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Three Years On – Ukrainians in Poland after Russia's 2022 Invasion

The wave of Ukrainian refugees which followed the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24th, 2022, was in Poland met with unprecedented levels of support and solidarity. According to data from the Polish Household Budget Survey, 70 percent of households offered some help, and over 10 percent (1.3 million households) provided direct personal assistance. Overall, by early 2025, 1.9 million refugees had registered in the dedicated social security registry (PESEL-UKR system) and 1 million continue to be registered as residing in Poland. Drawing on other data sources we argue in this policy paper that the latter figure is highly overstated, giving rise to unjustified criticisms of low school enrolment among Ukrainian children, and low rates of labour market activity among adult refugees. We highlight the risks that these critical voices may become prominent in the ongoing campaign ahead of the Polish presidential elections. During the crucial months of prospective peace negotiations, when presidential candidates are appealing for voters' support, we argue that the public debate in Poland concerning Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees, ought to be grounded in reliable evidence.

Introduction

The dramatic events of late February 2022 shook the populations across Ukraine, Europe and the world. The objective of the massive, full-scale Russian aggression was clear – to rapidly take over Kyiv, force Ukraine to surrender and take over full control of the country thus subjugating it into Kremlin's rule. Three years later, while thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians have lost their lives, and while Russia has imposed a massive economic and social burden on Ukraine, its key objective has badly failed and remains far from being realised. This thanks to the commitment of the Ukrainian government, the country's army and the mobilisation of the Ukrainian population. In turn, the country's resistance would not have been possible without substantial support from the outside, primarily from countries in the European Union and the U.S. International aid from governments to Ukraine between February 2022 and October 2024 amounted to over €230 billion (bn) with the largest part contributed by the US (€88 bn), the European Commission and European Council (€45 bn) and Germany (€16 bn). Proportional to 2021 GDP levels, the highest support came from Estonia (2.20 percent), Denmark (2.02 percent) and Lithuania (1.68 percent) (Kiel Institute, 2024). Support for Ukraine has come in many forms – military, material, financial, political and diplomatic. The international community has also imposed substantial economic and political sanctions against Russia, and has excluded it from many international forums, marginalising its voice in international discussions and meetings.

On top of that, Ukraine's neighbours and many Western countries opened their borders and welcomed a massive wave of refugees escaping the immediate military invasion in the east and north of Ukraine, seeking safety from continued bomb and drone attacks on the entire country, and running away from the risk of a complete Russian take-over. It is estimated that up to 8 million Ukrainians left the country in the first months after the full-scale war started, initially moving mainly to Poland, Romania and Slovakia (Polish Economic Institute, 2022; UNCHR, 2022). At the same time the Russian aggression resulted in internal displacement of more than 3.6 million Ukrainians (IOM UN Migration, 2024). While many of the international and internal refugees have since returned, over 6.8 million Ukrainians still reside outside of Ukraine's borders (UNCHR, 2025).

The wake of the war was met with an unprecedented wave of support among the Polish population (Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk, 2022). We use data from one of the largest representative Polish surveys – the Household Budget Survey 2022 and 2023 – to show the degree of involvement among Polish households in direct and indirect support to Ukrainian refugees. We also show that declarative general sympathy towards Ukrainians reached over 50 percent in 2023 – twice as high compared to 16 years earlier. This support has by now fallen close to the levels from just before the full-scale war (40 percent). As the immediate need for help has become less urgent, and the refugees have organised their lives in Poland, the involvement of Polish households in supporting the Ukrainian population has also declined. At its peak at the beginning of the war the proportion of Polish households that were actively involved in helping the Ukrainian population reached nearly 70 percent, with over 10 percent (i.e. more than 1.3 million) of the households providing direct assistance to the refugees.

In this policy paper we call into question some of the official data on the number of Ukrainian refugees who continue to reside in Poland (almost 1 million) (EUROSTAT, 2025). We argue that inconsistency across different sources with regard to precise numbers – such as likely inflated refugee count in the official social security register – may be used to build unfavourable claims against the refugees and the Ukrainian cause overall, as arguments and narratives develop based on marginal anecdotal evidence and incorrect statistics. As the new U.S. administration tries – in

its own way – to bring an end to the war, Ukraine will need continued strong support from all Western allies to end the war on favourable terms for Ukraine and to get significant additional help to rebuild the country. Ukraine's safety and economic security will depend on Western military guarantees and closer integration with the EU. All of this requires the support of populations in these countries, which gets increasingly undermined by internal disputes and external political interferences.

As negotiations to end the war begin to take shape, Poland enters a crucial electoral campaign ahead of its May 2025 presidential elections. This combination is likely to place the Ukrainian question among the top issues on the local agenda. At the same time, there is a risk that the extent of support towards Ukraine and Ukrainian residents in Poland will be used in the battle for electoral votes. We argue that any debate around this topic should draw on reliable, up to date data sources. In this regard, the government should provide more information to clarify data inconsistencies, to shed more light on the situation among Ukrainian citizens currently residing in Poland, and to ensure that any doubtful narratives raised in the public debate are quickly addressed.

