incident had been covered by local Russian news sources before being deliberately taken out of context for Polish audiences, and is one article in a long line of media engineered to generate fears about Ukrainians by smearing the character of their children. Coordinated efforts to push this narrative can be directly traced to Russian disinformation networks. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue unearthed a Kremlin disinformation operation called “Deutsche Wahrheit” (“German truth”) that was publishing

¹⁶² European Website on Integration, "Poland: Survey Reveals Shifting Attitudes Towards People Displaced from Ukraine," *European Commission*, June 24, 2024,

https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/news/poland-survey-reveals-shifting-attitudes-towards-people-displaced-ukraine_en.

¹⁶³ Tommy (@Tommyjakistam), "Ukraińcy już REZAJĄ POLAKÓW w Polskich szkołach!!!!," X, June 9, 2023, <https://x.com/Tommyjakistam/status/1667070444191592449>.

¹⁶⁴ Paul Cymbor, "Rozbój w szkolnej toalecie miał miejsce w Rosji," *Fakenews.pl*, June 12, 2023, <https://fakenews.pl/spoleczenstwo/rozboj-w-szkolnej-toalecie-mial-miejsce-w-rosji/>.

¹⁶⁵ Demagog, "Uczeń z Ukrainy pobił Polaka w szkole? Fałszywy opis wideo," *Demagog*, June 12, 2023, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/uczen-z-ukrainy-pobil-polaka-w-szkole-falszywy-opis-wideo/.

similar stories about Ukrainian children for a German audience¹⁶⁶. One video originating from the group's telegram claimed that Ukrainian children were aggressive because they were being abused by their parents: "Cases like this show how difficult it is for Ukrainian refugees to change their old habits: the physical and emotional abuse of their children. What will become of these young Ukrainians after their trauma? How will they behave towards their German peers in schools and kindergartens? The answer is obvious."¹⁶⁷ Another post claimed that a "rising number of suicides among teenage gamers" in Germany was caused by the bullying of "aggressive Ukrainian teenagers who demanded that players give them free in-game items."¹⁶⁸ The group also was the source of an impersonation Die Zeit video claiming that a 12-year-old German girl had been raped by Ukrainian teenagers¹⁶⁹. The sinister reason that the anti-Ukrainian disinformation wave targets children is to use characterizations of them as a vessel for claims about the innate nature of Ukrainians. It means to say, "Even the children are violent," and this is supposed to prove that Ukrainians, as an pure fact of their birth or early upbringing, are immutably dangerous to society.

Furthermore, the narrative that Ukrainian children are violent allows for the resolution of cognitive dissonance. In interviews, even Poles who felt strongly that Ukrainians should be sent back to Ukraine despite the war worried about the fate of Ukrainian children. "I hope they leave," said Magda, a young woman living in Rzeszow, "but perhaps the children shouldn't be forced to go back right now, because the kids don't deserve to be exposed to a war." A mother in Krakow echoed this sentiment, saying, "I just hope they find peace and get to go back to their country. The children don't deserve it." Interestingly, this repeated use of *deserve* implies that there are some Ukrainian refugees who should be exposed to the war—just not the children. However, sympathy for Ukrainian children alone creates a cognitive dilemma, because the parents and caregivers of Ukrainian children are usually Ukrainians themselves, and therefore cannot realistically be sent back to Ukraine without taking their children. Russian disinformation attempts to solve this problem by decreasing public sympathy for Ukrainian children as a group: If both Ukrainian children and adults are disfavored, then there is no moral barrier to political dreams of sending them back (although many barriers would remain, including legal obligations). Evidence from interviews suggests that this narrative has been far less successful than others in changing the minds of Poles, but its existence displays how far Russian disinformation is willing to go to achieve its aims.

¹⁶⁶ Institute for Strategic Dialogue, "Deutsche Wahrheit: A Pro-Kremlin Effort to Spread Disinformation About Ukrainian Refugees," *ISD Global*, December 1, 2022, https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/deutsche-wahrheit.

¹⁶⁷ Deutsche Wahrheit (@deutschtruth), "Der Münchner Hars Krüger rettete ein ukrainisches Kind vor seiner misshandelnden Mutter," *Telegram*, June 2, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221002200131/https://t.me/s/deutschtruth/196>.

¹⁶⁸ Deutsche Wahrheit (@deutschtruth), "Kinderpsychologen in Deutschland sind besorgt über die steigende Zahl von Selbstmorden unter jugendlichen Gamern...", *Telegram*, June 5, 2022, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20221002195641/https://t.me/s/deutschtruth/214>.

¹⁶⁹ Institute for Strategic Dialogue, "Deutsche Wahrheit," *ISD Global*.

Although this is one of the weaker narratives in terms of public consciousness, it has not been entirely disregarded. Ukrainian children living in Poland have been harassed and physically attacked because of their nationality on multiple occasions, both by Polish children at school and by Polish adults in public. Of the events categorized as hate incidents by the OSCE, reports from Polish schools included the beating of an 11-year-old Ukrainian student by their classmates, a teenager who was encouraged to self-harm after being harassed for her Ukrainian identity, and a six-year-old Ukrainian boy being “repeatedly beaten and humiliated while being subjected to racist and xenophobic insults by Polish children in kindergarten.” Acts against Ukrainian children were also committed in public. The “Never Again” Association reported that two teenaged Ukrainian girls collecting money for refugees were chased and verbally harassed by a man in May 2022, and that a Ukrainian teen had been threatened with a knife and followed by a man “uttering anti-Ukrainian insults at a bus stop” in June of 2022¹⁷⁰. In October of 2023, it was reported that a 12-year-old Ukrainian boy was beaten unconscious on the street by a man shouting anti-Ukrainian insults at him and another Ukrainian child¹⁷¹. As the minority group in Polish schools and in public, Ukrainian children are more likely to be the victims of bullying and violence than to be the perpetrators.

