



Country study

# Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

Poland country profile

Karen Hargrave, with Kseniya Homel and Lenka Dražanová  
January 2023

## Key messages

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**Over the past three decades Poland's migration context has been transformed:** from a homogenous society largely closed to the outside world to an increasingly prominent country of destination for refugees and foreign workers. Today, this includes over 1.5 million refugees from the conflict in Ukraine.

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**Since 2015, the dominant narrative around refugees has been one of 'us' versus 'them'.** Refugees from the Middle East and Africa have been painted as a threatening 'other', while Ukrainian refugees are characterised as part of 'us', united with Poles against Russian aggression.

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**Over time public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants in Poland have shifted:** from being among the most positive in Europe, to a negative turn post-2015, to a wave of solidarity towards Ukrainian refugees.

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**Poles have shown high acceptance towards Ukrainian refugees.** However, negative narratives may still gain traction. Many Poles see long-term challenges linked to accommodating Ukrainians, with potential for concerns to grow in the context of high attention to rising living costs.

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## **About this publication**

This briefing presents an overview of key features of migration and asylum policy in Poland, recent trends in migration patterns and public perceptions and political narratives around refugees and other migrants. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation aimed at supporting public and private stakeholders interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

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# Acronyms

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<b>CBOS</b>	Centre for Public Opinion Research
<b>CBU</b>	Centre for Research on Prejudice
<b>ESS</b>	European Social Survey
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>IMM</b>	Media Monitoring Institute
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>PESEL</b>	Polish national identification number
<b>PiS</b>	Law and Justice Party
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UNHCR</b>	UN High Commissioner for Refugees

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# 1 Introduction

This report presents an overview of migration and asylum policy in Poland, recent trends in migration patterns, and public perceptions and political narratives around refugees and other migrants. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation, aimed at informing public and private stakeholders interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

The study is based on a review of academic and grey literature, alongside data on immigration trends and related attitudes. It identifies:

- Historical dynamics surrounding immigration.
- Current policy approaches.
- Evidence on public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants in Poland.
- Public and political narratives advanced by different actors (including central and local government, civil society, the media and the private sector) in relation to refugees and other migrants.

The review of available literature and data was supplemented by 22 key informant interviews, conducted remotely in July and August 2022, spanning local and central government, Polish civil society and human rights actors, international humanitarian actors, journalists, academics and policy analysts. A review was also conducted of Polish-language media sources, covering reporting on refugees and other migrants across national and local outlets.

This study uses ‘refugees and other migrants’ to refer to the broad group of all foreign nationals in Poland, and ‘immigration’ in reference to their movement into Poland. The term ‘immigrant’ is used when reflecting the specific wording used in survey questions. The term ‘refugee’ refers to those escaping conflict or persecution, whether or not individuals are officially recognised as such or fall under wider frameworks such as subsidiary or temporary protection. The term ‘refugees and asylum seekers’ is used where a distinction is made within datasets between those who have been formally recognised as refugees and those whose status has not been determined. While the report focuses primarily on movements of refugees and other migrants into Poland, to the extent possible this is situated within the context of broader mobility patterns, including emigration from Poland.

The term ‘narratives’ is used in reference to the different stories told about refugees and migrants by different actors in the public domain, which can be framed in diverse ways – and which may influence individual thoughts, feelings and attitudes, as well as legislation and policy approaches.

## 2 History of migration in Poland

### 2.1 Early history to 1989: from a country of sanctuary to closed borders

While Poland's modern history of large-scale immigration is relatively recent, its precursors can be traced to earlier history. From the 11th century onwards Poland was host to large communities of Jews escaping the First Crusade, with further immigration of expelled Jewish communities from the 15th century onwards (Friedman, 2012). In the centuries that followed, and until Poland's partition in the late 18th century, Poland became part of a multicultural union with the emergence of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, spanning modern-day Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Latvia, as well as large parts of Ukraine, Estonia and Russia (Davies, 2005).