Ukrainian sovereignty, its peaceful development and prosperity are very much in the interest of both Poland and the rest of Europe. Therefore, the Polish government must provide arguments to reinvigorate the support for Ukraine among its population. This will be fundamental to ensure Ukraine's military success and stability, to guarantee the mutual benefits of integration of the Ukrainian population in Poland, and for the future economic cooperation with Ukraine in the prospective enlarged European Union.

The Outbreak of the Full-Scale War: Ukrainians in Poland

In the first couple of months after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022, over 2 million refugees fled to Poland through the common land border, with as many as 1.3 million people crossing the border during the first two weeks of the war (Figure 1a). The exact number of refugees who arrived in Poland is difficult to gauge as some people left Ukraine via the border with Romania or Slovakia and could have entered Poland across the uncontrolled borders of the Schengen area.

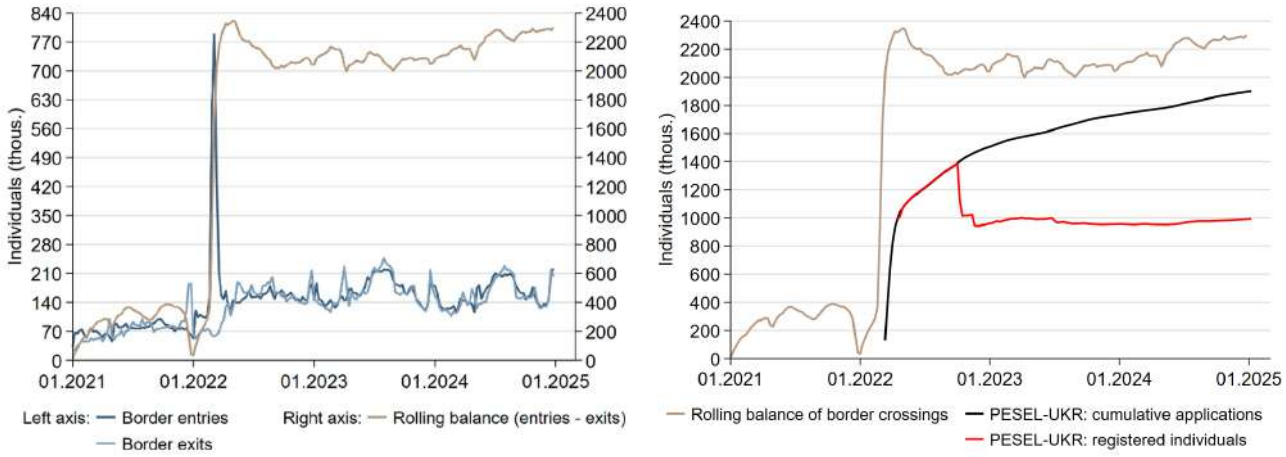
BOX 1. Ukrainian citizens in Poland before the war in 2022

Before February 24, 2022, the migration of Ukrainian citizens to Poland was regulated by existing legal mechanisms concerning all foreigners coming from non-EU countries (European Parliament, 2010). Migrants could apply for a temporary residence permit for a maximum of three years, most often in connection with prearranged employment or education (Sejm RP, 2013). Since 2017 Ukrainian citizens with biometric passports could travel to Poland and other EU countries without a visa, but their stay was limited to 90 days (European Parliament, 2017). Access to Polish social transfer system for migrants and their families was strictly regulated and limited. Labor migrants and temporary visitors under the visa-free regime had no right to public benefits or healthcare (Sejm RP, 2003).
At the time, application for refugee status was possible, but required undergoing a lengthy and burdensome asylum procedure. Those with refugee status granted had access to public transfers and healthcare (Sejm RP, 2003).

In accordance with the European regulations of Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001, the Polish government responded to the refugee crisis by establishing a special residence status for those fleeing the war. The regulations were introduced as early as March 12, 2022, and as a result, all Ukrainian refugees who arrived in Poland since 24 February could register themselves (and their family members) in a special social security registry, the so-called PESEL-UKR (Sejm RP, 2022). This registration immediately provided the refugees with an official status of temporary protection and legalized their stay in Poland until a specified date, which – as the war continued –

has been regularly extended. In comparison to other, non-EU migrants, the PESEL-UKR status grants the refugees simplified access to the Polish labour market and gives them access to public healthcare and social transfers – including general support available to all legal residents, as well as special financial and non-monetary aid targeted specifically at refugees (Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk, 2022). The registration process was streamlined and widely accessible in all municipality offices throughout Poland and resulted in rapid registration of the majority that had arrived to Poland since February 24, 2022. By the end of June 2022, 1.2 million individuals had registered for the PESEL-UKR status. The number grew to 1.4 million by October 2022 and continued to grow to 1.9 million registrations by January 2025. As evident from Figure 1b not all of those who crossed the Polish border (or arrived in Poland having left Ukraine through a different country) stayed in the country. Some continued their journey to other EU countries and beyond, while some decided to return to Ukraine. It is worth noting though that of all the registrations carried out by the end of 2024, nearly half happened in the first 8 weeks following the invasion.