The crime narrative is used to motivate the conclusion that Ukrainian refugees are dangerous to Polish society. By depicting them as incompatible with a safe and lawful country, these narratives suggest, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that Ukrainians are a threat to the safety, property, and lives of the Polish people. In reality, it is clear that while Ukrainian’s presence in the country has increased some instances of hate, violence, and crime, it is not because they themselves are more violent, but rather because they are more likely to be targeted as victims of crime.

The hate crime accusation displays how Ukrainians are scapegoated: Konfederacja supporters and Grzegorz Braun himself maintain that Ukrainian refugees incite more hate crimes, when in reality, the group inciting more hate crime in Poland is that very person and party. Again, Russian disinformation is gladly used and dispersed by Konfederacja, and in return their own narratives are echoed in the Russian ones. Unfortunately, this creates a negative feedback loop wherein disinformation generates hateful attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees, those refugees are targeted on the basis of their status, and contempt is bred on both sides when in the not-so-distant past, many Poles believed Ukrainians to be their “brothers.”

¹⁷⁰ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), “Poland (2022),” *Hate Crime Reporting Mechanism*, 2022, published by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), <https://hatecrime.osce.org/poland?year=2022>.

¹⁷¹ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), “Poland (2022),” *Racist and Xenophobic Hate Crime*.

NAZISM, BANDERISM, AND THE VOLHYNIAN MASSACRE

Perhaps the most internationally famous anti-Ukrainian narrative is the accusation that Ukrainians are Nazis. This is, of course, an extremely culturally condemnable position in Poland, and if believed, instantly removes Ukrainians from their pre-war status of cultural proximity to Poland.

Narratives using Nazism angle usually take one of three approaches: The first is less specific to Poland, used broadly in anti-Ukrainian campaigns throughout Europe. This is simply to categorize large swathes of Ukrainians as neo-Nazis. Russian and even Putin himself have championed this narrative, even asserting that the invasion was justified as an attempt to combat “the neo-Nazi regime that set up in Ukraine after 2014.”¹⁷² The second and third angles resonate more with Poland’s history with Ukraine, and twist real historical facts to smear the character of Ukrainians. Unfortunately, it will be shown that often Ukrainians are themselves the victims of state disinformation, which has been somewhat successful in whitewashing the memory of controversial Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera. Russian narratives targeted at Polish audiences focus on either the Volhynian massacre of Poles committed by the Ukrainian Insurgency Army (UPA) in 1943, or on the continued popularity of Stepan Bandera, whose faction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) collaborated with Hitler and perpetrated the Volhynian massacre. The Volhynian massacre was the killing of Poles living in the regions of Volhynia and Eastern Galicia during World War II. It is remembered as a senseless, brutal, and tragic massacre of civilians, mostly women and children, with a death toll of about 100,000 Poles. It remains perhaps the greatest cultural conflict between Ukraine and Poland to date. Polls in Ukraine show that Bandera’s approval rating hovers around 80%, and this is understandably disgusting to Polish hosts, some of whom remember firsthand the violence committed by Banderite factions during World War II. Bandera’s continued and even increasing popularity in Ukraine, in spite of his war crimes, is ill-understood in Poland. This presents an opportunity for propagandists to make an emotional and superficially convincing argument against Ukrainians.

On July 21st, 2021, Vladimir Putin wrote an article published by the Kremlin, which he titled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”¹⁷³ In the text, he claims that Ukraine is a country infested by “neo-Nazis” controlled by the West, that Ukrainians are Russians who have been brainwashed, and that the territory of Ukraine is largely land robbed from “Historic Russia.”¹⁷⁴ This text was distributed

¹⁷² BBC News, "Ukraine War: President Putin Speech Fact-Checked," *BBC News*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/64718139>.

¹⁷³ Vladimir Putin, "Article by Vladimir Putin 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'," *Kremlin.ru*, July 12, 2021, <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

¹⁷⁴ EUvsDisinfo, "When Words Kill," 2022.

among Russian soldiers in preparation of the invasion to come. Since then, Putin has maintained that the invasion was launched to “de-Nazify” Ukraine, a position echoed by official state correspondence. In these texts, Nazism is means to represent the core of evil, signifying a dangerous and corrupted ideology. The EU’s EUvsDisinformation project stated that such accusations are used to justify “action in Ukraine which can only be considered genocidal: No mercy on the battlefield, mass repression, ethnic cleansing à la Stalin.”¹⁷⁵ Nazism themes are dominant in anti-Ukrainian media targeted towards Polish audiences. The Nazism narrative was the single most prominent among the entire fact-checker dataset compiled for this thesis. Debunked articles claimed that Ukrainian youth are indoctrinated into Nazi ideologies at school¹⁷⁶, that Ukrainians were shouting “Glory to Nazism” at a march in Łódź¹⁷⁷, that President Zelenskyy gave the United States Congress a flag with an SS symbol on it¹⁷⁸ and that he signed a Ukrainian flag with one¹⁷⁹, that Ukrainian textbooks referred to Hitler as “The Liberator”¹⁸⁰, that Ukrainian neo-nazis were being treated in Polish hospitals¹⁸¹, and more. Data published by the New York Times established that Russian articles mentioning Nazism spiked whenever Russia was launching an offensive in Ukraine, most egregiously jumping from a miniscule amount to over 3,000 on February 24, 2022. Though it reached a peak just after the invasion, Ukrainian-Nazi coverage is still common. A recent article from *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny* published on June 19, 2024 claims that most Ukrainian refugees in Poland are “ideological neo-Nazis,” who “confidently give the Hitler salute and sing the Bandera song at rallies.”¹⁸² The article provides unfounded stories of Ukrainian “terrorist organizations” defacing Polish monuments with swastikas, burning the Polish flag, desecrating graves, and smashing memorials to victims of the massacre. These articles often have broad reach. Fake videos of Ukrainians defacing property with Nazi symbols were disseminated by international Russian news agencies and watched hundreds of thousands of times before being proven false by Deutsche Welle.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁵ EUvsDisinfo, “When Words Kill – from Moscow to Mariupol,” *EUvsDisinfo*, June 17, 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/when-words-kill-from-moscow-to-mariupol/>.

