THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF POLAND’S RESPONSE TO THE UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CRISIS: FROM THE INTERWAR PERIOD TO THE PRESENT

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According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as a result of the war of aggression launched by Russia, more than 8.1 million people have fled Ukraine, which makes it Europe’s worst refugee crisis since World War II. Poland, Romania, Moldova, Hungary, and Slovakia are currently hosting the most refugees. The goal of this study is to analyze the response to and representations of Ukrainian refugees in these countries specifically and the reasoning behind it. Generally, Ukrainian refugees have received a very warm and generous welcome, from both the political leaders and ordinary citizens. However, it stands in stark contrast to the way the same countries reacted to refugees fleeing places like Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. The same countries that once refused to accept refugees, such as Poland and Hungary, are now happy to open their doors. The primary reasons for the differing attitudes are the perception of Ukraine as a fellow civilized Christian and European nation with strong cultural and historical ties to countries such as Poland, women and children making up the vast majority of refugees, a sense of solidarity arising from Ukraine’s neighbors vividly remembering life behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, and the pragmatic understanding of Ukrainian victory as a bulwark against Russian aggression towards other countries in its former sphere of influence. The point is not to downplay the horrific trauma and suffering of Ukraine but to examine the variety of cultural, political, economic, and geographic factors that affect how nations see humanitarian crises that supposedly are all equally deserving of empathy and aid in the name of our shared humanity.
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Chapter 1: Compassion or National Interest: Refugees of the War in Ukraine

Background on the War in Ukraine and Subsequent Refugee Crisis

On February 22, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, a neighboring East Slavic nation with whom it has long shared close cultural, historical, political, and economic links; however, the once brotherly and cordial relations have steadily grown more hostile and uneasy in the past decade, with the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine and Russia’s annexation of Crimea, both of which occurred in 2014, serving as the primary turning points for their bilateral relationship.

The exact motivations of Russian President Vladimir Putin for engaging in a costly and potentially unwinnable conflict are best described as confusing and opaque, but some of the reasons proposed include Russia’s fear of Ukraine pursuing closer ties with the West at the expense of the former’s key security interests and even possibly joining the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Association (NATO), protecting the Russian-speaking population from an alleged “genocide,” the so-called “de-Nazification” of Ukraine, territorial revanchism driven by Putin’s view of Ukraine as an artificial state that is essentially indistinguishable from Russia, and the absurd biolabs theory. All attempts to decode Putin’s mind aside, the largest conventional war on the European continent since World War II has had wide-ranging tangible effects that Europe and the rest of the world will be forced to deal with both in the present and for decades or even centuries to come. One of these is the ongoing flow of refugees who have fled Ukraine because of the war. As of the present day, over 7.8 million Ukrainians have left
their home country, making it Europe’s worst refugee crisis since WWII.\(^1\) The countries that are currently hosting the most refugees are Poland, Romania, Moldova, Hungary, and Slovakia, all of which are neighbors of Ukraine.\(^2\) Generally speaking, Ukrainian refugees have received a very warm and generous welcome, from both the political leaders and ordinary citizens. As a few examples, the Polish parliament overwhelmingly passed a law that guarantees Ukrainian refugees the legal permission to stay in Poland for 18 months with the possibility of renewal and access to the labor market, health care system, social benefits, and education if they apply for a PESEL number,\(^3\) and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban asserted that his country would let everyone in, referring to Ukrainian refugees.\(^4\) However, this stands in stark contrast to the way that many of the same countries reacted to refugees fleeing places like Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. In 2015, during the Syrian refugee crisis, Poland and Hungary took hardline anti-refugee stances and were the main voices that pushed back against the EU’s plan to share the distribution of refugees.

One of the most named reasons for the vastly differing attitudes is the perception of Ukraine as a fellow civilized Christian and European nation, which excludes Ukrainian refugees from the discourse over integration and values that was all the rage when Europe had to reckon with the flow of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. Kiril

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Petkov, the Prime Minister of Bulgaria, fully endorses this sentiment when he bluntly remarked, “These are not the refugees we are used to... these people are Europeans. These people are intelligent, they are educated people. This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people we were not sure about their identity, people with unclear pasts, who could have been even terrorists. In other words, there is not a single European country now which is afraid of the current wave of refugees.”

Prior to Orban opening the door for Ukrainians, he frequently deployed xenophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric and proudly defied the European Court of Justice’s ruling that Hungary’s 2018 law banning individuals and organizations from helping migrants in applying for asylum violated European law. In response to a question over the shift in his government’s approach to migration issues, Orban, quite similarly to Petkov, asserted that there was a difference between migrants who should be stopped and refugees who deserve all the help they can possibly get. This point of view is hardly limited to nationally minded politicians from Eastern Europe.

While reporting from Kyiv, Charlie D'Agata, a senior foreign reporter for CBS News, made a grossly ahistorical comment about how the war in Ukraine was different from the previous conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan because Kyiv is “a relatively civilized, relatively European…city where you wouldn’t expect that or hope that it’s going to happen.” All of the statements above imply that victims of tragedies that occur

5. Brito, “Europe welcomes Ukrainian refugees.”
in “European/Western countries” are more deserving of help, sympathy, and attention because they are supposedly not predisposed to war or terrorism the way that the “uncivilized” people of the Middle East are. By closely examining the response and representation of Ukrainian refugees in the countries that have taken the most, one uncovers a variety of cultural, political, and geographic factors that affect how nations see different humanitarian crises, rather than ideally treating them as all equally deserving of empathy and aid in the name of our shared humanity.

**Poland’s Generosity**

Poland is the country that is currently hosting the greatest number of Ukrainian refugees. With over 1.4 million refugees taken in, it has received more people from Ukraine than any other EU member state. While it has already been said that European countries have been very welcoming to Ukrainians, it is still noteworthy that a survey from the Market and Social Research Institute (IBRiS) has found that over 90 percent of Poles support admitting Ukrainians who are fleeing the war into Poland, and a separate survey shows that 64 percent are willing to personally help refugees. A firsthand account from Anastasia Lapatina, a journalist who writes for the Kyiv Independent, of what is going on at the Polish-Ukrainian border supports the data and calls what she saw “the best of humanity,” despite initially expecting to see “a humanitarian catastrophe” that has sadly but understandably become an expected result of millions of people fleeing from

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war.\textsuperscript{10} Lapatina recounts arriving Ukrainians being greeted at the railway station with an enormous bilingual banner that read “You are safe here,” and dozens of volunteers providing the refugees with basic necessities, such as food, hot beverages, clothing, cell phones with pre-paid plans, housing accommodations, and legal advice. On a broader scale, thousands of everyday Poles have demonstrated untold generosity through actions like “hosting Ukrainians in their apartments, driving them to places, or simply giving them money to cover basic needs...restaurants and stores around the country give Ukrainians discounts, while any services – including the train I took – are provided for free.”\textsuperscript{11}

**Geopolitical Self-Interest in the Face of Russian Aggression**

Despite the heartwarming tone of this editorial, Lapatina does acknowledge that at least part of the undeniably beautiful response from Poland most likely stems from pragmatic geopolitical concerns. It is very possible that Putin’s ambitions will not be satisfied by conquering and subjugating Ukraine, and Poland, as a former Warsaw Pact country in proximity to Russia, could very much be next on his list of targets. In other words, by successfully shoring up Ukraine, other countries in Moscow’s former backyard have a way to ensure that Russia will be unable to conduct similar acts of aggression against them. That fear is not unfounded. Ukraine is hardly the only former Eastern Bloc country that has been subject to Russian military aggression.

In 1992, during the Transnistria War, Russia intervened in support of the

\textsuperscript{10} Anastasia Lapatina, “Here at the Polish-Ukrainian border, I see nothing but humanity towards refugees,” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2022.
\textsuperscript{11} Lapatina, “Here at the Polish-Ukrainian border.”
Transnistrian separatist forces, which helped them win against the Moldovan forces and gain de facto independence for Transnistria (Transnistria is still de jure recognized as a part of Moldova by every United Nations member state). Russia was also directly responsible for starting the first real war on the European continent in the 21st century when it launched a full-scale land, air, and sea assault on Georgia in 2008 to support the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (other than Russia, they are both recognized as independent by Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru).\(^\text{12}\) Lastly, as mentioned previously, in 2014, Russia invaded and annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in retaliation for the success of the Euromaidan movement that favored a reorientation towards the EU and the West and the ousting of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych. In late December of 2021, when whispers of a potential invasion of Ukraine were already circling though not widely believed, Russia released an extensive list of demands for the West to agree to in order to calm tensions on the continent and ease the crisis in Ukraine. The list included a ban on Ukrainian membership in NATO and the removal of all troops and weapons deployed to countries that joined the alliance post-1997, which includes Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania).\(^\text{13}\) If NATO yielded to Russia’s demands, the security and protection of allies in Eastern Europe will undoubtedly be jeopardized beyond measure because an immediate response to an attack on a member state in that

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region would be rendered impossible. While Russia’s wish list was never going to be anything more than a pipe dream, the willingness to openly express their preference for NATO to de facto retreat to where it was during the Cold War reveals that Moscow is not keen on respecting the sovereignty of countries within its proximity and sees itself as entitled to a sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe.