By the mid-20th century this multiculturalism had been all but erased. Poland emerged from the Second World War as a markedly homogenous society, following the deportation and genocide of Poland's Jewish communities under Nazi occupation (Dawidowicz, 1975; Kershaw, 1985), and later population transfers from Poland (notably ethnic Germans and Ukrainians) by the communist authorities (Brzoza and Sowa, 2009). Under communist rule from 1945 to 1989, immigration to Poland was 'not only unattractive to foreign citizens but also practically inaccessible' due to stringent entry restrictions (Okólski and Wach, 2020: 147). Some exceptions were made: for example, for students from socialist countries in Africa and Asia, and communist exiles escaping persecution following the Greek civil war (from 1948 to 1956) and the Chilean coup in 1973 (Klaus, 2020). Throughout this period immigration numbers remained low.

Emigration from Poland was more notable, as Poles able to circumvent exit restrictions joined others escaping political repression and economic difficulties under communist rule (Stola, 2010). These emigrants were openly accepted by authorities in the United States and parts of Western Europe and Scandinavia (Gibney, 2004; Pleskot, 2015). Emigrants followed a path well-trodden by previous waves of migrants in the late-19th and early-20th centuries and during the Second World War, including prominent patterns of seasonal migration between Poland and Germany (Jaźwińska and Okólski, 2001; Zubrzycki, 2011; Leszczyńska, 2019).

### 2.2 1989–2003: Immigration and asylum in post-communist Poland

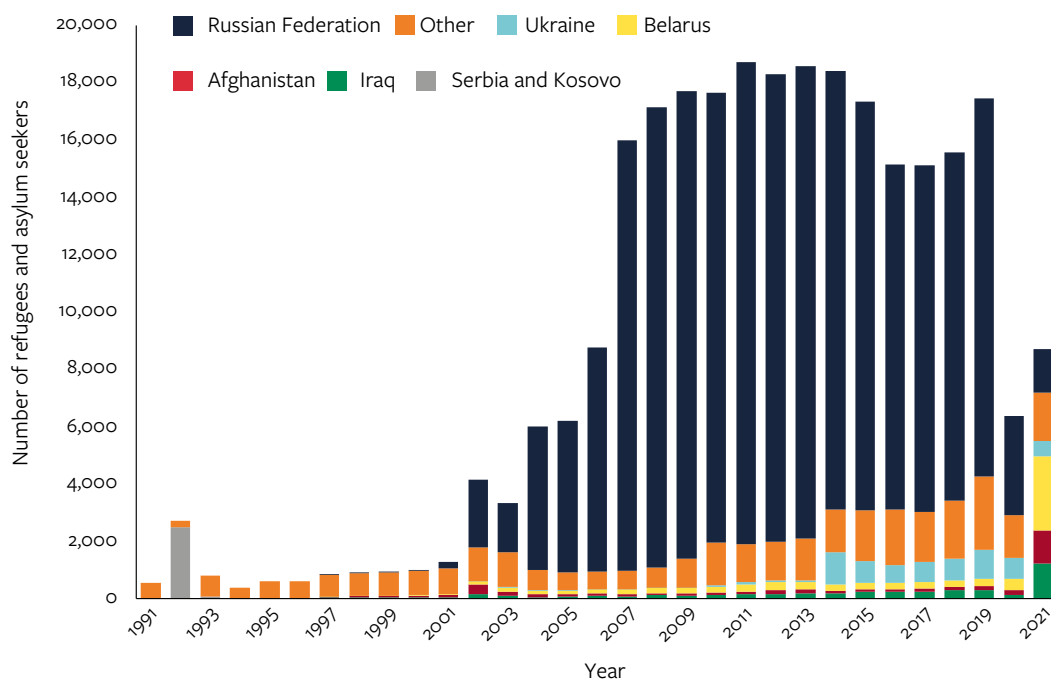
Poland's democratic transition from 1989 represented a landmark moment, both in terms of the country's overall political context and its migration landscape. Entry restrictions were lifted and Poland opened up to international migration flows. By far the most significant trend was short-term immigration from other former communist states in Eastern Europe, whose citizens, like Poles themselves, were suddenly granted the freedom to travel abroad (Kaczmarczyk and Okólski, 2002; Klaus, 2020). Many initially entered Poland as 'false tourists', as part of circular movements to seek short-term irregular employment (Okólski, 2012; Okólski and Wach, 2020), or used the country as a transit point towards Western Europe (Molęda-Zdziech et al., 2021).