Figure 1. Number of Ukrainian citizens crossing the border between Poland and Ukraine and registering for PESEL-UKR, 2021-2024



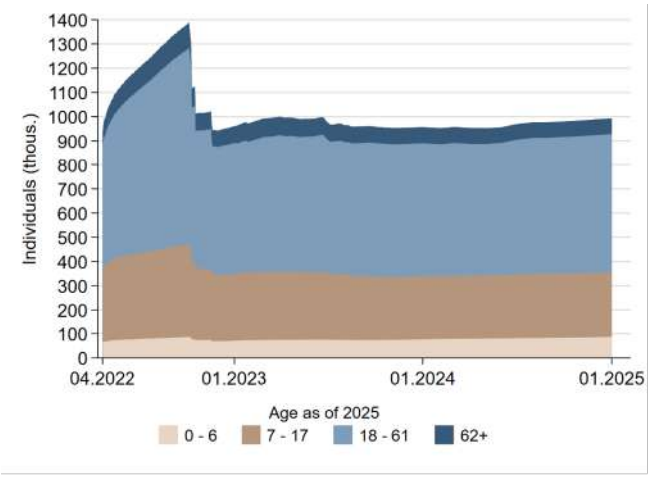
Note: Weekly data on crossings via all land borders with Ukraine.
Source: Open Data Portal (2025a, 2025b).

A notable and important legal change was introduced in October 2022, whereby individuals are automatically withdrawn from the PESEL-UKR registry after a period of 30 days when they (1) leave Poland, (2) apply for a residence permit, or (3) apply for international protection status (Sejm RP, 2022). This change is the reason for the substantial drop in the number of registered refugees at the end of 2022, with over 400 000 individual withdrawals (Figure 1b). This change in legislation was aimed at estimating more precisely the number of Ukrainian refugees currently residing in Poland. However, since withdrawals from the system require that departures from the territory of Poland are officially recorded at the border, or follow a parallel registration in another EU country, or are recorded as departures from the Schengen area through another country, the numbers in the system may still be far from the actual number of refugees currently residing in Poland.

Since late 2022 the number of registered Ukrainian refugees in Poland has been fairly stable at slightly below 1 million. Similarly, the shares of different age cohorts have not changed. In Figure 2 we show the split of those in the PESEL-UKR registry by age. Children under the age of 18 account for about 40 percent of all refugees, of which 30 percent are in schooling age (7-17). 7 percent of the

refugees are aged 62 years or older. Among those aged 18-61 years old, 70 percent are women. It is worth noting that out of about half a million children recorded in the first 7 months, almost 400 000 are still registered in the PESEL-UKR registry, a number that has been stable since the end of 2022. As we show below, these values are significantly higher compared to the number of refugee children reported by two other administrative sources. This in turn casts doubt on the reliability of the estimates of the total number of Ukrainian refugees in Poland.

Figure 2. Ukrainian citizens registered with PESEL-UKR, by age group

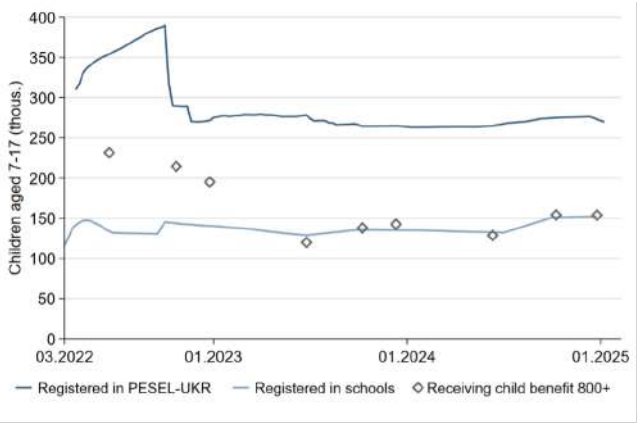


Note: Based on registered year of birth, age as of 2025.
Source: Open Data Portal (2025b).

Where Are All the Registered Children?

To check the reliability of the PESEL-UKR registry data, we match the information from the registry with information from school registers provided by the Ministry of National Education, and the number of children benefitting from social transfers provided by the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS). As evident in Figure 3, the number of registered school-age children in the PESEL-UKR registry and the number of those who are officially registered in Polish schools significantly differ, and the difference seems stable over time. According to school records, most of the Ukrainian parents promptly enrolled their children in schools right after their arrival in Poland – about 120 000 pupils joined Polish schools as early as March 2022. The numbers grew in September 2024, which followed the introduction of obligatory schooling for all Ukrainian children aged between 7 and 17 (Sejm RP, 2024), with online classes in Ukraine permitted only for those in their final year. When we compare data for late 2024 and early 2025, we see that while about 270 000 children aged 7-17 were registered in the PESEL-UKR database, only 152 000 attended Polish schools – resulting in a very low enrolment rate of about 56 percent – raising legitimate concerns over the children's academic and social development (see for example CEO, 2024).