**Cultural, Historical, and Geographic Proximity**

Going back to Lapatina, other factors that have shaped Poland’s warm welcome are the longstanding historical and cultural ties between Ukraine and Poland and the existing presence of a large number of Ukrainians who have immigrated to and successfully settled in Poland, which long pre-dates the ongoing war, so “Ukrainians are seen not as strangers but friends.” An estimated one to two million Ukrainians already reside in Poland, many of whom left Ukraine because of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the start of the War in the Donbas. As a result, several Ukrainians currently fleeing have been able to reunite and find shelter with family and friends who are already in Poland. Maria Sobolewska, a professor of political science at the University of Manchester credits the existence of Polish TV shows centered around Ukrainians in Poland and how just about everyone in Poland knows at least one person who is originally from Ukraine, reflecting the way that “contact breeds trust and acceptance.” Sobolewska acknowledges that it is obvious that “an element of racism” exists in the quick and eager welcome of Ukrainian refugees when compared to the response to

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14. Lapatina, “Here at the Polish-Ukrainian border.”
16. Wamsley, “Race, culture and politics.”
refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, but notes that "cultural proximity is important for immigration support."  

The cultural proximity has roots in how the region’s borders have shifted countless times throughout history, and, in turn, ethnicities, languages, and nationalities have also been the subject of exchanges. Lviv, a western Ukrainian city that once belonged to Poland, is now under threat from Russia, and shelling has been so close to the Polish border that windows in houses on the Polish side have been shaken. Due to how literally close the horrors in Ukraine are to home for Poland, a common sentiment among Poles is “this could be us,” which greatly contributes to the outpouring of empathy and support. Additionally, many Poles are old enough to remember their own country’s fight for freedom and democracy during the Cold War, so they fully sympathize and relate to what present-day Ukraine is going through, and this sense of solidarity motivates them to do everything they possibly can to help their neighbor.

**Discrimination Against non-Europeans**

Furthermore, the simple geographic fact of being a neighbor to Ukraine gave the Polish government no choice but to do their best to rise to the challenge, just as Turkey hosted three million Syrian refugees and Lebanon took in over one million. Lapatina briefly mentions far-right violence against non-European refugees and the chants of “go back to your country” directed at them. However, she asserts that “this should not be seen as representative of Poland’s response, and the compassion they have shown my fellow country people.”  

While Lapatina is correct in saying that most of the Ukrainian refugees

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17. Wamsley, “Race, culture and politics.”
18. Lapatina, “Here at the Polish-Ukrainian border.”
have been hospitably received by their host countries (both the official government responses and personal anecdotes can attest to that), there is no denying that non-Europeans have repeatedly faced patterns of racism, discrimination, and poor treatment at the Ukrainian border that cannot be dismissed as flukes or one-off incidents. There are a plethora of reports of Africans being stopped at border crossings to prioritize ethnic Ukrainians and then being left stuck for days at the border in horrible conditions. Videos exist of Africans getting shoved off of trains departing Ukraine and Ukrainians reprimanding and stalling African drivers as they try to leave. Even more shockingly, there have been accounts of pets being given priority for boarding trains before Africans.\(^\text{19}\)

Some of the ones most affected by unfair treatment as they flee Ukraine have been international students from Africa and South Asia. Clement Akenboro, an economics student from Nigeria, was thrown off of a train from Lviv that was on the way to Poland by security guards and recalled all of the African passengers being subjected to the same humiliating experience.\(^\text{20}\) Freedom Chidera, a five-year medical student who is also from Nigeria, said that guards at the Polish border discriminated against him, which included throwing racial insults. This was so traumatizing to Chidera that he needed to “detox [his] mind” and call his mother to get over “the worst experience in [his] life.”\(^\text{21}\) Korrine Sky, a medical student originally from Zimbabwe who now lives in the United


\(^{21}\) Langfitt and Beardsley, “International students.”
Kingdom, described leaving Ukraine as being like the popular Netflix survival drama series *Squid Game* with “Ukrainians and Europeans at the top of the hierarchy, people from India and the Middle East in the middle, and Africans at the bottom.”²² More than 600 Indian students were forced to take shelter under dorms because they had no information or instructions on how to evacuate.²³

Professional athletes also had good reason to fear the racist barriers. Maurice Creek, an American professional basketball player who has played college basketball for the Indiana Hoosiers and the George Washington Colonials and had signed with MBC Mykolaiv of the Ukrainian Basketball Super League, was stuck in a bomb shelter for 24 hours and feared that he would be turned away at the border by Ukrainian soldiers before he was able to escape to Romania and fly home.²⁴ However, there were also accounts of the kindness and helpfulness of Ukrainians. Francis Chukwura, a student aiming for a master’s degree in economics, does not begrudge the fact that Ukrainians were given priority on the trains leaving the country because, unlike the displaced Ukrainians, people from Africa have a home to return to after leaving the country. Chukwura and his group of fellow Nigerian students received coats and shelter at a hotel from the Ukrainian government as they were working to evacuate. He ended up gaining a great deal of respect for Ukraine and its people as he watched them fearlessly fight against the Russian invasion and suggests that Western countries should do everything possible to support

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²² Ray, “The Russian invasion of Ukraine.”
²³ Langfitt and Beardsley, “International students.”
Ukraine because it is unfair to leave Ukraine to fend for itself in this dire situation.

Rayshawn Ray, a Senior Fellow at The Brookings Institute and Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park, writes that the adjective European “has become a code word for white and a justification of the primary reason that people should care about the conflict, displacement, and killing,” a way of thinking that has been applied not only to refugees from “problematic” countries like Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan but even to non-Europeans who are caught in the same boat as Ukrainians that are fleeing the Russian attack on their homeland. The human rights campaigner Nyasha Bhobo writes that, according to a number of European leaders, “refugees of white-European, Christian orientation are preferable. Others who are Black, Arab, and especially of Muslim faith are to be violently kept out. This is the rhetoric that has built over the last 11 years since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, and has set the stage for the current locking out students of colour leaving Ukraine.” In other words, “European” and “white” are seen as interchangeable with civilized, educated, Christian, middle-class/prosperous, and normal, traits that nearly universally have positive and familiar connotations in Europe and the rest of what is colloquially known as the Western world, while non-European refugees are all too commonly treated with suspicion and even outright hostility because they are stereotyped as too culturally different/foreign to ever fully integrate into their host countries and truly belong (usually through learning and speaking the language, adopting everyday customs and behavior, and participating in and contributing to civil society), as a drain on the state because they refuse to get jobs and

work and prefer to collect benefits, yet simultaneously as threats to the job security of native citizens, and as potential sources of crime and terrorism. All of the negative stereotypes of the so-called “typical” refugee mentioned above carry the implication that non-European and non-Christian societies are inherently inferior and uncivilized or, at best, simply too far removed from European culture and values, which enables governments and ordinary citizens to justify their refusal to welcome them. The logic follows that if there is a group of people who likely will take up money and resources, constantly break the law or engage in religious/political terrorism, or remain perpetual foreigners, it is a matter of “common sense” to not take any of them in for the good of the country and its citizens.

Refugees as Potential Threats to Europe’s Security

Jennifer Sciubba, an associate professor of International Studies at Rhode College in Memphis, Tennessee, a global fellow with the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., and author of the book 8 Billion and Counting: How Sex, Death, and Migration Shape Our World traces the origins of the intense scrutiny that refugees from certain countries must go through before they are granted asylum, with the EU’s open door for Ukrainians being a notable exception, to the overwhelming fear of terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. She says that after 9/11, which was carried out by hijackers from the Middle East and affiliated with the Islamist terrorist organization al-Qaeda, “migrants came to be seen as a potential threat as they fled areas of the world associated with security risks.”27 This heralded a dramatic shift in the way

27. Wamsley, “Race, culture and politics.”
that refugees were discussed; more specifically, “they became perceived as a national security issue, rather than simply a humanitarian one.”

That is why the discourse around refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, regions that are majority Muslim and frequently linked with terrorism and extremism, constantly includes an emphasis on vetting their backgrounds for any signs of past criminal and/or terrorist activities.

Europe itself has suffered from deadly acts of terrorism carried out by Islamic extremists, including, but not limited to, the Madrid train bombings, the murder of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam, the 7/7 London bombings, the Charlie Hebdo mass shooting, the series of coordinated shootings and suicide bombings in Paris in November 2015, the 2016 Brussels bombings, the vehicle-ramming attack on a Bastille Day celebration in Nice, the 2016 Berlin Christmas market truck attack, the bombing of an Ariana Grande concert at the Manchester Arena, and the 2017 attacks in Barcelona. While one absolutely should not downplay the multitude of attacks committed by terrorists who are not motivated by Islamic extremism (the 2011 Norway attacks committed by domestic terrorist Anders Behring Breivik that killed 77 people is just one of many incidents of far-right, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, and nationalist violence in Europe) or ignore the millions of ordinary Muslims that call Europe home (they indisputably vastly outnumber those that hold extremist beliefs or participate in terrorism) and not all of the individuals involved in the instances of Islamic terrorism listed above were migrants (in fact, a significant number of them were actually born in the same European countries they attacked), the continuous and sometimes embellished narratives of “places like Iraq and Afghanistan, Syria, other places across the Middle East and North Africa” being breeding

28. Wamsley, “Race, culture and politics.”
grounds for terrorism and migrants as some kind of Trojan horse and the very real experience of horrific attacks on European soil by Islamist militants, a lot of whom do have some sort of connection to the same countries/regions, makes Europeans wary about letting in migrants from said places, regardless of their dire situation. Sciubba says that it is difficult to say if the concerns are nothing but “racism couched in national security terms,” and the understandable wish to keep your country safe from terrorists of every kind and the hatred of Muslims and/or non-Europeans are “incredibly analytically hard to separate.” However, one could accurately tie the two things together and say that “there was an assumption, or a greater fear, of people fleeing from conflict areas where there have been terrorist incidents or the association of terrorism.” Sciubba mentioned how, during the Cold War, which was prior to refugees being intrinsically coupled with matters of national security, Western countries, generally speaking, happily took in people fleeing the Eastern Bloc, in part to send a compelling ideological/political message about how much better democracy and capitalism were than Soviet-style communism.