¹⁷⁶ Jakub Śliż, “Ukraińskie szkoły wychowują przyszłych nazistów? Dezinformacja na Telegramie,” *Pravda*, August 19, 2022, <https://pravda.org.pl/ukrainskie-szkoly-wychowuja-przyszlych-nazistow-dezinformacja-na-telegramie/>.

¹⁷⁷ Demagog, “Sława Nazizm wykrzyczane na ukraińskim wiecu? Fake news!” *Demagog*, April 13, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/slawa-nazizm-wykrzyczane-na-ukrainskim-wiecu-fake-news/.

¹⁷⁸ Rossen Bossev, “To nie nazistowski symbol, a znak brygady ukraińskiej na fladze, którą Zeleniśki podarował w Kongresie,” *Sprawdzam*, January 16, 2023, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.336Z7BW>.

¹⁷⁹ Maja Czarnecka, “W nagraniu prezydent Zełenski nie podpisuje flagi SS-Galizien tylko 103 brygady obrony terytorialnej ze Lwowa,” *Sprawdzam*, December 4, 2024, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.36P982R>.

¹⁸⁰ Alexis Orsini, “False Video Claims USAID Paid for Zelensky’s ‘Person of the Year’ Title,” *Sprawdzam*, July 26, 2024, <https://sprawdzam.afp.com/doc.afp.com.364P3YG>.

¹⁸¹ Patryk Grażewicz, “Nie ma dowodów na to, że w polskich szpitalach leczy się ukraińskich nazistów,” *Pravda*, September 25, 2023, <https://pravda.org.pl/ukrainscy-nazisci-w-polskich-szpital/>.

¹⁸² Marek Gałas, “Tolerancja, panowie! Neonaziści są oficjalnie integralną częścią...” *Dziennik Polityczny*, June 19, 2024, <https://dziennik-polityczny.com/2024/06/19/galas-tolerancja-panowie-neonazisci-sa-oficjalnie-integralna-czescia-naszego-spolectwa/>.

¹⁸³ Kathrin Wesolowski, “Is There Any Truth to Russia’s ‘Ukrainian Nazis’ Propaganda?” *DW*, December 3, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-is-there-any-truth-to-russias-ukrainian-nazis-propaganda/a-63970461>.

Polish interviewees were well acquainted with this narrative. Many worried about the threat of Nazi ideology spread by Ukrainians in Poland, while those who were more skeptical still noted how popular the Nazism narratives were. A soldier from Rzeszow reported having seen photos of Ukrainians “putting Nazi symbols as graffiti.” A Warsaw man remarked, “There are good and bad people, Poles as well as Ukrainians. But the bad Ukrainians are very dangerous, supporting Bandera, they are Nazis.” A Krakow man lamented that he noticed more people talking about the negative history between Ukraine and Poland. “This is sad because we should not blame people for actions that were not their own,” he stated, but nonetheless Poles, especially older Poles, were becoming more focused on this issue. “I don’t know what to make of it [when people say that] Ukrainians are Nazis.”

The specific issue of Banderism was even more prominent than Nazism. These concerns go hand-in-hand with tensions about the Volhynian massacre, because it was Stepan Bandera’s faction of the OUN that carried out the killings of Poles. A Warsaw man spoke of Ukrainian “nationalists, evil people who spread...bad emotions [and] bad political beliefs,” and how they had “planned some kind of cancer inside of this society.” “Even Polish authorities,” he said, “never expected such levels of hate from them [Ukrainians]. So we are under shock!” Another Warsaw resident, a young and politically interested man, echoed a similar perspective: “There is a growing problem of Ukrainian nationalism, formed from the bottom up,” he told. “The Polish government response has always been very weak against the threat of Banderism in Poland. [Recently] there has been a huge surge of Bandera’s popularity in Ukraine. This may lead to a surge of coordinated violence against Poles...There is graffiti glorifying Bandera popping up everywhere...There are more Banderist hate crimes and this rate will continue to go up.” A Konfederacja youth leader spoke about Dmytro Dontsov, an influential author whose ideas were championed by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, Bandera included. “[He] created a savage culture and the ideology that he promoted resulted in Volhyn. And this is just one of many massacres that occurred.” Volhyn, he maintained, should be looked to as a warning.

A Ukrainian man who had been living in Poland for six years spoke about how he had noticed a shift in public and private discourse. “New conversations are being brought up about what the Ukrainians did at Volhyn,” he said. He observed “lots of hate” from older people who “sit on their couches” and think that all Ukrainians are bad because of their history, despite never meeting them, interacting with them, or making an attempt at peace. He recalled having seen lots of Ukrainian videos grappling with the history and trying to move forward, to build a strong and shared future with Poland. “Volhyn was barely brought up before the war. Now even the younger generations bring it up a lot.” He had seen former friends distance themselves from him after the war broke out, and he was suspicious that it was at least partially

due to the increased focus on Ukrainians' history with Poles during World War II. A Polish man from Nowy Targ stated that he didn't have anything against Ukrainians, but his grandmother "doesn't like Ukrainians at all," since she is in her 90s and hails from the region of what is now Ukraine that used to be Poland. "She's focused on the negative history." This sentiment was echoed across Poland. "Lots of older Polish people think that all Ukrainians are the same Ukrainians that committed the massacre," one Rzeszow man remarked. "It's a difficult subject and it's just dumb to bring up right now."