Figure 3. Number of school-age children among Ukrainian refugees



Note: School registrations: all school types except preschool education, post-secondary schools, schools for adults and grades in which children are at least 18 years old. Ukrainian refugees only. Child benefit data points as reported in June, October and December.
Source: Open Data Portal (2025b, 2025c); information on 800+ benefit recipients: unpublished data from the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS).

As evident from Figure 3 though, from late 2023 all the way until early 2025, the '800+ benefit' (which is a universal child benefit paid to all children aged 0-17) was paid to around 150 000 Ukrainian refugee children aged 7-17. Given the ease of claiming the benefit, and the relatively high value of the transfers (about 23 percent of net minimum wage per child per month), it seems very unlikely that so many families would opt out

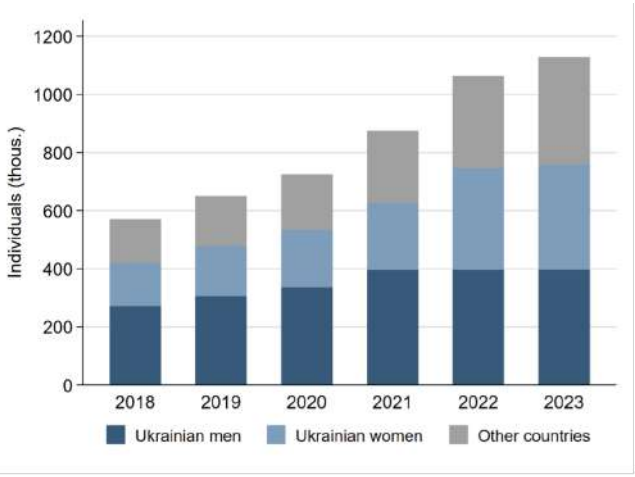
of the support. Looking at the close match between the numbers from ZUS and from the Ministry of Education, the more likely interpretation of the figures is not that children stay away from school and fail to claim social transfers, but rather that far fewer children continue to reside in Poland.

An additional argument supporting the inaccuracy of the PESEL-UKR data comes from a report published by the Narodowy Bank Polski (the Polish Central Bank) (NBP, 2024). Using information from a large survey conducted among Ukrainians living in Poland the report shows that 83 percent of school-age children in refugee families were enrolled in either a Polish or a Ukrainian school physically based in Poland. This is very far from the 56 percent rate calculated with reference to administrative data, again suggesting that the PESEL-UKR numbers of school-age children are highly inflated. If that is the case, not only the number of refugee children but the overall PESEL-UKR numbers (992 000 by January 2025) should be called into question.

How Many of the Registered Adults Are Active on the Labor Market?

The accuracy of the overall number of refugees is important because it is one of the key references for policy discussions. While international regulations specify that victims of war and conflict are granted the same basic rights and privileges as other legal residents, including access to the labour market, healthcare and other public services (Duszczyk et al., 2023), negative sentiments towards Ukrainian citizens have recently grown in Poland. Further, various restrictions on access to public support for Ukrainian refugees have already been publicly discussed and proposed in Parliament. These sentiments feed on the claims of fraudulent behaviour, unwillingness to engage in official employment and crowding out of public services for Polish nationals. Such claims about Ukrainians are spread more easily if not met by accurate numbers.

Figure 4. Number of Ukrainian men and women contributing to pension insurance in Poland



Note: 'Other countries' refers to other registered foreigners.
Source: Social Insurance Institution ZUS (2024).

Looking at labour market activity, the number of Ukrainians who were officially active on the Polish labour market (as employees, self-employed or receiving unemployment benefit) and who thus paid pension contributions to social security in December 2023 stood at 759 000 (see Figure 4). Of those 396 000 were men and 363 000 were women. While ZUS, the Social Insurance Institution, does not distinguish between migrants (those with the right to stay before February 24th, 2022) and refugees (with PESEL-UKR status) it seems safe to assume that those who registered in the ZUS database in 2022 and 2023 belong to the latter group. The difference between the number of Ukrainians contributing to social security in December 2021 and December 2023 is 132 000 and, as seen in Figure 4, the additional numbers of those registered differ only for Ukrainian women. New Ukrainian male refugees certainly also appear in the database in 2022 and 2023, but their number is difficult to estimate as some earlier migrants returned to Ukraine after the outbreak of the war, and as a result the net effect of men between 2021 and 2023 is essentially zero. Focusing on women, we can compare the number of new registrations in the ZUS database to the

total number of women aged 18-59 (excluding students) in the PESEL-UKR database (about 335 000 in December 2023). Such a ratio would suggest that only about 40 percent of female Ukrainian refugees are formally contracted on the Polish labour market (on contracts paying social security contributions). This is much lower than the values presented in the NBP report (2024), suggesting that in July 2024, around 70 percent of the adult war refugees were working and further 19 percent were looking for a job. This comparison once again suggests that the PESEL-UKR numbers are significantly inflated.