Ukrainians Fitting the Image of Refugees

The current Ukrainian refugee crisis can be compared to the earlier Cold War-era attitude towards migrants and escapees because, in both the former and the latter, European countries in the Western alliance have a strategic interest in pushing back against a hostile Russia and taking in people fleeing as a direct result of Russian actions/policies is one of the most concrete and meaningful ways that they can fulfill that goal. The reasons why countries like Poland feel they have a vested interest in doing what

29. Wamsley, “Race, culture and politics.”
30. Wamsley, “Race, culture and politics.”
31. Wamsley, “Race, culture and politics.”
they can to help Ukraine have been discussed at length. In short, it is largely driven by their own memories of life under Soviet hegemony and the possibility that, if Ukraine falls to Russia, it may trigger a domino effect where Putin is emboldened to target other countries in Eastern Europe. Lastly, 90% of the fleeing Ukrainians are women and children\textsuperscript{32} because the Ukrainian government has prohibited all men aged 18-60 from leaving the country.\textsuperscript{33} In contrast, at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, around three-quarters (73\%) of the asylum seekers were men.\textsuperscript{34} While gender stereotypes are hardly a strong basis for national security policy, women, children, and old people certainly do not evoke fears of being potential rapists, secret terrorists, or dangerous criminals the same way that young adult men do. That is because, in our popular consciousness, the demographics that make up the vast majority of the Ukrainian refugees fit the stereotypical image of what vulnerable and harmless people who are deserving of help look like.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the Ukrainian refugee crisis contained a perfect combination of factors to ensure a near-universal welcome from European countries that were previously skeptical of accepting migrants from the Middle East and North Africa. The fact that Ukraine is a largely Christian and “white” country, universally considered to be part of Europe, and with strong cultural and historical ties to countries such as Poland (the country taking in the most refugees), renders concerns about a failure to integrate

\textsuperscript{32} Rachel Treisman, “The U.N. now projects more than 8 million people will flee Ukraine as refugees,” \textit{NPR}, April 26, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/04/26/1094796253/ukraine-russia-refugees/.
and threats to the “traditional culture and values” moot. All of that, combined with the fact that women and children are the main groups fleeing their home country, neuters the fear of these particular refugees being a Trojan horse for people who will break the law and engage in terrorism. Moreover, Ukraine’s neighboring countries, specifically Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova, believe that they have an obligation to lend help and aid for reasons motivated both by genuine solidarity and political and security calculations. The former comes from the fact that all of the aforementioned countries, like Ukraine, vividly remember life under the Soviet yoke during the Cold War, allowing them to empathize with the suffering and resilience of Ukrainians and believe that Ukraine deserves the same protection and security that they enjoy through NATO and the European Union (except Moldova, all of these countries joined both after the fall of the Iron Curtain). The latter is rooted in Russia’s repeated habit of threatening the security of and intervening in the affairs of countries in its former sphere of influence. If Putin is successful in his war in Ukraine, who knows which one of Russia’s ex-satellite states will be next? From this perspective, a victorious Ukraine is an indispensable bulwark.

**Broader Implications for Poland**

There is little point in debating over which group of refugees is more deserving of acceptance. Rather, it makes much more sense to analyze and deconstruct the external factors, circumstances, and narratives that led governments and people to react so utterly differently to two of the worst refugee crises ever seen in post-WWII Europe, specifically Syria and Ukraine. The larger implication of Poland’s contrasting responses to Syrian and Ukrainian refugees is the end of the principle of universal human rights that European nations abided by, or at least paid lip service to, in the post-WWII era. Poland’s
willingness to let refugees in is contingent upon them being culturally and ethnically similar to Poles. That is an example of a larger move towards a nationalist approach to human rights that, in contrast to the principle of universal human rights, views nation-states as having the exclusive privilege of deciding which peoples/groups are deserving of human rights. In most cases, national origins are the basis upon which human rights are granted or denied.

As Poland shifts from short-term crisis management to the long-term integration of Ukrainian refugees, new questions and challenges have come up. These include unresolved disputes over history, increased burdens on Poland’s social services, and, for the refugees, the dilemma of whether to eventually return to Ukraine or to stay in Poland.  

Chapter 2: Nationalism, Historical Tensions, and Challenges to Integration

Conflict and Enmity in Polish-Ukrainian History

As previously explained, one of the main reasons for Poland’s admirable response to the influx of Ukrainian refugees is the long-shared history between the two countries that allows the Poles to see Ukrainians not as strangers but as friends. However, their centuries of shared history are not free of conflict and enmity, which means that it has the potential to become a fault line in the long-term integration of refugees. Christopher Mick, a Professor of Modern European History at the University of Warwick and specialist in Ukrainian, Russian, and Polish history, writes that Poland being the country that most passionately supports the Ukrainian war effort and shelters the most refugees co-exists with the fact that “Polish-Ukrainian relations bear a heavy historical burden.”

During the interwar years between the first and second world wars, “Ukrainian nationalists murdered several dozen representatives of the Polish state,” and “Polish police attacked Ukrainian villages, beating up young Ukrainian men and destroying communal buildings.” WWII is characterized by Mick as the source of most of the historical grievances and tensions. The massacres of Polish villagers in Volhynia in 1943 and in East Galicia in 1944, carried out by nationalist Ukrainian partisans under the command of Bandera’s Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) for the purpose of

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37. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
ethnically cleansing the regions, killed 70,000–100,000 Poles. In Ukrainian far-right circles, especially in western Ukraine, the OUN is widely venerated. Additionally, several Ukrainian governments have failed to adequately reckon with and acknowledge these atrocities. On the other hand, “the Polish resistance killed several hundred Ukrainian community leaders in the Chelm region” and murdered between 20,000 and 25,000 Ukrainian villagers as retribution for the massacres in Volhynia. At the Yalta Conference in 1945, Poland, which had no input in the decision, was compelled to “accept the loss of their eastern borderlands” in order to establish good relations with Ukraine.39

Yet Mick argues that there is far more historical evidence that supports Polish-Ukrainian cooperation over enmity. He writes that the main takeaway from history is that “if Poles and Ukrainians fight against each other, both sides lose.”40 In the 17th century, the Ukrainian Cossacks rebelled against the “relatively relaxed… overlordship” of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the Khmelnytsky Uprising and “set up an independent state, the Cossack Hetmanate, but ended up under much stricter Moscow rule.”41 The partition of Poland by Russia, Austria, and Prussia began in 1772 and was completed in 1795, which was only twenty years after the end of Cossack autonomy. Moving on to the Interwar Period, “between 1918 and 1920, both nations tried to create independent states.”42 Poland re-emerged as the Second Polish Republic, and Ukraine enjoyed a short existence as the Ukrainian People’s Republic. Competing territorial

38. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
40. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
41. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
42. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
claims over East Galicia led to the Polish-Ukrainian War, from which Poland emerged victorious. The following Polish-Soviet War ended with the Treaty of Riga that partitioned Ukraine, “mostly between Poland and the Soviet Union with smaller sections going to Czechoslovakia and Romania.”

Mick references the argument historian Timothy Snyder made in his book *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* that, in WWII, the aforementioned massacres of Poles by nationalist Ukrainian insurgents and subsequent massacres of Ukrainians by members of the Polish resistance weakened both the Poles and Ukrainians and “made it easier for Nazi Germany and for the Soviet Union to subjugate both groups.”

At the instigation of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, in the post-war period, up to 800,000 Poles were expelled from what is now western Ukraine and 500,000 Ukrainians from eastern Poland. Also, in 1947, “an additional 100,000 Ukrainians living in Poland were deported in [Operation] Vistula and dispersed in territories which had been taken from Germany.”

Once again drawing from Snyder’s *Bloodlands*, Mick places these population transfers and the terrible atrocities that accompanied them within “a pattern set by Stalinist terror and the Nazis’ genocide against the Jewish people.”

**The Effect of Historical Tensions on Bilateral Relations**

As mentioned earlier, Mick does not shy away from the strains that the historical burden has caused in Polish-Ukrainian relations. In 2000, an opinion poll conducted by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) found that “Ukraine was still one of the

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43. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
44. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
45. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
46. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
nations most disliked by Poles.”47 More recently, in 2015, the Ukrainian parliament passed a law allowing those who “denied the heroism of Ukrainian national resistance fighters to be punished.”48 It is not an exaggeration to say that the law made it hard or even impossible to accurately acknowledge the culpability of the OUN in the mass killings of up to 100,000 Poles in Volhynia and East Galicia during WWII. A few months after the law was passed, the right-wing nationalist Law and Justice Party came to power in Poland. The new Polish government “challenged the unwillingness of Ukrainian leaders” to accept the responsibility of the OUN in the massacres. 49 In 2016, “Poland’s Parliament recognized the killings as genocide.”50 The use of the term genocide to describe the massacres was perceived by many “Ukrainian politicians and journalists as an ‘anti-Ukrainian gesture’ adopted in the particularly unfavourable moment of the military conflict in the Donbas region and conscious attempts of the Kremlin to use Volhynian topic to further complicate Polish-Ukrainian relations,” and, in September 2016, the Verkhovna Rada, the unicameral parliament of Ukraine, passed a resolution that condemned the “the one-sided political assessment of the historical events” by their Polish counterparts.51 In January 2018, the Polish parliament passed a bill that included the criminalization of denial of the “crimes of Ukrainian nationalists;”52 however, this part of the bill was struck down by the Constitutional Tribunal of Poland.

47. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
49. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
52. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
Clashing National Narratives

There is a degree of irony in how the similarities between Poland and Ukraine play a key role in why “these historical issues are still unresolved and emotionally highly charged.”\(^{53}\) Poland and Ukraine are both countries that have long histories of being under the hegemony and the rule of larger, more powerful states. Furthermore, the contemporary Polish and Ukrainian states both arose in the late 1980s to early 1990s when the Soviet-led Communist bloc collapsed, and the Cold War came to an end. During the Cold War, Poland had been a nominally independent Soviet satellite state, and Ukraine was a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. Their newly restored sovereignty from Soviet control prompted the Poles and Ukrainians to construct new narratives of history that center their distinct national identities. Due to the aforementioned recurring instances of Poland and Ukraine being under the hegemony and rule of other countries, the Polish and Ukrainian historical narratives both strongly emphasize their respective victimization at the hands of outsiders and resilience in the face of these adversities. However, this framing of Polish and Ukrainian history makes it quite difficult for Poland and Ukraine to come to terms with instances where they dominated and/or committed acts of aggression against other nations and peoples.

To reiterate, instances of that nature have a presence in Polish-Ukrainian history. At some points in time (e.g., the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 16\(^{\text{th}}\) and 17\(^{\text{th}}\) centuries and the Second Polish Republic in the Interwar Period), Poland was one of the external powers that dominated Ukraine. In addition, in WWII and its immediate

\(^{53}\) Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
aftermath, Poland and Ukraine mutually engaged in massacres and deportations. Going back to the assertion that the similarities in Polish history and Ukrainian history are a reason for why the two countries have yet to satisfactorily resolve these issues, the already touched upon relative recency of the modern independent states of Poland and Ukraine coupled with their memories of repeatedly being conquered and subjugated make feelings of nationalistic pride rather potent among the Polish and Ukrainian people. While nationalism may carry a negative connotation in the United States and Western Europe, its normality in places like Poland and Ukraine is understandable as a result of their national identities and cultures being suppressed for long periods of time under foreign overlordship. In other words, the manifestations of nationalism can be interpreted as a reclamation of Polish and Ukrainian nationhood and a refusal to be reduced to the vassals of empires and superpowers. The popular national historical narratives of Poles and Ukrainians as plucky underdogs and survivors is one of the most prominent examples of this type of nationalism. Yet a downside of nationalism is that it leaves little to no room for critical introspection that would complicate the glorified and romanticized image of the nation. The previously mentioned thorny episodes of Polish-Ukrainian history do not line up with either country’s conception of themselves as repeated victims of conquests and domination who have remained resilient through all of it. This is not to say that there is no truth or basis to the preferred historical narratives, but they certainly do not accurately encompass every aspect of Poland and Ukraine’s histories. As for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its rule over the Ukrainian people, Poland sees its days as the Commonwealth, one of the largest and most powerful states in Europe, fondly as a Golden Age, especially considering how the Commonwealth ended in the late 18th
century with the partition of Poland, and it would take until 1918 for Poland to, albeit briefly, regain its independence after being partitioned. Poland’s thoroughly positive view of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Ukraine’s understanding of the Khmelnytsky Uprising and establishment of the independent Cossack Hetmanate as formative events in its history are, expectedly, not easy to reconcile. Most Ukrainians consider Bogdan Khmelnitsky, the Cossack leader who led the 17th century rebellion against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a national hero. According to a survey conducted by Rating Sociological Group in October 2018, 73 percent of Ukrainian respondents “regard Khmelnytsky entirely or rather positively.” On the other hand, “Poles tend to consider Khmelnitsky a brute, recalling his Cossacks’ massacres of Poles and Jews.” The most well-known and influential depiction of Khmelnitsky in Polish culture is in With Fire and Sword, “a 19th-century novel set during the uprising that pits a savage Cossack against a refined Polish nobleman for a princess’s love.” More broadly, the Khmelnytsky Uprising is marked as the start of the Commonwealth’s decline, which culminated in the partition of Poland in the 18th century.

Present State of Polish-Ukrainian Relations

Mick’s central argument is that the unresolved historical issues “have a negative impact on the relationship between the nations without, however, changing Polish political support for Ukraine.” While the point about commonalities in Polish and

56. Economist, “Ukrainian refugees.”
57. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
Ukrainian history playing a role in keeping the points of tension salient still stands, it is also true that the common memories of enduring Soviet domination have brought Poles and Ukrainians closer together, starting from the end of the Cold War to the present day. At the moment, “common political interests…prevail, not least because of the increasing threat to its neighbours from Vladimir Putin’s Russia.” As already mentioned, Poland understands that if Putin is successful in his current goal of subjugating Ukraine, he very likely will feel emboldened to threaten and attack other countries that were once part of the Russian sphere of influence, which includes Poland, a former member of the Warsaw Pact. Still, it was not inevitable that, after the fall of communism, “independent Poland and Ukraine would establish good political, cultural and economic ties.” The precondition was that Poland treat Ukraine as an equal and with respect and stop treating it as inferior based on a perspective rooted in imperialism. To expand on that point, due to the fact that there were periods during which Poland ruled over the Ukrainians, specifically the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Second Polish Republic, “far into the 20th century, a considerable part of the Polish elite viewed Ukrainians as incapable of sustaining an independent state” and doomed to be “either absorbed into Polish culture or forced into the Russian orbit.”

Mick does not dwell much on the imperialist attitudes of the Polish elites and instead moves on to emphasize the strength of the post-Cold War Polish-Ukrainian relationship. In 1991, Poland “was the first country to [recognize] Ukrainian independence.” Over the three decades since the establishment of diplomatic ties

58. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
59. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
60. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
61. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
between Poland and Ukraine and prior to the current influx of refugees, “around 1.5 million Ukrainians have migrated to Poland.”  

Mick draws a parallel between “people in the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands” historically “[speaking] both languages and [having] mixed ancestry” and “Poles and Ukrainians [in the present day]…discovering in their daily encounters how much they actually have in common.”  

In contrast to the 2000 survey which found that Poles still largely had negative attitudes towards Ukraine, “an opinion poll from February 2022, taken before the Russian attack,” indicated that “more Poles now like than dislike Ukrainians.”  

Mick portrays this as “a sign of how much things have changed.”  

The CBOS opinion poll for February 2022 that he references shows that 41 percent of Poles have a positive attitude towards Ukraine, compared with 25 percent who have a negative attitude. So, Mick is correct in designating it as a mark of progress in the Polish-Ukrainian relationship. Yet it is worth noting that the percentage of Poles who are positive in their assessment of Ukraine is a plurality and not a majority, and Poles feel more positively towards Italy, the United States, Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, Greece, England, France, Lithuania, and Germany than towards Ukraine. A more nuanced interpretation of the shift in Polish public opinion towards Ukraine would be that the two countries have grown closer now that the Cold War-era barriers to political cooperation, cultural exchange, and person-to-person ties are gone and they face a common enemy in Putin’s Russia, but the historical troubles continue to linger and do cloud the perceptions that Poles and Ukrainians have of each other.

63. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”  
64. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”  
65. Mick, “Ukraine and Poland.”
The Law and Justice Party and Polish National Identity

Although it is indisputable that, currently speaking, Poland has gone out of its way to welcome and help Ukrainian refugees as part of its larger strategy for supporting Ukraine in the face of the Russian invasion, the long-term integration of refugees could bring about new challenges. One potential barrier to a smooth process of integrating Ukrainian refugees into Polish society in the long-term is the potency of state-sponsored nationalism, which has already been discussed in terms of how it has made it nearly impossible to resolve the extant historical issues. Mateusz Mazzini, a lecturer at Collegium Civitas and writer-at-large for Gazeta Wyborcza daily, writes that the efforts of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party to “remake Polish identity” by “plac[ing] perceived national grievances at the center of Poland’s story, while pushing outsiders into historical oblivion” will “make it very hard to integrate refugees.”66 As for why PiS has been successful in pushing its preferred version of Polish history, Mazzini references the argument from several scholars that, after the fall of communism and Poland becoming democratic in 1989, “its government did little to create a sense of shared history” and offered close to no collective “understanding of what had happened over the previous several decades, including the years of Nazi occupation and Soviet control, as well as the transition toward democracy.”67 That vacuum left by previous Polish governments paved the way for “PiS to provide its own [nationalistic] story, in which Poles were the victims of historic abuses and never the perpetuators.”68

67. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
68. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
The core claim of PiS regarding Polish nationhood was that Poland had not actually regained its sovereignty in 1989 because, at the time, “it was still dominated by former communist officials” who were complicit in the oppressive Soviet-backed rule.  

Therefore, PiS equated its right-wing nationalist ideology with Polish identity and patriotism. This has manifested in “new government cultural policies, which [consciously use] religious and historical symbols” in order to conflate being Polish and supporting PiS. According to PiS, “to be truly Polish mean[s] hating communists, devout Catholicism, and feeling nostalgic about the glories of Polish history.” A key aspect of this cultural program is massive changes to the Polish school curriculum that, in the words of Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek, are meant to, “reclaim the generations of young Poles deprived of awareness.”  

Czernek’s words reflect PiS’s view of itself as the restorer of Polish sovereignty and ultimate arbiter of what it means to be Polish. The education ministry has replaced traditional civic education in favor of a compulsory course on “history and the present,” which, unsurprisingly, reflects “the ruling party’s ideological biases.” One of the most egregious examples of the biased nature of the new curriculum is the expectation for students to prove that “the 2010 Smolensk presidential plane crash (which killed [Lech Kaczyński, the then-president of Poland], a PiS leader, [and] the twin brother of the current leader) was the most important event in Poland’s postwar history.” Students are also supposed to “study the writing of Pope John Paul II on what Polish democracy ought to involve” and to treat 2005, the year that the first PiS

69. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
70. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
71. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
72. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
73. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
74. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
government came to power, “as the real beginning of Polish post-communist
democracy.” It goes without saying that the intentions of PiS are to utilize the Polish
education system to entrench its ideology in the minds of the future generations of Poles.