The situation informing Ukrainians' views on Bandera is complicated and poorly understood, and is shaped by factors beyond Russia. In April of 2022, Ukrainian research organization Rating Group reported that 74% Ukrainians are favorable towards Bandera¹⁸⁴. This is quite understandably concerning to Poles, who primarily associate the name Bandera with the Volhynian massacre. The key is that Bandera's legacy has been whitewashed by Ukrainian school curricula and public communications. As a result, many Ukrainians are only acquainted with one part of Bandera's legacy. In an interview at his office at ZOIS Berlin, Dr. Félix Krawatzek explained that many Ukrainian supporters of Bandera are wholly unaware of his involvement in World War II era war crimes like the Volhynian massacre. Often, their first time hearing about the dark sides of Bandera's legacy is when their new neighbors or friends in Poland or Germany bring it up. Andreas Umland of the Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies deems the 'Bandera cult' an "expression of selective memory and politics of history."¹⁸⁵ The Bandera celebrated or looked upon favorably in modern Ukraine is the "radical fighter for [Ukrainian] independence" who dedicated his life to the cause, serving time in a Polish prison, German concentration camp, and who was eventually assassinated by the KGB for his efforts. His legacy has been intentionally divorced from collaboration with the Nazis and his organization's ethnic cleansings of Poles and Jews, both of which are nonetheless historical facts. Russia's invasion has increased Bandera's popularity because he has been depicted as a father of the Ukrainian independence movement who was willing to stand up against Russia, and therefore fits superficially with Ukraine's current plight.¹⁸⁶ Banderism is dangerous to Ukraine's relations with its neighbors, especially with Poland. Unfortunately, as a result of past state propaganda and selective remembrance, many Ukrainians are unaware of who they are truly supporting when they purport to view Bandera positively. The crucial misunderstanding is that while many Ukrainians may say they support Bandera, most would condemn the Volhynian massacre, and they simply are unaware that those two topics are historically linked in the Polish consciousness.

¹⁸⁴ Roman Goncharenko, "Stepan Bandera: Ukrainian Hero or Nazi Collaborator?" *Deutsche Welle*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/stepan-bandera-ukrainian-hero-or-nazi-collaborator/a-61842720>.

¹⁸⁵ Goncharenko, "Stepan Bandera," 2022.

¹⁸⁶ Marcin Żółtowski, "Kim dla Ukraińców jest Stepan Bandera?" *Fakenews.pl*, November 29, 2022, <https://fakenews.pl/spoleczenstwo/kim-dla-ukraincow-jest-stepan-bandera/>.

Predictably, Russian media capitalizes on this misunderstanding. Sputnik, a Russian state-owned broadcasting company, has recently published numerous articles in English and Polish dramatizing Polish-Ukrainian tensions about the Volhynian massacre, with headlines like ‘Poles Chide Warsaw for Cozying Up With Kiev as WWII Massacre Anniversary Nears’¹⁸⁷ and ‘Zelensky ‘Left Seething’ After Meeting With Polish Minister Over WWII Massacre by Ukrainian Fascists.’¹⁸⁸ These articles are then disseminated by both Kremlin troll accounts and unsuspecting Polish citizens, delivering coverage designed to exacerbate tensions, straight from Moscow to the Polish public. It also seems that Russian propagandists ramp up their focus on Volhyn when they anticipate damning coverage of their actions in Ukraine, as a distraction to the Polish public. For example, around the time of the Bucha massacre, ‘Volhynia massacre’ was trending on Twitter, a phenomenon either catalyzed or supported (or both) by Russian troll farms. After the news of Bucha broke, the hashtag’s trend began to die down again¹⁸⁹. Narratives are often repeated verbatim by authentic Polish content creators, to great virality. In one facebook post viewed over 200,000 times, a Polish man claimed that Russia had invaded Ukraine for the purpose of “avenging the Poles murdered by Bandera scum,” by which he means, the victims of the Volhynian massacre. “In the name of the murdered, we should stand together with the Russians and chase away the Bandera whores,” he urges¹⁹⁰. Konfederacja MP Grzegorz Płaczek’s social assistant was observed posting content claiming that Ukrainian ultranationalists (in other words, Banderists) had been the ones to commit the murders in Bucha, and had blamed their actions on the Russians¹⁹¹.

These narratives create or draw out cultural tensions between Poles and Ukrainians, seeking to paint them as culturally foreign, irrational, and dangerous in Poland. They employ Recasting, attempting to remove Ukrainians from a status of cultural similarity. As discussed in the Crime chapter, alleged banderism or Nazism is often used to stoke fear about the capacity of Ukrainians for violence and lawlessness. This narrative is one of the most emotionally salient, and for that reason occupies a large part of the false claims lodged against Ukrainian refugees in Poland. The unique historical situation presents numerous opportunities for misunderstanding, sweeping generalizations, and fearmongering. Ukrainians suffer from

¹⁸⁷Ilya Tsukanov, "Poles Chide Warsaw for Cozying Up With Kiev as WWII Massacre..." *Sputnik International*, July 1, 2023, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20230701/poles-chide-warsaw-for-cozying-up-with-kiev-as-wwii-massacre-anniversary-nears/>.

¹⁸⁸Ilya Tsukanov, "Zelensky 'Left Seething' After Meeting With Polish Minister Over WWII Massacre by Ukrainian Fascists," *Sputnik International*, October 13, 2024, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20241013/zelensky-left-seething-after-meeting-with-polish-minister-over-wwii-massacre-by-ukrainian-fascists-1120535618.html>.

¹⁸⁹Julia Dauksza and Mariusz Sepioło, "Pamięć i hejt," *Frontstory.pl*, April 26, 2022, <https://frontstory.pl/dezinformacja-ukraina-rosja-internet-media-spolecznosciowe-mowa-nienawisci/>.

