

Ukrainian refugees ‘collateral’ in Polish presidential election

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May 14 2025

As a fringe hard-right candidate grows in popularity, a survey suggests only 25% of Poles view Ukrainians positively, down from 83% in 2022.

Shortly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 the central square of the Polish city of Rzeszów was crowded with volunteers doling out steaming food to sleepless refugees who had streamed over the border to escape the war.

The city became an artery for hundreds of thousands of the displaced and received symbolic recognition from President Zelensky as a “Rescuer City”. Last month crowds in that same square cheered for a man who accused Ukrainians of treating Poles “like suckers”.

Slawomir Mentzen, who is running in Poland’s May 18 presidential election, emerged on stage to rapturous applause on April 10 to tout his “commonsense revolution”, which involves halting the spread of leftist ideology, sealing Poland’s borders and liberalising gun ownership. It also takes aim at Poland’s one million Ukrainian refugees, whom Mentzen accuses of insulting Poles and “showing absolutely no gratitude”.



Previously considered a fringe candidate, the firebrand’s share of the vote has grown to 13 per cent, due in part to a discontent he has tapped into among Poles over immigration.

He has also caused controversy by stating that he opposes abortions for victims of rape — which he refers to as “some sort of unpleasantness” — and railed against the European Union’s Green Deal.

He has previously marketed himself on his approachability, hosting “Beer with Mentzen” events to discuss policy over a pint — perhaps one of the many craft beers under his own brand, with names such as Hate Speech and White IPA Matters.

While much of his rhetoric remains too extreme for the mainstream, the targeting of Ukrainians has gained traction as the public mood sours towards migrants. And with 1.6 million followers on TikTok, Mentzen has been able to tap into the political consciousness of young Poles.

Anna, a 19-year-old student in Rzeszów who described herself as usually agnostic about politics, said refugees were a daily grievance. “Sometimes you can walk around the city all day

and hear nothing but Ukrainian. We all support Ukraine, but I see videos all the time of people living well there,” she said.

Young voters resent the idea that opportunities could be taken from them, said Wojciech Przybylski, a political analyst. “It’s a high-ranking political issue among groups that see Ukrainians as workforce competition, for example, lower qualified people or the younger cohort.”

Mentzen also argues that Poles are unfairly made to pay for Ukrainians’ social benefits and medical treatment, although economists say that Ukrainians contribute far more than they receive in aid, adding around \$4 billion to the state budget.

“If you have dissatisfaction in the performance of public services, then the obvious scapegoat is migration,” Przybylski said.

“Some Poles think that although the war is a bad situation, it is not regressing, so the Russians are not creating immediate pressure to drive people away [from Ukraine].” He said some Poles felt that Ukraine has the capacity to sustain its internally displaced population.

Ukrainians are feeling the effect. Oksana Pestrykova, who co-ordinates support for refugees at the aid organisation Ukrainian House in Warsaw, said Ukrainians in Poland have become collateral in Poland’s high-stakes presidential race.

“People are saying that children at school and people in line for an appointment with a doctor are telling them to go home to Ukraine,” she said. “Three years ago it was much more welcoming, but people tell me now that they avoid speaking in Ukrainian on public transport and in the street.”

Mentzen is not the only candidate who has attempted to capitalise on this shift in mood. Karol Nawrocki of the nationalist Law and Justice party has criticised the Ukrainian government, most recently taking aim at Zelensky for a “lack of gratitude and lack of ability to conduct international policy”.

Nawrocki, whose campaign slogan is “Poland first, Poles first”, said in a campaign video last month that social benefits should be “above all for Poles”.

Protracted protests over a grain crisis between Poland and Ukraine and painful political clashes over the Volhynia massacre of Poles by Ukrainian nationalists during the Second World War have left a bad taste, while war fatigue has begun to take its toll.

Civic Coalition, the ruling political alliance, is said to be considering a child benefit overhaul to restrict social assistance payments only to migrants who work and pay taxes in Poland. The EU’s temporary protection scheme for Ukrainians is set to expire in March next year.

Professor Rafal Pankowski, an expert on right-wing extremism, said candidates like Mentzen and Grzegorz Braun, another hard-right populist, have built a powerful base through tapping into anti-Ukrainian sentiment on social media. “This kind of sentiment spills over to the other candidates, so that even mainstream candidates have started using anti-Ukrainian language,” he said.

Just 25 per cent of Poles held a positive opinion of Ukrainians in a survey by the Mieroszewski Centre think tank in December 2024. In 2022, it was 83 per cent. The same survey showed that more than half of Poles last year believed the scale of assistance provided to refugees was too large.

Donald Tusk, Poland's prime minister, is hoping that the election will be won in the first round by the candidate for his Civic Platform party, Rafal Trzaskowski, the mayor of Warsaw. Tusk has been at odds with incumbent conservative president, Andrzej Duda, who he says has thwarted his attempts at reform through presidential veto since the former came to power in 2023's parliamentary elections.

Trzaskowski has declined in the polls in recent months but remains the frontrunner, polling at around 31 per cent. Nawrocki, who has been rocked by a recent apartment scandal, is in second place at 26 per cent.

Mentzen does not have the predicted vote share to win the election, but his supporters could be kingmakers if the vote goes to a second round between the top two contenders.

Pankowski said there was a risk that Trzaskowski would lose votes in such a run-off if he was perceived as "compromising his liberal identity in search of far-right support".

"We also have many voters in Poland who are totally opposed to the far right, and that is something that candidates can often overlook," Pankowski said.

A. Langford: "Ukrainian refugees «collateral» in Polish presidential election". TheTimes.com, 14.05.2025.

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