Official Nationalism in the School Curriculum as a Barrier to Integration

Mazzini argues that integrating Ukrainian children into the school system will be
a major challenge due to the existence of unresolved historical tensions between Poland
and Ukraine and the one-sided manner in which they will be taught in accordance with
the PiS-approved curriculum. He describes this historical revisionism as “suddenly
becom[ing] awkward” now that there is a “massive influx of Ukrainian students in Polish
schools.” As explained earlier, a formative event for Ukrainian national identity is the
Khmelnitsky Uprising, a “serf rebellion against Polish nobility.” In contrast to Mick’s
positive assessment of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth’s rule over the Ukrainians
as “relatively relaxed,” Mazzini emphasizes how, under the Commonwealth, “Ukrainian
peasants [had been reduced] to near slavery” and “educated Ukrainians [were forced] to
learn and speak Polish.” That is not easy to reconcile with the narrative of “Polish virtue
and victimhood” promoted by the current PiS-led government. Focusing only on the
glories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and not acknowledging the factors that
pushed the Ukrainians to revolt and throw off Polish rule will not go over well with
Ukrainian students. The Khmelnitsky Uprising is more nuanced than either country’s
official account, but the point here is to demonstrate how nationalism, with its singular

75. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
76. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
77. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
78. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
79. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
purpose of extolling a country’s virtues, makes it a difficulty to fully include others, especially if they complicate or contradict the idea of the country as always righteous and innocent.

Mazzini then discusses Poland and Ukraine in the years of WWII, which is arguably the most terrible period in their shared history. As previously covered, “Ukrainian nationalists tried to exterminate ethnic Poles in the Wołyń [(Volhynia)] area, killing [between 50,000 to 100,000] Polish inhabitants,” and “Poles retaliated, though on a much smaller scale,” by “murdering a few thousand Ukrainians.” To reiterate, the massacres during WWII have been “a delicate and difficult topic for decades in Polish-Ukrainian relations.” One of the reasons why it remains unresolved is because “the Soviet domination over both countries blocked any meaningful debate about it.” In the realm of education, it could now become “a major point of contention, as PiS-reformed curriculums, again, emphasize Polish heroism and the tragedy of Polish victims, leaving little room to even discuss the Ukrainian perspective.” In this situation, both Poland and Ukraine were simultaneously victims and perpetrators, but that complex reality is not compatible with a nationalist narrative, which relies on clear-cut heroes and villains.

**The Diminishing Sustainability of Polish Nationalism**

Beyond the school curriculum, the more fundamental problem is that “the official Polish version of history is based around excluding rather than including non-Poles.”

To put this dichotomy in more formal terms, PiS practices ethnic nationalism, which is

80. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
81. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
82. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
83. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
84. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
characterized by defining the nation and national identity around ethnicity (e.g., common ancestry, language, religion), an ethnocentric attitude towards political, cultural, and historical issues, and the likely marginalization or exclusion of people of other ethnicities, while its inclusive counterpart is called civic nationalism, which defines the nation and national identity in terms of citizenship and shared liberal values and institutions, such as freedom, equal rights, tolerance, democracy, and the rule of law, and deemphasizes ethnic identity in favor of diversity and multiculturalism. One of the reasons for why PiS could push an ethnonationalist version of history is because, until recently, modern Poland “had just one major national group within its borders.” According to the 2011 Polish census, 96.9% of the population was ethnically Polish. Yet now, “suddenly and unexpectedly, Poland has two nations rather than one for the first time since World War II.” The Polish government is caught in a dilemma of finding a way to “educate Ukrainians in a school system that it has rebuilt around a narrow and intensely distorted version of Polish history.” It is hard to imagine a scenario where the government manages to “find a common narrative that simultaneously appeals to a narrow and distorted understanding of Polish nationals while integrating Ukrainians into a country that may become a long-term home.”

A broader issue raised by the conundrum of integrating Ukrainians and also subscribing to an ethnocentric interpretation of Polish history is the feasibility of traditional nationalism in a world that is continually growing more interconnected and

85. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
87. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
88. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
89. Mazzini, “Poland’s official nationalism.”
globalized. Although it has been a member of the European Union, a supranational union that has the purpose of promoting unity among the nations of Europe and moving past the continent’s long history of nationalism, since 2004, Poland has been resistant to certain aspects of European integration that it considers to be infringements of their sovereignty and national interests. One of them was the EU’s plan during the Syrian refugee crisis to share the distribution of refugees among member states, which was vocally opposed by Poland and Hungary, another EU member state that is led by a right-wing nationalist government. To say it again, Poland has drastically changed its attitude towards refugees in the wake of the war in Ukraine. Yet Poland still has a policy of official nationalism that could eventually create tensions between Poles and Ukrainians as the two nations, despite being close allies and partners today, still have mutually unresolved disputes over historical traumas. The reason why education has been singled out as a potential area of conflict in the integration of Ukrainian refugees is because it will directly touch upon said historical traumas, while most of the other parts of welcoming and helping Ukrainians do not necessitate bringing up difficult episodes of history and are sufficiently made easier through decades of cultural exchange and person-to-person interactions and a shared antipathy towards Putin’s Russia. Despite the differences between Poland’s responses to the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crises, they are both manifestations of how nation-states and borders are no longer as powerful and absolute as they once were and the increasing necessity of multilateral and international cooperation and the diminishing chances of retaining ethnic and cultural homogeneity.
Chapter 3: Practical Challenges of Integration

Challenges Other than Nationalism and Xenophobia

In an interview on February 21, 2023, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki acknowledged that some far-right politicians “are trying to create noise and animosity between Poles and Ukrainians” but have not succeeded in doing so.90 Instead of Ukrainian refugees “being a burden or a threat,” Morawiecki asserted that the influx “will strengthen Poland demographically” and “enrich [Polish] culture.”91 Despite the generally optimistic tone of the interview, Morawiecki alluded to a potential area of disagreement between Poland and Ukraine. He “wish[ed] Ukraine well” but said that “if people who came here would like to stay, they will after some time have permanent documents and will be able to stay and will make us stronger from many different angles.”92 Morawiecki’s words illustrate the fact that xenophobia and nationalism are not the only fault lines in the integration of refugees. The Ukrainian government wanting the refugees to come home after the war so Ukraine can more effectively recover and rebuild and the Polish government explicitly viewing the Ukrainian refugees as an effective means of shoring up its demographics (ever since Poland joined the EU, a significant number of Poles, mostly young and educated people, have taken advantage of their access to freedom of movement and emigrated abroad for better economic opportunities, and this trend, since it contributes to the Polish population facing long-term stagnation

91. Higgins, “How Poland.”
and even decline, has raised concerns about Poland’s future) do not look very easy to reconcile.

Early in the war, the refugees, largely consisting of women and children, poured into eastern Poland, which is located just across Ukraine’s western border. However, as “hopes of a swift end to the fighting faded,” nearly all of them moved further west, stemming from an eagerness to “find a place to live and work.”\(^93\) That is an indication of a recognition on the part of the Ukrainian refugees that it may be necessary for them to stay in Poland for the long term.

Higgins does not shy away from Poland’s “tangled, often painful history with Ukraine” and how it has colored the views of some Poles.\(^94\) For example, Ryszard Marcinkowski, a seventy-four-year-old retired railway worker, “grew up with horror stories about the brutality of Ukrainian nationalists told by his parents and aunt, all refugees from formerly Polish lands in what, since World War II, has been western Ukraine.”\(^95\) However, “when millions of Ukrainians started arriving in Poland last February,” Marcinkowski put all of that aside and “drove to the border to deliver food and other supplies.”\(^96\) His rationale was that, in spite of the overwhelmingly negative impression of Ukrainians that he inherited from his family, he had an obligation to help them because, “for Poland, Russia has always been the bigger evil.”\(^97\) In other words, Marcinkowski is of the mindset that the enemy of Poland’s enemy is Poland’s friend. As mentioned previously, a canny recognition that it is in Poland’s geopolitical interest to

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95. Higgins, “How Poland.”
96. Higgins, “How Poland.”
support Ukraine because, if Russia succeeds in its war on Ukraine, Putin might then be emboldened to target other countries in the former Russian sphere of influence plays an indispensable role in the pro-Ukrainian sentiment in Poland.

Case Study of Wroclaw

The western city of Wroclaw, the formerly German city of Breslau, serves as an excellent case study for the massive “scale of change in Poland.” After 1945, the city was ethnically cleansed of Germans and repopulated with ethnic Poles, “many of them refugees from lost territory in Ukraine.” Wroclaw has long boasted about every stone in the city speaking Polish. Yet the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of Wroclaw is now a thing of the past. According to local officials, “more than a quarter of Wroclaw’s population speaks Ukrainian and or Russian, and around 20 percent of school students are from Ukraine.” There are “more than a half-dozen grocery stores and two supermarkets run by Ukrainians that sell mostly Ukrainian food, like Kyiv cake and patriotic boxes of candy called ‘Everything Will be Ukraine.’” The presence of what has been estimated to be around 250,000 Ukrainians has not been well received by everyone. In October, at a soccer game, a group of fans waved a large banner that read “Stop the Ukrainization of Poland.” In response to that xenophobic incident, Radoslaw Michalski, the official coordinating Wroclaw’s refugee response, said it “reflected only a ‘marginal fringe’” and certainly did not represent the broader attitude of the people of

98. Higgins, “How Poland.”
100. Higgins, “How Poland.”
Michalski recounted the public spontaneously mobilizing to support and help refugees. In the early days of the war, without any central coordination or planning, “more than 4,000 Wroclaw residents volunteered to help Ukrainians arriving by rail,” which he described as a grassroots “outpouring of generosity.” The arrival of Ukrainians, “which peaked at 12,000 on a single day last March,” has “slowed to a trickle of around 20 people a day.” So, the focus is now shifting from “finding Ukrainians shelter to helping them find work and navigate Polish bureaucracy.”