¹⁹⁰Demagog, "Rosyjska agresja karą za Wołyń? Dezinformujące nagranie," *Demagog*, April 26, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/rosyjska-agresja-kara-za-wolyn-dezinformujace-nagranie/.

¹⁹¹Jan Kunert, "Nie tylko Bucza. Jak asystent posła Grzegorza Płaczka..." *Konkret24*, February 14, 2025, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polityka/nie-tylko-bucza-jak-asystent-posla-grzegorza-placzka-szerzy-rosyjska-dezinformacje-st8303255>.

disinformation on both ends: Both as the subject of Russian disinformation, and as the unsuspecting audience of Bandera's historical whitewashing.

LANGUAGE

Frustrations about the language barrier were cited by half of all Poles interviewed. This tension is ubiquitous in Poland, and would likely be present even in the absence of Russian interference. But while imperfect communication has caused some chafing of Polish-Ukrainian relations, the reality is that Ukrainians are far better suited to learn Polish than refugees of most other backgrounds. Language skills considerably improve a refugee group's reception in a country¹⁹², so over time as the Ukrainians living in Poland ameliorate their Polish skills, it is likely that this concern will diminish in salience.

In interviews, the degree of sympathy a Pole felt towards Ukrainian refugees informed how they interpreted the problem of language. Poles who held the most positive feelings usually regarded the language barrier as an unfortunate hurdle, but did not blame Ukrainians personally for their imperfect Polish or English skills. "The language barrier can make things difficult," said a young man living in Rzeszow, "but not for me, because I speak Ukrainian." This was how he communicated with many of his friends, one of whom walked by and said hello during the interview. Another Rzeszow man suggested that Ukrainians with poor Polish and English skills are probably those suffering the most, because they have the most difficulty finding employment. "They can't steal [anyone's] job if they don't speak the language," he quipped, referencing the narrative that refugees take job opportunities from Poles.

The majority of discourse surrounding the language barrier was less sympathetic, with Poles expressing frustration about refugees who "don't try to learn Polish or English." Often it was suggested that Ukrainians were mad at Poles for not speaking Ukrainian, instead of taking it upon themselves to adapt to their host country. Several retail workers in Rzeszow spoke about their experience with Ukrainian customers this way: "They don't know how to speak Polish or English. They come in wanting to buy things, but they don't know the words, and then they get mad when they can't be understood... This is why we [Poles] don't like them anymore." Interviewees also gave accounts of violence resulting from linguistic tensions. Magda from Rzeszow recounted that her friend had gotten in a physical fight with a Ukrainian man "just because he didn't speak Polish." A major concern was that Ukrainians who didn't speak Polish or English were unable to contribute economically. Several interviewees cited this reason as justification for sending non-Polish speaking refugees back to Ukraine. "They are a drain on Poland now,

¹⁹² Kirk Bansak et al., "Europeans' Support for Refugees," (850-854)

and even though there is still a war, they cannot stay here anymore unless they learn Polish and get full time jobs and decide to contribute,” said one Warsaw resident. In a group interview, three Konfederacja supporters agreed that while Ukrainian refugees were preferable to refugees from elsewhere in the world because due to their superior language skills, but that “If [Ukrainians] don’t speak Polish, they should be deported.”

While the language barrier may be frustrating, it has become significantly more permeable since the beginning of the war. In May 2022, 46% of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Poland reported having little to no knowledge of the Polish language. By November 2022, this percentage had fallen to 21%¹⁹³. The US State Department classifies Polish as a Category III “Hard Language,” meaning that about 1,100 hours are typically required to achieve professional working proficiency for English speakers—about 44 weeks of intensive language study¹⁹⁴. The survey data suggests that Ukrainian refugees have learned Polish faster than other (non-Slavic language speaking) groups might have. This is likely due to the similarities between the two languages. Polish and Ukrainian are both Slavic languages, and given their geographic proximity, each has had a relatively large linguistic influence on the other: Contemporary Standard Ukrainian contains many elements of Polish lexicon and phraseology,¹⁹⁵ and to a lesser extent, ‘Ukrainianisms’ became engrained in Polish due to historical fashions of speaking “Polish spiced with Ruthenianisms” (*z ruska po polsku*).¹⁹⁶ The degree to which this similarity impacts understanding is debated: Some Polish speakers claim to be able to understand Ukrainian almost perfectly without having learned it, while some maintain that they cannot even understand Polish when it is spoken with a Ukrainian accent. Regardless, it is certain that acquisition of Polish is easier for Ukrainian speakers than those unfamiliar with any Slavic language, and therefore Ukrainians have had an easier time learning Polish than previous migrant groups in Poland.

Given the relatively fast rate that the majority of non-Polish speaking Ukrainians were able to improve their Polish skills, it seems counterintuitive that the language barrier would become more of a tension over time. One possible explanation for why language has remained a point of contention was given by an interviewee. “In Krakow, all the normal Ukrainians who wanted to assimilate already did. So all you see is those weird ones who refuse to assimilate—those who refuse to learn the language, they stand out.” Over time, patience for refugees’ subpar Polish abilities may have run out.

¹⁹³ UNHCR, *Analysis of the Impact of Refugees from Ukraine on the Economy of Poland*, March 2024

¹⁹⁴ U.S. Department of State, “Foreign Language Training,” accessed April 9, 2025,

<https://2017-2021.state.gov/foreign-language-training/>.

¹⁹⁵ Lesiów, Michał, Robert De Lossa, and Roman Koropecyk. “The Polish and Ukrainian Languages: A Mutually Beneficial Relationship.” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 22 (1998): 393–406. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41036749>.

¹⁹⁶ Strumiński, Bohdan. “Ukrainianisms in Polish.” *The Polish Review* 40, no. 1 (1995): 39–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25778824>.