These movements were facilitated by bilateral visa-free entry agreements between Soviet satellite states concluded under communist rule, but which were previously rarely accessible to ordinary citizens. Over time, these temporary movements evolved into longer-term settlement and regular employment. By 2000 over 70% of migrants obtaining work permits in Poland were from the former Soviet Union, with smaller numbers of permits granted to citizens from countries throughout Western Europe, the US and Asia (in particular Vietnam) (Okólski and Wach, 2020).

The 1990s also saw new refugee movements into Poland, and with them the development of Poland's modern asylum system (discussed in Section 3.2). While asylum applications numbered a few hundred annually in the early 1990s, by 2004 they had risen to around 8,000 (ibid.). Key groups seeking international protection included individuals from Serbia and Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and smaller numbers from Sri Lanka, Pakistan and India (Klaus, 2020). From the early 2000s onwards the number of refugees and asylum seekers hosted in Poland increased significantly with the second outbreak of conflict in Chechnya (Szczepanik, 2018). Figure 1 shows the increase in entries from Russia, largely comprising people from the North Caucasus, in particular Chechnya. It is estimated that over 100,000 Chechens arrived seeking protection in Poland (Klaus, 2020).

**Figure 1** Refugees and asylum seekers in Poland



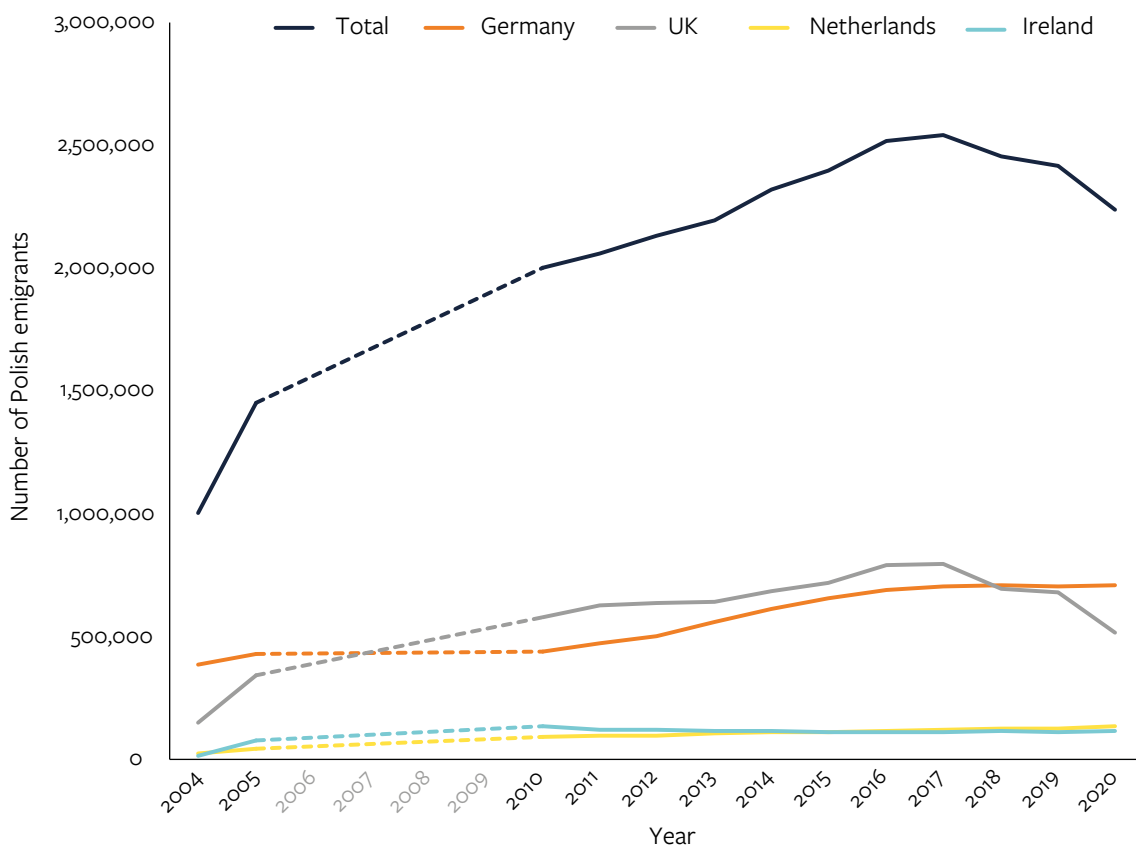
Note: This graphic displays the total numbers of registered refugees and asylum seekers hosted in Poland at the end of each year, by their country of origin. The countries of origin named in the figure represent those for which 1,000 or more refugees and asylum seekers were recorded in at least one year. Significant countries of origin under 'other' include Bosnia-Herzegovina (1993-2003), Georgia (2009 onwards) and Syria (2013 onwards). The sharp drop overall in 2020 is due to a validation exercise that removed refugees considered no longer likely to be present in Poland from UNHCR's dataset.

