

POLISH NATIONALISTS WEAPONIZE HISTORY IN BID TO REMAIN RELEVANT

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As fatigue creeps in among Poles helping refugees, the nationalists see a chance to bounce back in the polls. They are fuelling anti-Ukrainian sentiments with two tools: the economy and history.

In order to give the Ukrainians a little sense of home, Polish cities have turned into Little Kyivs or Odessas. Take Lodz, a textile industrial hub in central Poland.

Yellow-blue flags float on the buildings over the boulevards, stores and buses, which bustle with the language of the newcomers. These people have been provided with a stipend, access to Poland's labour market, and health and social benefits, while local entrepreneurs were offered by local administrations inducements for hiring them. Even advertising posters have been displayed in Cyrillic unfamiliar to Polish eyes.

Yet what otherwise might be seen as signs of the nation's extraordinary generosity, for Dariusz Ziembra they are misbegotten examples of help.

"They are allowed to use public transportation for free, while my kids have to pay for tickets. Why is it so?," ask Ziembra, 41, sitting in the kitchen on the first floor of the tenement that he co-owns in southern Lodz.

A member of the far-right National Movement, which traces its roots back to radical nationalist groups active in the interwar period, Ziembra is vocal about his dissatisfaction with, as he calls it, "discrimination of the Poles".

"I'm not saying that we should put them in camps...," he claims. "But with a state budget indebted by COVID-19, we've been pumping public funds into humanitarian aid and giving all the rights to all the Ukrainians without verification who is a refugee and who is not... We accept foreigners with their traditions and treat them as more important than our own."

These sentiments, although not always expressed in such an explicit way, are not that rare.

Money, sympathy dry up

Over a hundred days into Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, with no end to the war in sight, resources and private shelters stretching thinner, and galloping inflation and energy bills, "the Polish people's widespread enthusiasm for helping is drying up," admits Rafal Kowalczyk, a historian at the University of Lodz.

The initial mobilisation of the nation animated by volunteers and non-government groups received international acclaim. Ordinary citizens, including Kowalczyk, have helped transport hundreds of thousands Ukrainians fleeing the war from the border, offering them aid, food and accommodation in

towns and cities all around Poland. Kowalczyk also co-started a fundraiser for purchasing bulletproof vests and medical supplies for Ukrainian soldiers.

But after raising over 19,000 zloty (4,000 euros), donations suddenly came to a halt. “Since mid-May, we have not received any contributions,” he says.

In a written response to a BIRN enquiry, city hall says that in early April Lodz was hosting over 20,000 Ukrainian refugees who, coupled with 56,500 fellow-citizens that were already living in the city and its suburbs, constituted some 11 per cent of the town’s total population. There’s no more recent data available, but it’s likely that many have already returned to cities like Kyiv which are not currently under attack.

Those who have decided to stay are facing this new, yet easy-to-predict phenomenon: the public’s war fatigue that it is now being capitalised on by nationalists.

One day after the outbreak of the war, Pawel Wyrzykowski, 31, a leader of the Confederation alliance, a parliamentary coalition between two radical parties including the National Movement, in Siedlce in eastern Poland, wrote that the Ukrainian refugees “will not be hands to work but “mouths to feed, beggars”, with absolutely no accumulated capital to undertake productive work”, and suggested sending them to Germany. Now, he explains to BIRN, he was just expressing the view of how he thought the Polish people might perceive the refugees.

“In many ways, I was right,” he says over the phone. “Although the Ukrainians get a lot of support from both the state and private people, they respond with a complete lack of gratitude, cooperation and even decency. I heard many stories about them not resigning from generous benefits despite returning home.”

A negative impact of the refugees on the economy became a part of Polish nationalists’ playbook as much as accusations that the Ukrainians are allegedly being favoured by state institutions. Ziemia insists he has received many signals that the refugees are preferred over the Poles in getting access to social and medical services, and that the Poles are being fired because employers find it more profitable to hire Ukrainians.

BIRN has been unable to verify either these claims or whether they are systematic or incidental in character. However, Polish state institutions have firmly denied any sort of partisanship has been taking place.

Dead hand of history

By fuelling public weariness with the refugees, the Confederation is trying to rejuvenate its fortunes, says Rafal Pankowski, the head of Never Again, a racism monitoring organisation.