Another explanation is that Poles' patience for Ukrainian itself is waning. Interviewees expressed discomfort with hearing and seeing Ukrainian in public spaces more frequently. In some cases, the prevalence of the Ukrainian language in Poland was merely considered annoying, but in others it was a sign of 'Ukrainianization.' "In big cities, all you hear is Ukrainian in the streets," said a young man living in Krakow. The amount of Ukrainian overheard on public transportation was particularly salient. "It's annoying on trams when all you hear is Ukrainian language," said two young men in Krakow. A Polish schoolteacher echoed this sentiment: "It gets annoying, hearing Ukrainian on the street all the time and on the tram." He added that he felt a little guilty for thinking this way. "I have nothing against [the refugees]...but we're in Poland." The ubiquity of Ukrainian has become a "daily topic of conversation" in Warsaw, according to one resident, because "you can't walk down the street or go on the tram without overhearing" it. A Ukrainian man who had been living in Krakow for six years noticed a shift in people's attitudes towards him on public transportation since mid-2022. "People are usually polite unless they hear [me] speaking Ukrainian or Russian, especially on the tram," he said. "They start to act differently if I speak and my accent is recognized as Ukrainian, or at least as non-Polish." Indeed, one interviewee spoke about being annoyed by the Ukrainian accent itself. "Half the refugees try to speak in Polish," she recalled, "But I hate their accent, and I can't understand them."

One man living near Nowy Sacz noted that Ukrainians and Poles are often difficult to differentiate without hearing them speak. "They look similar, but [Ukrainians] speak in a weird accent when they speak Polish," if they speak at all. "That's how you can tell." A Warsaw resident seconded this feeling, admitting "sometimes, it's only possible to [distinguish between Poles and Ukrainians] when someone says something with strange stress." Indeed, Ukrainians are often superficially indistinguishable from Polish people. For this reason, public hate incidents committed against white Ukrainians often begin after the perpetrator hears the victim's language. Of 38 anti-Ukrainian hate incidents in Poland detailed by OSCE between 2022 and 2023, at least 6 were recorded to have begun when the victims were overheard speaking Ukrainian out loud or on the phone¹⁹⁷. Ukrainians were on different occasions subjected to xenophobic, anti-Ukrainian, and misogynistic insults, threatened with death, punched in the head, stoned, and beaten unconscious, all on the basis of their language. In one case, a Ukrainian woman, her 13-year-old son, and her pregnant adult daughter were attacked, kicked, and beaten by two men who overheard them speaking in Ukrainian as a family.

¹⁹⁷ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), "Poland."

It's clear that the language barrier causes tension, and this is no surprise, given its ubiquity in everyday interactions between Ukrainian refugees and Poles. Russian disinformation does not dedicate much effort downplaying Ukrainian refugees' Polish skills, because the reality is generally apparent for Poles living in cities with a significant refugee population. The exception is the "Ukrainianization" narrative, which points to the growing amount of Ukrainian language accommodation in public spaces as an indication of an alleged Ukrainian takeover of Poland. One such false narrative seems to have been fabricated by Marek Bąkowski, a former Law and Justice MP candidate. In late March of 2022, Bąkowski took to Facebook to accuse a children's planetarium of changing its materials to favor Ukrainian-speaking children over Polish-speaking ones. "Today I booked a screening at the Venus Planetarium in Zielona Góra for a school group," he wrote. "A nice lady warned me that the screenings are held in Ukrainian and that Poles will receive headphones with translation... I say enough of this madness. I appeal to those who still hold their homeland dear. Let's unite from the grassroots, there is still a chance."¹⁹⁸ Representatives of the Venus planetarium determined that this was not possible, confirming to Demagog in a statement that "all of the shows presented that the Kepler Science Center Venus Planetarium are broadcast in the Polish language version."¹⁹⁹ Some of the shows included optional voice-over tracks in English, German, and Ukrainian that required headphones, but Bąkowski's story about having been told that Polish-speaking children would have to use headphones could not have been true. While Bąkowski's facebook alone had been the source of the story, Konkret24 linked his account to conspiratorial, anti-Ukrainian, and pro-Russian facebook groups²⁰⁰. In the past, he had shared Russian propaganda including videos of Russian soldiers distributing food to Ukrainians and false claims that the Ukrainian army had attacked its own citizens in Donetsk. Whether he was actually colluding with Kremlin propagandists or simply inspired by their rhetoric, his post generated intense fears about Ukrainianization. Polish comments included: "We Poles will end up as servants up as servants for the maintenance of foreigners - Ukraine," "Poland is not a country of national unity? Or maybe we should have two official languages?" and "We are supposed to feel like foreigners in our own country? Scandal."

When asked how Ukrainian refugees are impacting Poles' everyday lives, those who felt the least positively towards Ukrainians mentioned linguistic "Ukrainianization." "Since the war, many buildings and signs have Ukrainian language and ads on them," remarked the leader of a youth Konfederacja club in Warsaw. "This is insulting to Poles, because we don't feel at home in our own country anymore." A

¹⁹⁸ Marek Bąkowski, "W dniu dzisiejszym rezerwowałem dla grupy szkolnej z Wielkopolski seans w Planetarium Wenus w Zielonej Górze..." Facebook, archived March 30, 2022, <https://archive.ph/xRYAg>.

¹⁹⁹ Demagog, "Polskie planetarium ma seanse tylko w języku ukraińskim? Fake news!" *Demagog*, April 8, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/polskie-planetarium-ma-seanse-tylko-w-jezyku-ukrainskim-fake-news/.