Addressing the public concerns with regard to school enrolment and labour market activity with correct figures could help counter the growing negative sentiments towards Ukrainians in Poland as well as towards the overall support for the process of securing peace in Ukraine and integrating it closer with Poland and the EU. In the next section we show that when the full-scale war started in February 2022, not only the sentiments were strongly in favour of supporting Ukraine. Additionally, the level of engagement of the Polish population in actively assisting Ukrainian refugees was truly unprecedented.

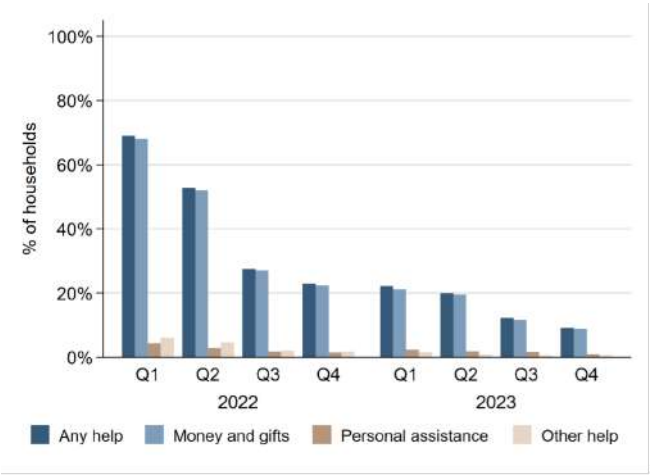
Individual Support in Response to the Outbreak of the War

In the first few weeks after the full-scale Russian invasion the Polish society almost uniformly united in providing help and assistance to Ukrainians affected by the war. The Polish Economic Institute estimated that during the first 3 months the financial, humanitarian and material help provided by the Polish society alone reached 9-10 billion PLN, which corresponded to 0.34-0.38 percent of Poland's GDP (Baszczak et al. 2022). Polish private businesses were also quick to join the assistance efforts, donating money, food, medical and other specialized equipment, and providing services such as transportation, insurance, and education free of charge (WEI 2023). Until May 2022, 53 percent of Polish enterprises engaged in different kinds of relief or support.

The assistance to refugees has been documented in numerous anecdotes, formal reports and extensive media coverage. The scale of support is also reflected in the Polish Household Budget Survey, a regular household survey conducted by the Central Statistical Office. Already in the first quarter of 2022 the survey included several questions related to the assistance given by the interviewed households to Ukrainian refugees. These questions were then included in the survey throughout 2022 and 2023. As shown in Figure 5, when the inflow of refugees from Ukraine started in late February 2022, nearly 70 percent of Polish households offered some form of assistance. Most of this help took the form of gifts and money transfers, but 10.4 percent, i.e. over 1.3 million Polish households, offered direct help such as transport, providing an overnight stay, delivering goods to accommodation venues, etc. The fraction of those offering assistance stayed very high through the first half of 2022, and 23 percent of Polish households still provided some form of assistance in the last quarter of 2022 (Figure 5). As the war stalled, and the Ukrainian population settled and became more independent, and the Polish government took official responsibility of assisting those still in need, the level of direct support from households fell. However, in late 2023 9 percent of Polish households still continued to provide some form of assistance. What is really special about the initial wave of support is that the positive attitudes towards the refugees and the Ukrainian cause were nearly universal. As seen in Figure 6, assistance was offered by high and low educated households (79 and 59 percent), those living in large cities and in rural areas (73 and 68 percent), the young and the old (66 and 63 percent). Households who declared good material conditions were more likely to offer help (75 percent), but even among those who declared

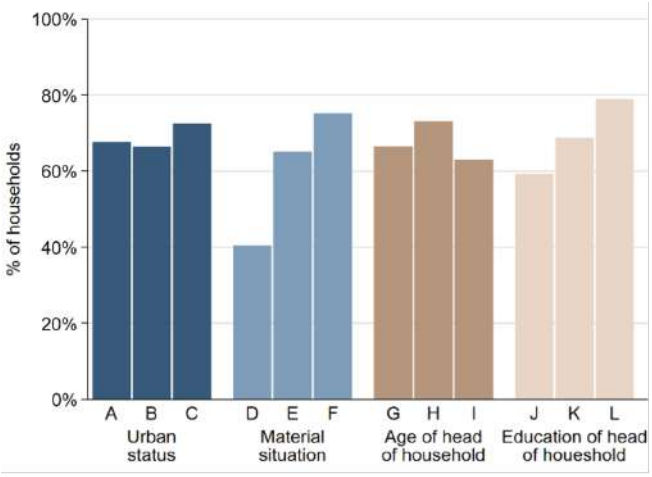
difficulties with their financial status 41 percent came forward to offer some assistance.