Following a series of internal conflicts and after the ruling right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party had taken over part of its radical agenda, support for the alliance, which secured almost 7 per cent of the vote in the 2019 parliamentary election and whose candidate ranked fourth in the presidential election a year later, was languishing at 4 per cent in late May.

“They have been very active lately on social media and YouTube spreading rampant misinformation and sometimes even affirming the war,” says Pankowski. “I think they are counting on a similar effect that took place after the COVID-19 pandemic outburst: the initial solidarity and mobilisation was soon replaced by conspiracy theories and xenophobic moods.”

However, exploiting economic costs and social challenges related to a large number of Ukrainians is only one way to take advantage of the population’s fatigue. Another one traces back to the 1940s.

At one point in the conversation with Ziemba, his eight-year-old daughter appears in the kitchen sharing stories about her Ukrainian friends in the school and – to Ziemba’s slight discomfort – using Ukrainian words. When she admits wanting to learn Ukrainian, he’s quick to add: “I want it too. But you know why? To know the language of the enemy.”

The concept of the Ukrainians as “enemies”, widespread among far-right groups, is rooted in the tragic World War II history. Between 1943 and 1945, members of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) massacred tens of thousands of Poles throughout Volhynia, a region that was in German-occupied Poland at that time. In 2016, Poland’s parliament recognised the killings as genocide. Ukraine not only rejects this term, but also claims the death toll was between 20,000 and 30,000, while Polish historians insist it could be as high as 100,000.

“I understand [Vladimir] Putin’s arguments when he talks about the denazification of Ukraine,” says Ziemba, who three years ago agreed to place on his tenement house a mural to memorialise four victims of the massacre. “I don’t see any reasons to remove it now.”

Since its independence in 1991, Ukraine has attempted to rehabilitate many controversial figures in order to strengthen its national identity, a process that has speeded up with the efforts to “de-Russify” and “de-Sovietify” the public space after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. As part of these efforts, the country has given hero status to many nationalists linked to the UPA due to their resistance against the Soviet Union, and named streets, stadiums and schools after them, provoking loud protests from Poland and Israel.

According to Wyrzykowski, a local party leader of Confederation, now is the best time to push for Ukraine to cut ties with the UPA tradition. “I don’t believe Ukraine will ever replace its nationalistic heroes with the more current ones such as President [Volodymyr] Zelensky,” he says. “This heritage is still alive and maybe will be even stronger after the war, if we don’t pressure them.”

But others think the problem is that in both countries, Poland and Ukraine, it is the radical groups themselves that have been identified voicing difficult aspects of history.

“Mainstream politicians cannot keep silent about the past,” argues Lukasz Kaminski, a former head of the Institute of National Remembrance, a state research institute with investigative and lustration powers. “If we leave it alone, the radicals will use it for their own purposes, as, in many ways, has been done with the Polish-Ukrainian war history.”

“The current remarkable rapprochement between the two nations is the perfect point for the reconciliation. But one has to remember: no matter how good relations are, we will never have a common version of history. We can agree on basic facts, but will always interpret history differently

and this must be taken as a starting point,” he adds suggesting that an important gesture by Ukraine would be the lifting of the ban on exhumations of murdered Poles.

The question of whether the nationalists will succeed in spreading its anti-Ukrainian message to a larger part of Polish society is still open. “For now, this strategy is not working,” says Kaminski. “But it can work in the future: with the recession hitting the economy or Ukraine losing in the war.”

“Our fates are shared and intertwined, and it is in our common interest to move forward,” comments Kowalczyk, a historian from Lodz. “Because we have one enemy: it is Russia.”

Predictably, for the Ukrainians fleeing the war historical spats are the least of their worries. Oksana Skryl, 38, a lawyer from Dnipro in central Ukraine, who founded a shelter in Lodz, doesn’t want to discuss the WWII past, which, seemingly, she doesn’t know much about. Among her current anxieties are rather the Polish entrepreneurs’ reluctance to officially hire a mother of two, high rents and a burning longing for a husband who stayed in Ukraine.

“In Poland, for the first time in my life, I experienced the kindness and sincere heart of the people,” she says. “But every day I dream of returning home. I miss everything: its walls, its smell...”

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