²⁰⁰ Konkret24, "Seanse w planetarium w Zielonej Górze tylko w języku ukraińskim? To nieprawda," *Konkret24*, April 1, 2022, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polska/seanse-w-planetarium-w-zielonej-gorze-tylko-w-jezyku-ukrainskim-to-nieprawda-ra1101169-ls5791216>.

Krakow woman felt similarly, stating that “Poland is becoming less Polish” as a result of the “Ukrainian writing everywhere.” This narrative borders on the conspiratorial, suggesting that Ukrainians seek to displace Poles in Poland, and is heavily favored both by Russian-affiliated sources and alt-right Polish political parties. It receives its own discussion in the Ukrainianization chapter.

The language barrier is a relatively banal annoyance that inevitably appears when two populations speaking different languages begin cohabitating in one place. Although irritation about the language barrier came up regularly in interviews, it seems that the topic of language was covered less frequently amongst anti-Ukrainian disinformation narratives. This may be due to the fact that while imperfect communication is annoying, it is not particularly emotionally salient by itself. When it is relevant, it is used as a proxy for something else: That Ukrainians are lazy for not learning Polish, for example, or that there is linguistic Ukrainianization occurring in Poland. The greatest potential language seems to have in inciting tensions between Poles and Ukrainians lies in its ability to distinguish Ukrainians from non-Ukrainians, identifying them as targets for anti-Ukrainian hate in public. While Poles may find the language barrier annoying, it does not seem to pose a threat like crime, violence, or ‘Ukrainianization’ does. However, due to the relative frequency of its occurrence, the small annoyance seemed to have aggregated to a broader concern. So while language ability certainly played a role in decreasing Polish perception of Ukrainian refugees, it has not been attacked directly by Russian disinformation, instead resulting naturally from the circumstances on the ground.

JOB MARKET

The Polish government typically speaks the labor of refugees and migrants in the country as a net positive, as it fills vacant positions and supplements staff shortages. These shortages can be severe, affecting half or more of the companies engaged in critical industries, including construction, manufacturing, transportation, and logistics²⁰¹. These vacancies are one of the most stressful pressures on Poland's economic prosperity, and thus foreign workers, who help to alleviate this pressure, are valued for their bolstering of the workforce. In fact, the National Democratic Institute found that refugees' economic impact was the primary driver of positive feelings towards them, with Polish respondents citing 'do jobs Poles don't want,' 'save Poland from economic crisis,' and 'fill job vacancies' as the biggest benefits of having refugees in their cities²⁰². In June 2022, the Polish Minister of Family and Social Policy affirmed this view, stating, "Foreigners working in our country contribute to the development of the Polish economy... We are very pleased that these people find employment in Poland." Ukrainian refugees, thanks to greater linguistic fluency and high degrees of education, secured employment more quickly and easily than previous refugee groups. In April of 2023, only 11% of Ukrainian refugees surveyed in Poland reported being unemployed. Most crucially, a joint report from Deloitte and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established that Ukrainian labor has helped fill Poland's dire vacancies: Before the refugee inflow, the percentage of firms reporting vacancies stood at a record 49%, and that number was set to increase. But after the influx of refugees, firms reporting shortages fell to 45%.²⁰³ Since 2021, the sectors that have seen the greatest increase in Ukrainian workers are exactly those suffering the most from labor shortages: Manufacturing saw an increase of 34,000 Ukrainian workers, hospitality and food services saw 18,000 join, as did wholesale and retail trade. Ukrainians work and pay Polish taxes, contributing to the national income, and the industries they work in are precisely those that were struggling to retain employees before 2022.²⁰⁴

Russian disinformation narratives recast Ukrainians as lazy and parasitic, with few intentions to work. Paradoxically, the narratives also fabricate a sense of scarcity on the Polish job market and accuse Ukrainians of taking Polish jobs. The image of the Ukrainian refugee simultaneously appears, like Schrodinger's cat, in two mutually exclusive positions: Both lazily unemployed and stealing jobs at the same time. This is a strategy to cast both situations in a negative light: If a refugee is unemployed, they

²⁰¹ Lidia Kurasinska, "Poland's Economic Growth Is Threatened by Severe Labor Shortages," *Forbes*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lidiakurasinska/2024/09/26/polands-economic-growth-is-threatened-by-severe-labor-shortages/>.

²⁰² National Democratic Institute, *Public Opinion Research: Ukrainian Refugees in Poland*, December 2023, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Public%20Opinion%20Research.pdf>.

²⁰³ UNHCR, *Analysis of the impact of refugees from Ukraine on the economy of Poland*, Geneva: UNHCR, March 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106993>.

²⁰⁴ StopFake, "Rosyjska propaganda wykorzystuje polsko-ukraiński spór o zboże," *StopFake*, September 28, 2023, <https://www.stopfake.org/pl/rosyjska-propaganda-wykorzystuje-polsko-ukrainski-spor-o-zboze/>.

must be lazy, and if they are working, they must be an economic rival. If one takes these propositions as true, then the only logical conclusion is that Ukrainians, no matter what they do, will hurt the Polish job market, and therefore must be cast out of Poland. This is exactly the conclusion that Russian disinformation hopes to achieve. This narrative features prominently in the publications of Polish-language Russian disinformation fronts. *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny*, a Polish-language apparatus of the Kremlin's disinformation network, reports: "Young, healthy Ukrainians clearly do not intend to support the economy of the host country after all, but prefer to idle, receiving refugee benefits and demanding various preferences."²⁰⁵ Similarly, *Lega Artis*, a Russian portal masquerading as a Polish legal consultancy, published an article accusing Ukrainians of laziness in other host countries. According to the article entitled "Displaced Ukrainians Don't Want to Work," of the 180,000 Ukrainians that arrived in Spain and Portugal, only 7,000 were employed. This false statistic was debunked by *Demagog*²⁰⁶.