Source: UNHCR, n.d.

### 2.3 2004–2015: EU accession, Ukrainian immigration and the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe

Another turning point came in 2004, with Poland’s accession to the European Union (EU). As shown in Figure 2, emigration from Poland rose sharply, as EU entry facilitated large-scale emigration to other EU Member States (Iglicka and Ziolek-Skrzypczak, 2010). Significant numbers returned between 2008 and 2010, as the global financial crisis impacted economies across Europe (Hołda et al., 2011; Anacka and Fihel, 2016). Nonetheless, by 2017 Poland recorded over 2.5 million emigrants – equivalent to 5% of the population (Okólski and Wach, 2020) – with the largest populations in Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), the Netherlands and Ireland (GUS, 2021a).

**Figure 2** Emigration from Poland



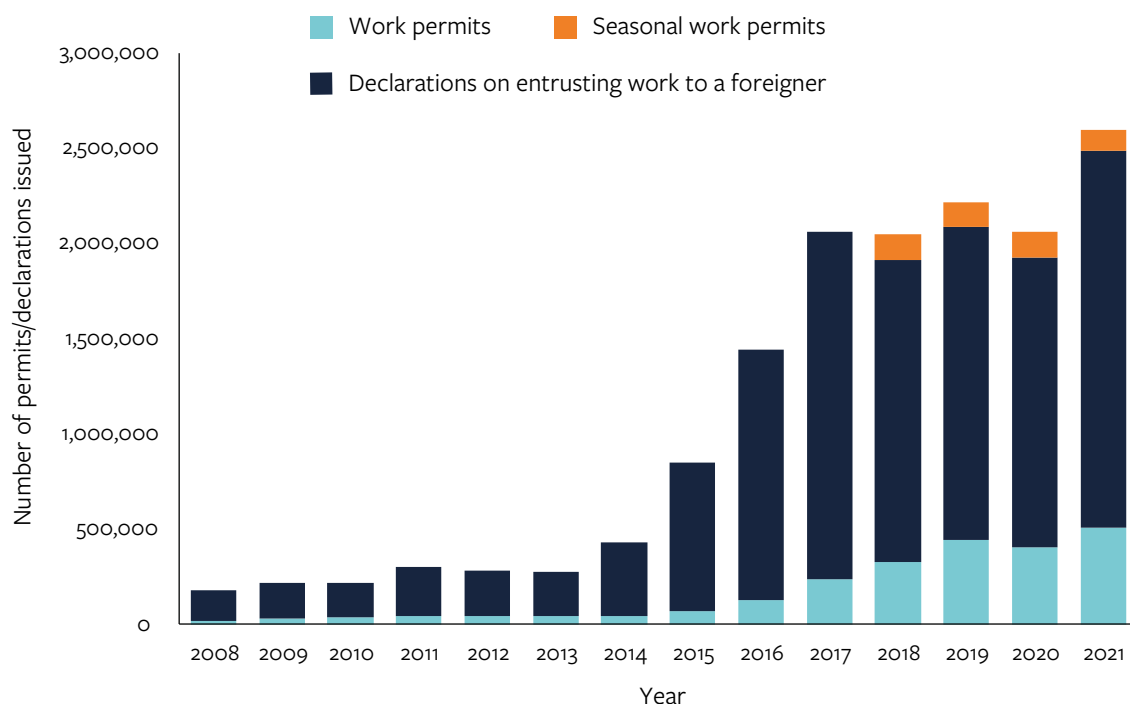
Note: The figures here represent the total number of Polish emigrants recorded at the end of each year, measured in terms of temporary stay, from 2004 to 2005 defined as those staying abroad for over two months, and from 2010 onwards for over three months. According to Statistics Poland, the difference in results due to this change is non-significant. The figure is missing data from 2006 to 2009, represented as a dotted line in the graphic.