Figure 5. Polish households engaged in assisting Ukrainian refugees, 2022-2023 (by quarter)



Note: Help covers support and transfers to individuals and institutions in Ukraine as well as to Ukrainian refugees in Poland. "Personal assistance" – direct help to refugees (with job search, doctor's visits, public matters, language lessons, translation, etc.), "Other help" – help at the border, in reception points, temporary accommodation points, gift collection points, transportation, hosting or subletting own housing free of charge, blood donation. Source: own compilation based on the Polish Household Budget Surveys 2022-2023.

Figure 6. Polish households engaged in assisting Ukrainian refugees (any help) in the first quarter of 2022, by household characteristics

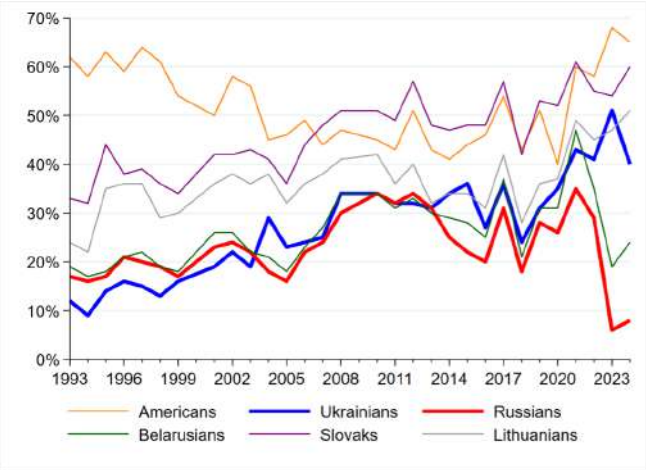


Notes: Urban status – A: rural area, B: city below 100 000 inhabitants, C: city over 100 000 inhabitants. Material situation (self-assessed) – D: bad or rather bad material situation, E: average material situation, F: good or rather good material situation. Age of head of household – G: 18-29, H: 30-59, I: 60 and older. Education of head of household – J: lower than secondary, K: secondary or postsecondary, L: tertiary. Source: own compilation based on the Polish Household Budget Survey 2022.

It is worth noting also that by the time the full-scale war broke out in February 2022 the sentiments among the Polish population towards Ukrainians had improved compared to attitudes in the 1990s and early 2000s. These sentiments have been regularly surveyed by the Public Opinion Research Center CBOS, and we summarize them in Figure 7. As evident, in the early 1990s the proportion of Poles declaring positive sentiments towards Ukrainians was very low. It steadily increased until about 2017 and then grew rapidly from 2018 till 2020. In 2022 the sentiments towards Ukrainians reached their peak, with over 50 percent of Poles declaring fondness towards them – on par with nations such as Lithuania and Slovakia. At the same time positive attitudes towards Russians reached an all-time low of 6 percent. Positive sentiments towards Ukrainians declined in 2024 – the last year for which the data is available – but even after the drop they are still high when compared with attitudes before 2023.

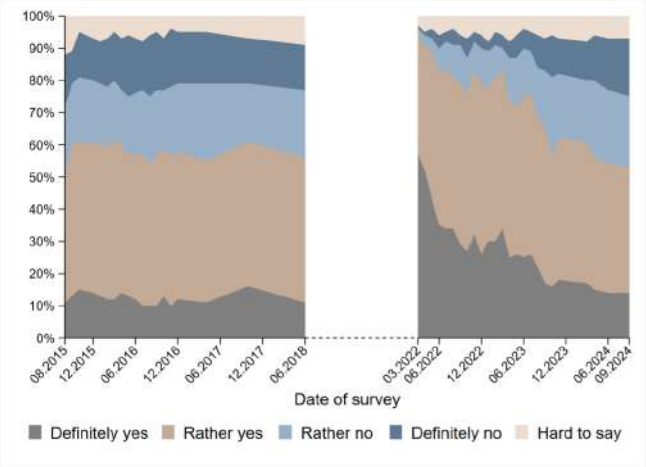
While the general positive sentiments towards Ukrainians in Poland has improved over the years, 2022 was truly unique when it comes to attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees (see Figure 8). Between 2015 and 2018, i.e. after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, around 50-60 percent of Poles declared that refugees from the conflict areas in Ukraine should be welcomed in Poland. When the same question was asked again in March 2022, 95 percent agreed that Ukrainian refugees should be welcomed in Poland and nearly 60 percent declared that they 'definitely' agreed with such a policy. However, the proportion of Poles in support of welcoming Ukrainian refugees has decreased. In late 2024 the share was more or less back at the level prior to the full-scale war, i.e. at over 50 percent.

Figure 7. Share of survey participants declaring fondness towards foreigners of different origin



Source: The Public Opinion Research Center CBOS (2024a).

Figure 8. Opinion survey: If Poland should accept Ukrainian refugees coming from the conflict territories



Note: The surveys were discontinued between 2018 and 2022.
Source: Public Opinion Research Center CBOS (2024b).