As alluded to earlier, in the beginning, “everyone thought the war would end in a month or two,” but that has definitely not proven to be the case. Consequently, the Ukrainian refugees need to get jobs and schooling. Some have chosen to use the online learning for refugee children, offered by the government in Kyiv, “so they can keep up with the Ukrainian curriculum.” That reflects how “most Ukrainians…eventually want to go home.” Education is one of the most important aspects of a child’s formative years, and Ukrainian refugee children continuing their classes, even if it is done virtually and away from their homeland, ensures that they do not end up losing touch with their heritage and culture and that it will be feasible for them to return to Ukraine once the war is over. Nevertheless, many refugees prefer to, metaphorically speaking, have one foot in each country, which stems from a practical understanding that they need to stay in Poland for the time being and the foreseeable future and from a pride in their nation that likely

103. Higgins, “How Poland.”
104. Higgins, “How Poland.”
has been bolstered by the spirit of resilience in the face of the Russian invasion/the longshot hope for eventual peace and stability in Ukraine.

For example, Veronika Goncharuk, who arrived in Wroclaw in April from Kharkiv with her husband and three children, has enrolled “her two sons and her daughter in a Polish state school and also in online Ukrainian classes.”\textsuperscript{110} Goncharuk remarked, rather bluntly, that “it probably made more sense ‘for the sake of [her] children’ to settle in Poland because ‘with a neighbor like Russia, Ukraine will never be at peace.”\textsuperscript{111} Her children have learned Polish, but Anastasia, Goncharuk’s ten-year-old daughter, “lamented that her only friend at school was a fellow Ukrainian girl, Katya, who got sick recently and left her friendless in class.”\textsuperscript{112} Although none of her Polish classmates bully her for being Ukrainian, they do not talk to or hang out with Anastasia, leaving her feeling very lonely. It is fair to say that, while explicit anti-Ukrainian sentiment is confined to the fringes of Polish society, the overwhelming amount of enthusiastic support for Ukrainian refugees that was present in the early days of the war has been gradually waning and that Poles and Ukrainians are still in the process of getting acclimated to each other.

Igor Czerwinski, a Polish language teacher at a Wroclaw school that has taken in 150 Ukrainian students in addition to 250 Polish pupils, gave some insight into how the school system has been affected by the influx of refugee children. He mentioned hearing “grumbling from fellow staff members about the strain brought on by the influx of

\textsuperscript{110} Higgins, “How Poland.”
\textsuperscript{111} Higgins, “How Poland.”
\textsuperscript{112} Higgins, “How Poland.”
foreigners.”  

The complaints from the other staff members could reasonably be construed as xenophobic, but, if the benefit of the doubt is given, they might just be overwhelmed by the vast increases in class sizes, the work load, and the necessity of providing mental health support to children who have fled a warzone. Czerwinski himself was extremely glowing in his comments about the Ukrainians. As “an ethnic Pole born in Kazakhstan,” he is a bilingual Polish and Russian speaker who has interacted with Ukrainians outside of the professional setting, such as at the Orthodox church he attends with many Ukrainian worshippers. Additionally, Czerwinski asserts that Ukrainians “are among his best students.” It is entirely plausible that, due to his personal background, Czerwinski is better able to form relationships with Ukrainians than other Poles are, and, conversely, the Ukrainians are more willing to open up to him.

To make sense of the ongoing situation in Wroclaw, Grzegorz Hryciuk, “a history professor at the University of Wroclaw,” referenced “the arrival in Wroclaw more than eight decades ago of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Poles from lost Polish territories in western Ukraine, formerly eastern Poland.” Most of these Polish refugees “harbored a deep hatred of Ukrainians, whom they blamed for massacres before and during the war.” They also held on to the “hope of returning swiftly to their former homes in and around formerly Polish cities like Lviv.” Eventually, they adjusted and “made new lives in exile.” Hryciuk argues that the pattern of displacement and adjustment “is now

118. Higgins, “How Poland.”
starting to repeat, only with ethnic Ukrainians instead of ethnic Poles.”

This raises “questions about whether and how long cities like Wroclaw and the Polish state can handle a drastic demographic and ethnic shift.” As discussed many times already, Poland “has long resisted taking in people from the Middle East and Africa” but “mostly welcomed Ukrainians” because the latter, “in their appearance and customs,” are not that different from Poles.

That is why Ukrainians refugees have avoided being stigmatized as the “other.”

There still is “some concern that the influx could create an opening for extremist nationalist groups to the right of Poland’s governing Law and Justice party,” which itself strongly adheres to right-wing nationalism, promotes an exclusionary idea of Polish identity, and has “campaigned in the past on promises to keep out foreigners.”

Przemyslaw Witkowski, an expert on far-right extremism from Wroclaw who teaches at Collegium Civitas, a private university in Warsaw, rebuffed the idea of the Polish far-right becoming a formidable political force from uniting around anti-Ukrainian sentiment. That is because Poland’s “extreme nationalist fringe [is] currently split over the war and refugees from Ukraine.” “Ultrareligious groups like one called Confederation look to Russia as a bulwark against secular Western values and denounce the ‘Ukrainization’ of Poland,” while, on the other hand, “groups with neo-Nazi, pagan leanings support Ukrainians ‘because they are white, they are Slavs and they are against Russia.’” In other words, the Polish far-right is divided between those who emphasize

120. Higgins, “How Poland.”
121. Higgins, “How Poland.”
123. Higgins, “How Poland.”
religion and traditional moral values and those who emphasize national identity and see Russia as an aggressor. Neither faction of the far-right has “gained much traction with the general public, in part because ‘it is hard to create serious tension when people have jobs.’” 126 At present, “the unemployment rate in Wroclaw is under 2 percent.” 127 To expand on the link between employment and xenophobia, foreigners and anyone perceived to be an outsider serve as convenient scapegoats in hard times, including, but not limited to, economic downturns. When one’s life is going badly, there is a certain catharsis to be found in directing your anger and resentment onto the perceived source of the malaise. It is much easier to blame immigrants, who are already subject to existing stigma, for taking one’s job than to reflect on the myriad of factors that contribute to unemployment, although the latter is more factually based. On the flip side, in times of happiness and prosperity, people generally are willing to, at the very least, tolerate the presence of immigrants because there are no extant problems to scapegoat them for.

Lukasz Kaminski, the director of the National Ossolinski Institute, an institution promoting Polish culture that moved from Lviv to Wroclaw in 1945, declared the “nationalist ideal of an entirely Polish Poland” to be finished. Kaminski describes the “influx of Ukrainians as a return to Wroclaw’s roots in the Middle Ages as a ‘mixed land’ of Germans, Poles, Jews and other ethnic groups” and dismisses the construction of Poland as a homogenous nation-state as “always artificial — against…history and against…[the] past experience [of Poles].” 128

Cuts to Funding for Public Housing Used by Ukrainian Refugees

Anti-Ukrainian sentiment that is rooted in xenophobia might be relegated to the margins of society, but the practical challenges of accommodating such a large number of refugees still exist and have affected the government’s policy on refugees. Starting in March 2023, “Ukrainian refugees that stay in Poland for more than 120 days and live in common housing facilities have to cover half of their accommodation costs with a cap of 40 zlotys (€8.50) per day.”129 Vulnerable groups, such as “children, retirees, pregnant women, single parents, parents with children under 12, and people in a particularly difficult financial situation, are exempted.”130 Furthermore, from May onwards, “refugees will have to cover 75% of their accommodation costs… if they stay in Poland for longer than 180 days. This will be capped at 60 zlotys (€12.73) per day.”131 The government states that it can no longer afford to provide funding for refugees in the country to the degree it did before. Besides housing, “refugees benefit from other state-funded perks, including free public transport and healthcare, as well as many of the social welfare benefits that are available for Polish citizens, including a monthly child benefit of 500 zlotys (€107),”132 which will not be affected.

According to the OECD’s Migration Outlook for 2022, Poland spent about “€8.36 billion on Ukrainian refugees,” which adds up to “one-third of the overall spending by all countries in the report” and is the most that any single country has spent on Ukrainian

130. Krzysztof, “Poland cuts funding.”
131. Krzysztof, “Poland cuts funding.”
132. Krzysztof, “Poland cuts funding.”
refugees.\textsuperscript{133} To help Poland handle the burdens of receiving the largest number of Ukrainian refugees, the European Commission’s Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) provided €123 million. The Commission also noted that, “under the ‘Stand Up for Ukraine’ global pledging event that raised €9.1 billion, Poland received €200 million to provide first assistance (food, transport and temporary accommodation) to those fleeing the war in Ukraine, to increase capacity in external borders management as well as to bridge the gap between first reception and early integration of persons displaced from Ukraine.”\textsuperscript{134} However, in the words of Interior Minister Mariusz Kamiński, “the money received was of ‘little help’ considering the overall cost of maintaining refugees.”\textsuperscript{135} Still, it served as a demonstration of the EU’s appreciation of Poland.

The government explained its move by saying that, according to experts, “the optimum help for refugees should last no longer than a year” because “providing them with assistance would demotivate them and make it difficult for them to return to the labour market.”\textsuperscript{136} Paweł Szefermaker, deputy interior minister and the government’s plenipotentiary for War Refugees, said, “It is nobody’s interest (…) to deprive anybody of a roof over his or her head. Those regulations are of motivational character.”\textsuperscript{137} The fear of refugees and/or immigrants mooching off of assistance/welfare and failing to contribute productively to society is a common trope in nativist discourse. However, the scaling back of benefits for Ukrainian refugees is not rooted in opposition to their

\textsuperscript{133} Krzysztof, “Poland cuts funding.”
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presence in Poland. Rather, the Polish government is trying to integrate them, and they view the pulling back of aid as a step towards them becoming normal members of Polish society, rather than remaining on the margins in a state of dependency.