Source: GUS, 2021a

The wider implications of Poland's EU accession included the updating of policy and legal frameworks in line with EU regulations. On the one hand, entry into the Schengen zone required Poland to tighten regulations controlling border traffic with other former Eastern bloc countries. On the other, Poland's burgeoning economy following EU accession, coupled with rising emigration and early signs of an ageing population, led to clear labour market gaps (Okólski and Wach, 2020). The result was heavy private sector pressure – in particular from the agriculture lobby – to expand labour market access for foreign workers (Klaus, 2020). This led to new regulations in 2007 facilitating access to temporary work in Poland for individuals from selected countries in East and Central Europe, including Ukraine (discussed in more detail in Section 3.1).

The number of foreign workers entering Poland's labour market through these simplified procedures grew sharply from 2015, as large numbers of Ukrainians arrived in Poland in the aftermath of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas region (see Figure 3). Very few applied for international protection, with the majority opting to legalise their stay and labour market participation through temporary labour migration pathways (Klaus, 2020), from 2017 facilitated by visa-free entry for Ukrainians to countries within the Schengen Area (EEAS, 2017).

**Figure 3** Foreign workers in Poland



Note: 'Declarations on entrusting work to a foreigner' correspond to individuals from selected countries, including Ukraine, entering Poland's workforce under streamlined procedures from 2007, as opposed to the standard work permit granted following a full process. 'Seasonal work permits' correspond to a new type of permit introduced in 2018, in line with EU regulations, for work that is deemed seasonal.

Sources: Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2018; 2022a; 2022b; 2022c