Why Have Sentiments Shifted?

At the crucial time of a possible long-awaited end to the Russian invasion, when coordinated support of Western governments will be essential to secure a just and long-lasting solution, the willingness of these governments to firmly stand behind Ukraine will, to a large extent, depend on the sentiments among their voters. Thus, the wavering enthusiasm for the Ukrainian cause in countries such as Poland can be seen as a worrying sign, in particular given how high the level of support was in the early days of the invasion. This support will be particularly important over the next few months, given the likely period of intensive international negotiations and the battle for votes in the upcoming Polish presidential elections.

It is not unusual to try to put the blame for various unfortunate developments on external forces, including global trends, external conflicts and all things 'foreign'. Thus, the fact that many people in various countries, including Poland, blame their perceived worsened economic conditions on the consequences of the war and the related influx of Ukrainian refugees is far from surprising. While some politicians might want to explain the complex broad context, others will take advantage of these sentiments and continue to fuel the negative discourse. With that in mind, three main topics have been particularly visible in the public debate in Poland:

1) access to social transfers, in particular to the '800+' child benefit for Ukrainian refugees
2) Ukrainian refugees' participation in the Polish labour market and tax contributions to the local budget
3) risks to particular groups of interest, most prominently reflected in Poland by the crisis surrounding imported Ukrainian grain (see Box 2)

The first two issues are strongly related to the general approach to immigration and integration of migrants in the Polish society. The popular media discourse – in traditional and social media – tends to focus on instances of abuse of social support and public services, and to build up negative sentiments along the lines of supposed unwillingness to engage in legal economic activity among those who have settled in Poland. While one can certainly identify anecdotes which selectively confirm all sorts of misbehaviour, the

overall evidence would clearly reject such claims. As discussed, the surveys conducted by the NBP show that a significant majority of migrants and refugees from Ukraine find legal employment in Poland. Further research based on administrative data demonstrates that many Ukrainians establish and successfully run their businesses in Poland (Polish Economic Institute, 2024). Between January 2022 and June 2024 Ukrainian migrants and refugees established almost 60 000 enterprises in Poland, and as Vézina et al. (2025) argue, these firms did not crowd out Polish businesses, meaning they represent a true value added to the national and local economies.

Recent public discussions, however, have focused on the combination of employment and benefit claims. The debate started with two parliamentary initiatives by the right wing Konfederacja and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość opposition parties and was then picked up by the leading government party's presidential candidate, Rafał Trzaskowski (money.pl, 2025). The proposed legislative changes are broadly similar, suggesting that access to the main child benefits – the '800+ benefit' – should be limited to those refugee families where at least one of the parents is formally employed. Such conditionality does not apply to Polish families, and according to current legislation, to no other families legally residing in Poland (Konfederacja, 2025; Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, 2025). The supposed aim of the changes would be to, first of all, limit fraudulent claims among those who no longer reside in Poland, and secondly, to restrict access to the benefits to those who contribute with their taxes to the public budget only. On both counts the policy seems badly misconceived. As shown above, the '800+' claims closely match the numbers of children officially registered in Polish schools, far below the numbers registered in the PESEL-UKR database. Moreover, such a policy is unlikely to lead to much higher employment among refugee parents. The benefit is universal and received by all families regardless of employment status or income; previous research has shown a similar benefit to have negligible effects on employment (see for example: Myck and Trzcinski, 2019). Therefore, the most likely reason for some refugee parents to not take up work is not unwillingness, but rather other constraints – constraints which will not change as a result of the proposed restrictions. Most Ukrainian families who fled the war are mothers whose partners could not join them due to military restrictions on the mobility of Ukrainian men. While many women settled and found jobs, family obligations may significantly limit some refugee's options for regular employment. For these families, withdrawing the eligibility for the '800+ benefit' would be a significant loss of income with potentially dire consequences for their children. It is thus difficult to understand the initiatives as anything other than attempts to address the growing critical sentiments towards the refugees to gain support among voters who are convinced by the anecdotal narrative. As argued above – with the exception of anecdotes – there is very little evidence in support of such legislative changes. Even from the point of view of potential budgetary gains, the proposed limitations on benefit claims would impose heavy administrative costs which would likely exceed any resulting savings. The politicians coming forward with such proposals would be well advised to consider data from various sources and avoid raising issues which have a clear potential to fuel negative sentiments towards refugees and migrants.