This paradoxical narrative featured frequently in street interviews. One young man in Krakow articulated both concerns within minutes of each other. At first he reported that Ukrainians are "lazy" and "don't want to work," but only a short while after, expressed that he hoped Ukrainians would leave soon because "they are now taking jobs away from young people in Poland." Other interviewees thought that Ukrainians should be deported unless they got jobs, like a woman interviewed on the streets of downtown Warsaw: "They cannot stay here anymore unless they learn Polish and get full time jobs and decide to contribute," she said, citing how much aid had already been given. Another Warsaw man agreed, stating, "If [the Ukrainians] are working, they should stay because our population is decreasing, [because] our society is ageing... But if they are not working, we should deport them." The focus on economic contribution seemed especially salient in Warsaw. "[The refugees] should have to work if they want money," agreed two young women, "but they don't want to work."

Younger interviewees tended to focus more on Ukrainians as potential economic rivals. A young woman from Warsaw reported that most of her friends were starting to dislike Ukrainians because they themselves were job searching, and felt as though the Ukrainians were indeed competing with them. Another woman from Rzeszow reported that people on X were saying that the Ukrainians should "go back because they are taking the jobs." However, this narrative was often brought up and dismissed by more sympathetic interviewees. "If a Pole is good at their job, no Ukrainian will take their job." said a

²⁰⁵Galaś, "Tolerancja, panowie! Neonaziści są oficjalnie integralną częścią naszego..." *Dziennik Polityczny*, June 19, 2024, <https://dziennik-polityczny.com/2024/06/19/galas-tolerancja-panowie-neonazisci-sa-oficjalnie-integralna-czescia-naszego-spolectwa/>.

²⁰⁶*Demagog*, "Ukraińskim »przesiedleńcom« nie chce się pracować? To dezinformacja," *Demagog*, July 1, 2022, https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/ukrainskim-przesiedlencom-nie-chce-sie-pracowac-to-dezinformacja/.

young Rzeszow retail worker. Another joked, “We [Poles] think they [Ukrainians] are stealing our jobs, but... How is someone stealing your job if they don’t even speak the language?”

Some Poles did acknowledge that Ukrainians were a net positive to the workforce, even those who had negative feelings toward Ukrainian refugees overall. “Most employers have a cheaper labor force now,” said a man from Nowy Sacz, making a distinction about who benefits from the influx of labor. “This is good for business owners, who are rich people.” A man walking along the Vistula commented, “I don’t know how much Poland is supporting them, but I know that we need more workers in this country, not less, to do the jobs that Poles do not want to do.” “In Poland, there is not too many people to [do] jobs,” observed one Konfederacja supporter. “Many Poles don’t like to do physical jobs...So, the Ukrainians help us.”

In a time of increased economic pressure on global economies, narratives about the job market and economic factors become more salient. These narratives are wielded to propel the belief that Ukrainian economic prosperity, both in Poland and on an international level, is given preference at the expense of Poland’s, which did come up in the interviews. Despite Ukrainian refugees’ economic contributions to the Polish economy, Russian disinformation found a foothold in narratives that paint them as preferred over Poles on the job market: Both when they work, and when they don’t. The first narrative accusing them of laziness is a recasting effort because it undermines a fact of the Ukrainian refugees’ behavior in Poland. The second, the job-stealing narrative, both reframes a preference for employed refugees and recasts Ukrainians as economic migrants (as opposed to people fleeing violent conflict). Both are meant to dispute the facts of refugees’ labor and undermine their economic contributions to Poland.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

Russia wages war in many ways. Conspicuously, as in the case of their invasion into Ukraine, and covertly, with hybrid warfare techniques. Disinformation falls into this latter category. It is designed to undermine its enemies by creating destabilization, polarization, and distrust of democratic governments. It has the ability to chase political enemies around the globe and create rifts between otherwise willing allies. With this thesis, I hope to firstly to have demonstrated the strength of Russian disinformation's ability to shape international public opinion. Secondly, with the introduction of the *Reframe* and *Recast* paradigm of anti-Ukrainian disinformation campaigns, I hope have illustrated the specificity to which the disinformation is targeted to achieve its objectives. This research will fill a wanting gap for explanations of the growing Polish dissatisfaction with Ukrainian refugees and explain the degree to which Russian disinformation has contributed. By targeting Poles with disinformation campaigns, Russia poses a threat to democratic integrity, autonomy, and Polish foreign relations. Furthermore, dissemination channels, once established, are extremely difficult to reverse, meaning that the more the Polish public turns to disinformation now, the greater access Russia will have to their media streams for future sabotage campaigns. Citizens may now or in the future find themselves isolated and polarized from their country if they rely unsuspectingly on sets of false facts provided by malign Russian influence. These threats aggregate to destabilize the very foundations upon which democratic dialogue is built. Therefore, this research will make significant contributions to the understanding of Russian disinformation threats to democracy: In Ukraine, in Poland, and beyond.

“After the outbreak of the war, the Polish people showed that Solidarity is not just a great history, but that Solidarity lives on in us. We opened our hearts and our homes to our neighbours. There were and there are no refugee camps in Poland. We welcomed and continue to welcome our guests in our homes. This is the second wave of Solidarity for us: Solidarity with Ukraine!”

Ukraine still needs a great deal of support from the whole free world. For it is fighting for this freedom now. We know that the consequences of this war are affecting many people around the world, but let us remember that it is the Ukrainian people who are paying the highest price for this freedom. The price of their lives.

And that is why from Warsaw, a city so afflicted by war, from Poland, from the country of Solidarity, there is an appeal going out to the whole world: stand in solidarity with Ukraine! We repeat the words which Poles had on their lips when they were fighting for their freedom: there is no freedom without Solidarity!”

– President Andrzej Duda,
February 24, 2023²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Duda, Andrzej. “Message by the President of the Republic of Poland,” February 24, 2023.

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