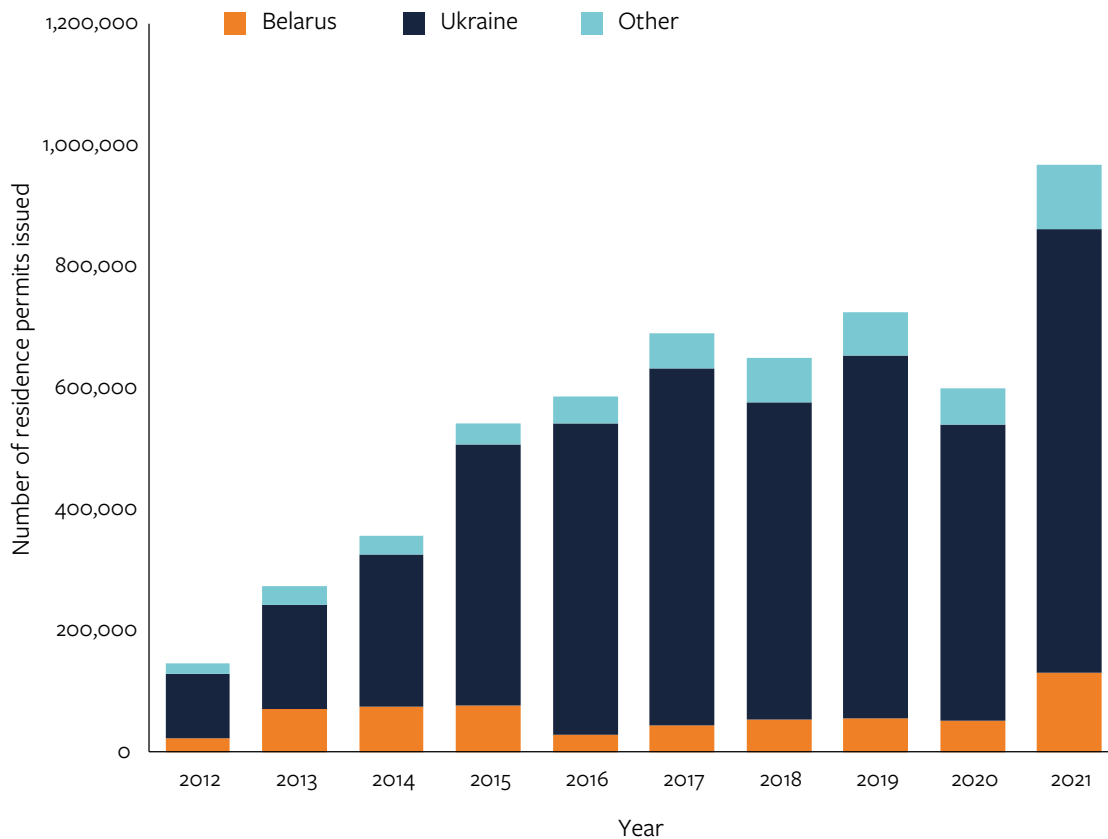
Although the data is difficult to disentangle, in the years that followed, up until the recent outbreak of conflict in Ukraine in 2022, an estimated 1.3 million Ukrainians entered Poland (Jóźwiak and Piechowska, 2017; Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk, 2022). This represented the first mass immigration into Poland in modern times – albeit one largely composed of short-term, circular movements – and was generally welcomed by the private sector, government and public alike (Jóźwiak and Piechowska, 2017; Klaus, 2020). In contrast, the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe in 2015 attracted much greater levels of concern, despite limited impacts in Poland itself. By 2018 just 889 Syrians had been registered within Poland’s asylum system, most of whom received refugee status (Klaus, 2020).

## **2.4 2016–present: Tightening asylum, burgeoning labour migration and conflict in Ukraine**

Between 2015 and 2018 asylum applications in Poland dropped sharply, from over 12,000 to approximately 4,000 (Okólski and Wach, 2020). To some extent this can be attributed to increasingly restrictive asylum policies under Poland’s new Law and Justice Party (PiS) government, which took office in 2015 (discussed in Section 3.2). Shifting migration routes also played a role, as did Poland’s relatively low appeal as a destination for refugee arrivals, particularly in comparison to other countries in Western Europe (Klaus, 2020).

Immigration, which accelerated following Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, has continued to rise in recent years. This is in part due to continued challenges in Ukraine, alongside sharply falling unemployment within Poland, leading to severe difficulties recruiting among Poles and growing demand for foreign workers (Wysieńska-Di Carlo and Klaus, 2018; Klaus, 2020). It is estimated that, in early 2020, directly before the Covid-19 pandemic, an estimated 2.2 million migrants resided in Poland (GUS, 2020). Sectors and roles employing high numbers of foreign workers include construction, industrial processing, administrative services, transport and warehouse management (PARP, 2021).

This growth in immigration is particularly visible in terms of first residence permits issued to non-EU citizens. As shown in Figure 4, in 2017 Poland issued almost 700,000 such permits – the majority of them to Ukrainians – the largest number across all EU Member States. After falling back slightly in 2020, linked to border restrictions and wider travel disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2021 the number of permits issued rose again, to almost one million, representing a third of all such permits issued across the whole EU (Eurostat, 2022b). The vast majority of individuals entering Poland from outside the EU do so on a temporary basis; by 2021, individuals from outside the EU holding temporary residence permits in Poland comprised 60% of all foreigners holding a valid residence permit. This represents a more than fivefold increase since 2015 (GUS, 2021b).

**Figure 4** First residence permits issued in Poland to non-EU citizens, by country of origin

Note: Prominent countries of origin classed under 'other' include Turkey, Moldova, Russia, India and Georgia, all of which have had at least 5,000 permits issued in at least one year 2012–2021.