BOX 2. The dispute over the Ukrainian grain

In February 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion destabilized the Ukrainian market, in particular the agricultural sector, due to blocked exports through the Black Sea. To enable exports, so-called Solidarity Lanes were established, including corridors crossing Poland (European Commission 2022). However, Poland was not prepared to handle and re-export large volumes of Ukrainian agricultural products, due to insufficient capacity of Polish sea ports (farmer.pl, 2023; for such quantities experts argue that road transport is unprofitable; Kupczak, 2023). This led to a surplus of grain in multiple storehouses throughout the country, especially in Southeastern Poland. Overall, Polish grain stocks increased by over 250 percent, from 3.8 to almost 10 million tones (Supreme Audit Office, 2023). The drastic surplus of grain, together with much lower prices for Ukrainian crops, led to a dramatic price drop—one could buy mixed Polish-Ukrainian grain for half the price it cost the previous year (rp.pl, 2023). Apart from its impact on quantity and price, Ukrainian grain drew public attention also due to concerns regarding its quality (money.pl, 2023). Imported agricultural and food articles must undergo rigorous quality controls at the border, depending on their purpose – human consumption, animal fodder or cultivation, conducted by the respective state inspection office. Random controls held in 2022 by the Food Articles Inspection revealed that 2.4 percent of the grain samples were banned from entering the market (rp.pl, 2023). According to a report by the Supreme Audit Office (2023), controls run by the Veterinarian Inspection were drastically limited as of May 2022 which allowed poor quality fodder grain to enter the Polish market (Supreme Audit Office 2023). Since technical grain – used in the production of biofuels, insulating materials or oils – is exempt from border quality controls, its imports and sale as consumable grain could be particularly profitable. Several incidents of such forgery were subject to investigation confirming that large quantities of technical grain originating from Ukraine were sold as consumable to Polish companies (gov.pl, 2024). The tightened border controls that followed, resulted in multiday delays in the transportation of food products from Ukraine. To mitigate these constrains an agreement was reached, and, as of March 8, 2023, grain transit through Poland to other final destinations (within EU or to a third country via Polish ports) is exempt from border controls at the Polish-Ukrainian border and sealed by the National Revenue Administration. These seals can be removed only at the final destination (gov.pl, 2023a).

Throughout this period Polish farmers held demonstrations opposing the influx of Ukrainian grain. The border crossings with Ukraine were temporarily blocked by protests aimed at disrupting the flow of goods. The symbolic dumping of Ukrainian grain on the ground at the Medyka border crossing resulted in a famously cited statement by the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that this event may be seen as evidence of the "erosion of solidarity" with Ukraine (BBC, 2024). After the EU-level temporary embargo on four types of grains and oil seeds from Ukraine was lifted in mid-September 2023 (which was in effect since May 2023), Ukraine agreed to introduce export measures to avoid grain surges (European Commission, 2023). Nevertheless, Poland administered a unilateral ban on selected products and their derivatives (gov.pl, 2023b), which led Ukraine to file a complaint with the World Trade Organization (WTO, 2023). While the ban still applies (gov.pl, 2025), the Polish government has on multiple occasions actively sought to convince the EU to include wheat (and other grains) among the crops covered by the quotas under the EU-level 2022 regulation on temporary trade liberalization with Ukraine (the Autonomous Trade Measures Regulation; OKOpress, 2024; European Commission, 2024).

Conclusions

Considering the current approach by the U.S. administration under President Donald Trump, Ukraine's position in the prospective negotiations will strongly depend on the support it can gather from its European allies. This in turn is likely to reflect the sentiments towards the Ukrainian cause among European voters. In Poland, where critically important presidential elections are scheduled for May 2025, the importance of these sentiments might be particularly salient. On the one hand, the candidates are likely to voice support for Ukraine to secure peace and stability in the region. On the other hand, they may appeal for support among voters who are critical of the generous approach of Polish public institutions towards Ukrainian refugees.

As shown in this policy paper, the critical voices highlighting instances of abuse of privileges granted to refugees are largely unfounded, and much of the critical discourse is linked to – in our view – highly inaccurate numbers of officially registered refugees with the PESEL-UKR status system. The government would do a service to the quality of the debate about Ukrainian refugees in Poland, and at the same time defuse some of the critical claims, by verifying the PESEL-UKR database.

Using administrative data on school enrolment and benefit claims we show that these match almost perfectly, with around 150 000 children aged 7-17 in both registries in late 2024. This is far less than the 270 000 children in this age group registered in the PESEL-UKR database and assumed to be residing in Poland. Similarly, survey data suggests that about 70 percent of Ukrainian refugees are active on the Polish labour market. This proportion is much lower when official data based on social security contributions is compared to the total number of adult refugees in the PESEL-UKR registry. The comparison once again suggests that the figures in the latter database are significantly overstated. It is thus very unlikely that the number of Ukrainian refugees in Poland is as high as the numbers officially reported in the registry (992 000 in January 2025).

The accuracy of the numbers is important for several reasons, and the ability to address various critical claims in the public debate is only one of them. At the time of an electoral campaign ahead of a highly significant presidential election, this reason, however, may prove fundamental to avoid further polarization of the debate about continued support for Ukrainian refugees in Poland. It is also crucial for securing strong support for Ukraine by the Polish government in the coming challenging months of peace negotiations. While it is likely impossible to restore the level of positive attitudes toward Ukrainian citizens seen in Poland in February and March 2022, that degree of solidarity should serve as a foundation for a deepened relationship between the two countries.

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