Consistent with Poland’s at times strained relationship with the European Union over its sovereignty, Poland has not “notified the European Commission about its plans to make refugees pay accommodation fees.” Yet it does not seem like it will become a point of dispute between Poland and the EU since “the Commission remains aware of the adoption of the new law and is in contact with the Polish authorities on this topic.” The Commission’s spokesperson added that it is “closely monitoring the situation in Poland and is in regular contact with the Polish authorities concerning the practical implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive to ensure that relevant safeguards are in place regarding accommodation of displaced people under temporary protection.”

Still, Poland’s move has not been free from scrutiny. The Migration Consortium, “an association assembling 10 organisations that fight for the rights of migrants and refugees,” wrote in their report, “Polish School of Help,” published in February, that “the government should withdraw from (introducing) the obligation for the female refugees to participate in covering the costs of living in common accommodation facilities.”

Professor Witold Klaus, co-founder of the Migration Consortium, called the obligation “incompatible with EU laws obliging member states to help people embraced with

138. Krzysztofek, “Poland cuts funding.”
139. Krzysztofek, “Poland cuts funding.”
140. Krzysztofek, “Poland cuts funding.”
141. Krzysztofek, “Poland cuts funding.”
international protection” and “inhuman and absurd.” Refugees would be forced to “move out from the common accommodation centres due to the costs,” but there would be no place for them to go. Poland lacks a sufficient system for helping the homeless or even for providing affordable housing. Klaus explained that even those who had jobs often cannot afford the rent. He suggested that the government “launch initiatives that would facilitate moving out from the common accommodation centres to other places co-financed by the state.”

The Commission appears to be ready to provide further operational and financial help to Poland. The new generation of Home Affairs funds for 2021-27 opens the door to “significant extra resources for member states to ensure adequate reception facilities, including specialised support to vulnerable persons, and to manage asylum procedures.” According to the Commission’s press release, “the allocation to Poland amounts to €237 million under AMIF and €162.4 million under Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI), which will be essential to respond to the new challenges as they evolve, including through the implementation.” The funds are intended to aid EU member states “with their migration, and border management needs to assist those fleeing the war in Ukraine, especially as regards first reception needs such as emergency accommodation, food, healthcare and extra staff.”

142. Krzysztoszek, “Poland cuts funding.”
143. Krzysztoszek, “Poland cuts funding.”
144. Krzysztoszek, “Poland cuts funding.”
145. Krzysztoszek, “Poland cuts funding.”
146. Krzysztoszek, “Poland cuts funding.”
147. Krzysztoszek, “Poland cuts funding.”
The Dilemma of Whether to Put Down Roots in Poland or to Eventually Return to Ukraine

As brought up earlier, another likely source of difficulties for Poland’s management of the influx of refugees is the interests of the refugees themselves, which are not always congruent with those of the Polish government. Olga Moisieieva and Lena Gorduz, who sheltered together with their families for three weeks during the siege of Mariupol, have started to put down roots in their new home of Warsaw. For example, Lena’s daughter is attending university, and her son is doing well at a Polish school. However, both of them are grappling with the tough and unresolved question of whether they will “ever go back to Ukraine.” Lena stated that they “want to go back with all our heart and soul,” but their “children are making friends, and going back will be traumatic as well.” Their internal conflict is not unique. “Hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian war refugees” are also “struggling to envision the future.” They are torn between staying where they are “for the sake of their kids, having found good education, friendships, jobs and opportunities” or returning to “pick up the threads of their unraveled past lives.” In February, “during a visit to Brussels to discuss the country’s reconstruction plans and its funding needs, Yulia Svyrydenko, a Ukrainian deputy prime minister and economy minister, said Kyiv is eager to create the conditions necessary for the return of all who fled to safety.” Svrydenko noted the necessity of them returning

149. Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.”
150. Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.”
151. Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.”
152. Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.”
“to participate in the recovery efforts and reconstruction of Ukraine.”\textsuperscript{153} Although Ukraine wants the refugees to return as soon as possible for the aforementioned reasons, “the longer the war persists,” “the sharper the dilemma will become for refugees.”\textsuperscript{154} That could mean serious consequences for Ukraine, which is a country that has suffered periodic instances of “destructive depopulation” throughout its “history of wars and man-made famine.”\textsuperscript{155} Even prior to the Russian invasion, Ukraine was the world’s eighth largest source country of migrants.

Consistent with past bouts of population loss through migration, “many of those who left Ukraine over the course of the last year are among the most resourceful, and a high percentage are skilled or well-educated.”\textsuperscript{156} Paweł Jabłoński, Poland’s Deputy Foreign Minister, told Politico that “For Ukraine, if they don’t go back, this would be a brain drain. Ukraine is already losing people in the war, so this will be a problem for Kyiv.”\textsuperscript{157} Jabłoński said that the Ukrainian refugees have been an asset for Poland, specifically by plugging gaps in the Polish labor market. There is a degree of irony to Poland itself suffering the adverse effects of brain drain with many of its young and educated citizens moving abroad to find better jobs and qualities of life in other EU nations, which is enabled by freedom of movement, and redressing the issues it created by taking advantage of another nation losing large numbers of its population. This is absolutely not intended to downplay everything Poland has done to support Ukrainians who were displaced by the war, but the fact that taking in refugees brings tangible

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benefits to Poland undoubtedly plays a role in why there is little to no mainstream negative sentiment against them.

Another reason for why “there are no signs of Poles tiring of Ukrainians” is because “they’ve integrated quickly and determinedly” into Polish society.\textsuperscript{158} So, in Jabłoński’s words, “there currently isn’t any push factor to encourage them to leave.”\textsuperscript{159}

An opinion survey from the University of Warsaw’s faculty of Political Science and International Studies concurs with his statement. Robert Staniszewski, an assistant professor, said, “One year after the start of the war in Ukraine, 80 percent of Poles view refugees from that country in a positive light. Poles also believe that Ukraine should be supported in its war with Russia, as well as helping refugees from that country. This has not changed since April 2022, when we first conducted an opinion poll on this issue.”\textsuperscript{160} Staniszewski, however, cautioned that things may change if the refugees remain over time. The Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), invoked by Brussels for the first time in history, has allowed Ukrainians in EU countries, including Poland, to “avail themselves easily of the right to residency and work.”\textsuperscript{161} Almost all of the 4 million Ukrainians in Poland who have registered under the TPD scheme are women and children because “Ukrainian men from the ages of 18 to 60 have been banned from leaving the country in case they’re needed for the draft.”\textsuperscript{162} The Ukrainian government “hopes that the women and kids will be more likely to return as an indirect consequence of this.”\textsuperscript{163} To explain this point, having the right to residency and work goes a long way

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  \item[160.] Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.”
  \item[161.] Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.”
  \item[162.] Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.”
  \item[163.] Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.”
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to improve their livelihoods and wellbeing, which puts them in better shape to return and rebuild Ukraine when the time is right. Indeed, a UN survey published in September 2022 “found that 81 percent of Ukrainian refugees say they intend to return home to reunite their families.”\textsuperscript{164} Yet it goes without saying that the “percentage could start slipping if the war prolongs.”\textsuperscript{165} TPD only grants Ukrainian refugees residency and work rights for up to three years, “but even in the event of the war ending earlier, migration experts say there will likely be few EU governments willing to send them back quickly” because they do not want to risk the “bad press of tear-jerking stories about kids being ripped out of schools, or mothers losing their jobs.”\textsuperscript{166} Being displaced due to war certainly is a traumatizing experience, but returning to the homeland after years of putting down roots in another country also is not an easy task. For Ukraine specifically, the effects of the war with Russia will linger long after the fighting ends and a state of normalcy currently looks like a pipe dream. Considering that, even with the profound longing that nearly all Ukrainian refugees have for their nation, it is not a mystery as to why they find themselves at a metaphorical crossroads. Without significant push factors from the countries Ukrainian refugees are residing in, “the pace of reconstruction in Ukraine, and the speed of its transition from a wartime economy to a peacetime one, will likely be crucial in shaping the stay-or-go decision many will have to make.”\textsuperscript{167} That is one of the reasons Kyiv is “eager to get on with repairing the country as soon as possible.”\textsuperscript{168}

\textsuperscript{164} Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.” \textsuperscript{165} Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.” \textsuperscript{166} Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.” \textsuperscript{167} Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.” \textsuperscript{168} Dettmer, “War refugees grapple.”
meantime, however, “Ukrainian refugees like Lena and Olga feel caught, as if they’re stuck living in their minds, in two places at the same time.”169

Strains on the Polish Education System

The Ukrainian refugees have been especially “determined to avail themselves of all the opportunities, educational and economic, they can find in their adoptive countries,” even more than other refugees.170 To reiterate, many have “adapted rapidly” by learning “local languages and retraining so they can get working,” and the children have enrolled in school.171 In Poland, the education situation is somewhat complicated by the fact that, unlike in some countries (e.g., Germany), Ukrainian children are not under a requirement to attend local schools. Just “over a third of them have elected to attend Polish schools, while the others are sticking with the Ukrainian curriculum and learning remotely.”172 However, according to Olga and Lena, this may change. They predicted that if the war continues to rage by the start of the next school year, more refugee children will switch to Polish schools, which will make the “decision to return home that much harder.”173

Although the official Polish curriculum being designed to promote a particular vision of Polish history and identity could possibly become a source of friction in the integration of Ukrainian refugee children, it is also worth examining the practical challenges that come with a huge increase in the student body, especially when the new students have literally fled a war in a foreign country. An article from The Economist,
written in April 2022, described the Ukrainian children as being stuck in a hard situation but doing better “than those fleeing other conflicts.”174 For context, in 2021, “the UN guessed that only about half of all children who had fled across an international border were getting lessons of any kind.”175 Lost years of education leave damage that remains “long after the turmoil they fled from has ended.”176

At least a quarter of Ukraine’s children have “left the country since the conflict started in February” of 2022.177 Other than food and shelter, education is perhaps the most important aspect of the welfare of Ukrainian child refugees. At the time, “more than 160,000 [had] registered to attend local schools,” and Polish Education Minister Przemyslaw Czarneck warned that “Poland could eventually have to find room for 700,000 new pupils,” which would mean expanding the school system by 14%.178 Janusz Korczak Primary, a school in the Warsaw district of Mokotow, had new students in almost every class, some as many as six. The government has “raised caps that usually limit the size of classes.”179 While the staff are happy to help these children, no one believes that “it is ideal to be plonking the new arrivals straight into normal lessons, when few speak much Polish.”180 Some methods of handling the language barrier (although both Polish and Ukrainian are Slavic languages, they are not mutually intelligible) include “asking Ukrainian children who were already enrolled before the crisis to help

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175. Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
176. Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
177. Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
178. Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
179. Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
180. Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
them communicate with newcomers,” hiring Ukrainians who have teaching experience and speak Polish as teaching assistants, and using Google Translate.\textsuperscript{181}

A more formalized way of addressing the language barrier has been the creation of special mixed-age “preparatory classes” that are designed to provide lessons that “better match their needs”\textsuperscript{182} and to help them learn “Polish and about Poland.”\textsuperscript{183} That being said, only about 10 percent of the newly enrolled Ukrainian students are in the special classes, and around 90 percent “have been integrated into regular classes.”\textsuperscript{184}

Similar to the Polish government’s rather controversial plan to cut funding for common housing for Ukrainian refugees, there is a clash between addressing the specific issues faced by refugees and integrating them as quickly as possible.

In theory, online learning could alleviate some of the strain. For example, “teenagers coming to the end of their school years do not see much value in joining foreign schools” and “those coming from parts of Ukraine that are least affected by the conflict can sometimes access remote classes being provided by their old teachers.”\textsuperscript{185} It has already been mentioned how the “Ukrainian government is promoting a library of online lessons.”\textsuperscript{186} However, Tetiana Ouerghi, a teacher in Warsaw, said that many students feel conflicted, repeating a common sentiment expressed by the Ukrainians.

Some of the Ukrainian students have made the choice to study in Polish classrooms by day and keep up with the Ukrainian curriculum by night, “in the hope that they will soon

\textsuperscript{181} Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
\textsuperscript{182} Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
\textsuperscript{183} Dan Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools expect as many Ukrainian refugees as there are students in Los Angeles,” \textit{Washington Post}, March 20, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/20/poland-schools-ukraine-refugees/.
\textsuperscript{184} Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
\textsuperscript{185} Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
\textsuperscript{186} Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
be going home.”

No one knows for sure how long the new Ukrainian students will remain. Valentyna Mundur, a former schoolteacher from Kharkiv, now works in Warsaw for the largest teachers’ union in Poland, “helping identify other newcomers with experience in schools.” Reiterating the hesitation that many Ukrainians have about returning, Mundur “says a Ukrainian victory is not the only thing needed before she and her son can go home.” Kharkiv will need to be rebuilt, and she is worried that “all the guns and explosives now circulating in Ukraine will make it less safe than it was before.”

Even prior to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, there were concerns regarding the state of the Polish school system. Although Poland “is known for having some of the best schools in the world, ranking above the United States and most of Europe on PISA standardized test scores in reading, math and science,” it has faced a “shortage of rooms and teachers,” which certainly is not helped by the relaxation of caps on class sizes. Local news outlets “reported 13,000 teaching staff openings” at the start of the 2021-22 school year, which is “more than three times the typical level of vacancies.” To cope with the lack of space and staff, “some students have been attending classes only in the morning or afternoon.” Some teachers quit due to exhaustion from the pandemic, but “local officials, teachers, experts and activists [have] also blamed national government policies.” Teachers in Poland are often paid minimum wage, and the ruling right-wing

187. Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
188. Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
189. Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
190. Economist, “How Polish schools are coping.”
191. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
192. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
193. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
194. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
nationalist Law and Justice Party has been unreceptive to and even contemptuous of their calls for higher wages. During the teachers’ strike of 2019, President Duda’s “chief of staff suggested they should have more children to get more state benefits.” The previously touched upon official nationalism of the curriculum has also contributed to teachers leaving. Czarnek, the education minister, is an ardent conservative who has “spoken out against LGBT rights and women pursuing careers before family,” “opposed historical and artistic recognition of Jews killed in Poland during World War II and of the massacre of Ukrainian civilians by the Polish Home Army in the 1940s,” and has championed education as a means of saving “Latin and Christian civilization” from an attack by a “dictatorship of left-liberal views.” Jacek Kucharczyk, president of the Institute of Public Affairs, a think tank in Warsaw, stated, “The Polish educational system has been under terrible strain before this crisis started, because of the reforms our populist government had been implementing.” She expressed a fear that the education minister might end up blaming “the refugees when school systems fail, instead of the government for lack of action.”

Another challenge for the school system has been the need to provide mental health support for Ukrainian students. The government has allocated $42 million for “psychological and pedagogical assistance” in schools. Additionally, the Ministry of Education and Science has issued guidance for educators on “how to teach child refugees fleeing war.” Anna Ostrowska, a spokeswoman for the ministry, said in an official

195. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
196. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
197. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
198. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
199. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
200. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
statement that “Teachers … should remember not to arouse unnecessary fear, and to let children and young people talk about their emotions.”201 In the face of all these dramatic changes, Czarnek has stated his wish that “the Polish education system [be disrupted] as little as possible.”202 In practical terms, it means that the national government is leaving it up to local officials to sort things out, and the latter is not quite sure how they will manage.

In an interview with The Washington Post, Warsaw Mayor Rafal Trzaskowski said, “It’s impossible for me to say how many kids I can accept to school. Reality will show many more. But if you stretch a class from 20 to 25, that’s acceptable. If you do 30, then it’s tougher. When you do 35, then, of course, the standard of education goes down.”203 Trzaskowski praised the “tremendous kindness” that residents of Warsaw have shown towards Ukrainian refugees but also “acknowledged concern that sentiments might sour if classes balloon and Polish parents see their children’s education suffer.”204 To cope with the influx of new students, “some Warsaw schools have begun setting up makeshift classrooms in common spaces and asking teachers to give up their breaks and planning periods to take on additional groups of students.”205 Considering how Poland is already facing a teacher shortage and educators have vocally expressed their frustrations with the low pay, having a large number of new students who also require linguistic and mental health assistance is not really making the situation easier. He called on the Polish government to give Warsaw more support. The Ministry of Education and Science did

201. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
202. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
203. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
204. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
205. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
not respond to The Post’s questions about “what more it could do to help local communities,” which could be an indication of future conflict between the national government and localities over responsibility for the wellbeing and livelihoods of Ukrainian refugees.\(^\text{206}\)

Lastly, it has taken some effort to convince the Ukrainian students that learning Polish is a worthwhile pursuit. While there have been some instances of Ukrainian children being worried that their inability to speak Polish will cause other kids to not like them, the aforementioned sentiment is probably more widespread as “informal surveys suggest the vast majority [of Ukrainian students] hope to return to Ukraine soon.”\(^\text{207}\) Aleksandra Machura, a psychologist at Warsaw’s 45th Traugutt High School, has tried to square the circle by framing learning Polish “not as a commitment to stay[ing] forever but as something students could bring back as they help their communities rebuild.”\(^\text{208}\)

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is fair to say that outright anti-Ukrainian xenophobia is not a major concern regarding Poland’s response to the ongoing refugee crisis. However, that does not mean that everything is picture perfect. The Ukrainian refugees struggle with the lingering choice of whether to put down roots in Poland or remain ready to return home, the Polish government sometimes is overzealous in its push for rapid integration, and scars from past episodes of painful Polish-Ukrainian history have not fully faded. Considering the fact that the war and refugee crisis are still ongoing, it is not prudent to

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206. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
207. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
208. Rosenzweig-Ziff, “Polish schools.”
make any predictions about how Poland will be affected in the long term by taking in millions of Ukrainian refugees, but it is clearly contingent upon how and when the conflict will be resolved and the pace of reconstruction in Ukraine.

Although the Polish response to Ukrainian refugees is popularly viewed as a unique response to a modern refugee crisis that is driven by compassion and empathy, a more accurate analysis accounts for both the heartfelt solidarity between Poles and Ukrainians and the expected factors of self-interest, nationalism (although nationalism has largely remained absent from the Polish discourse over Ukrainian refugees, the possibility of it eventually emerging cannot be fully ruled out), and the practical difficulties of handling a large-scale influx of refugees. While some, including *The Economist*, have portrayed Poland as warming up to multiculturalism,\(^{209}\) that is not an accurate description because Poland’s acceptance of millions of Ukrainians is based on them having strong cultural and ethnic proximity to Poles and being compatible with Polish society. Rather than multiculturalism experiencing a revival in the midst of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, it is more accurate to describe the reaction from countries like Poland as a reaffirmation of the centrality of the nation-state. By admitting Ukrainians and shunning Syrians, Poland is asserting its rights as a nation-state to control its borders and to avert the dilution of its national identity. This glowing image of Ukrainians in Poland was ubiquitous early on in the war when the focus was on short-term crisis management and has not abated yet even as Poland transitions towards the much more

\(^{209}\) Economist, “Ukrainian refugees.”
difficult task of long-term integration. However, only time will tell if Poland has truly found a place for Ukrainians.
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