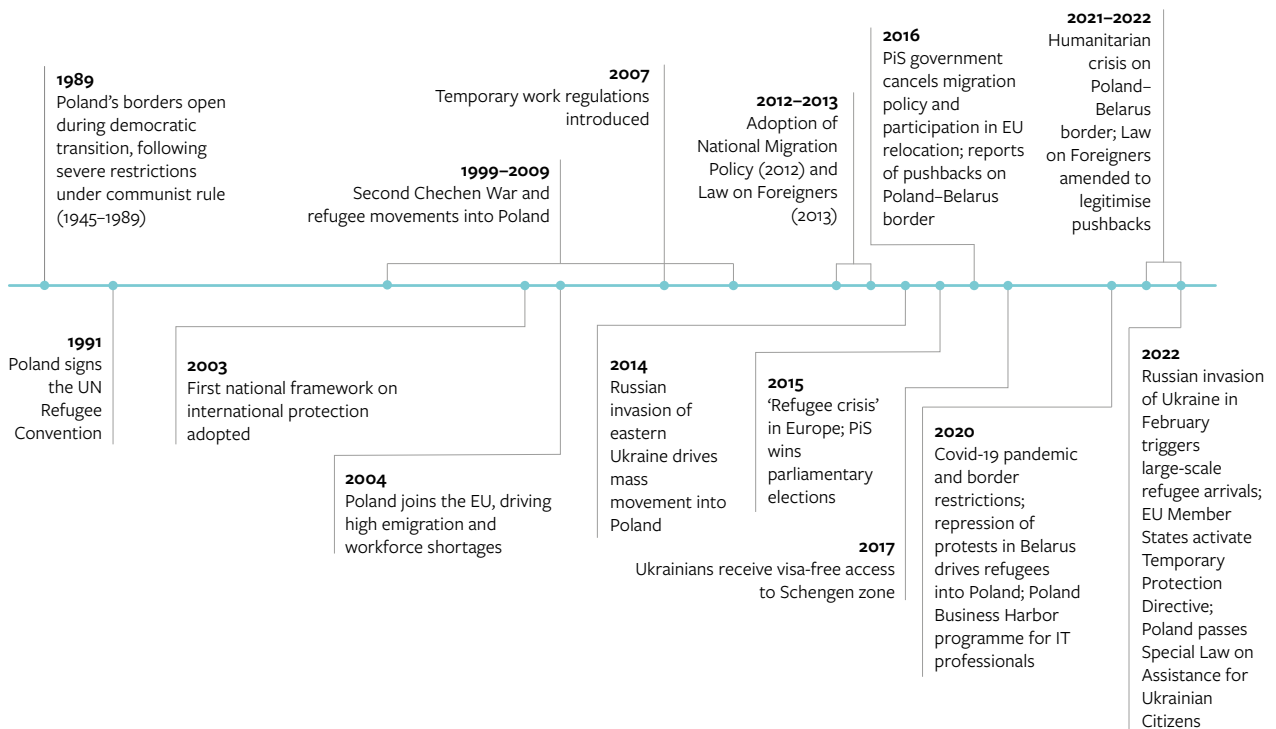
Source: Eurostat, 2022a

It remains to be seen how recent developments – in particular the large-scale arrival from February 2022 of refugees escaping Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine – will affect this trend of short-term immigration. Ukrainian refugee arrivals have followed other recent groups of refugees originating from Poland's eastern neighbours, most notably those escaping repression at the hands of the Lukashenko regime in Belarus, who in 2021 represented the largest group of refugees and asylum seekers in Poland (UNHCR, n.d.).

From 24 February to mid-May, an estimated 3.5 million people crossed the border from Ukraine into Poland (Duszczuk and Kaczmarczyk, 2022), with almost 1.55 million remaining in Poland and registered for protection as of December 2022, by far the highest figure across countries in Europe (UNHCR, 2022a). According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in mid-2022 this represented the sixth-largest refugee population in the world (UNHCR, n.d.): a significant moment in a country where, prior to 2022, registered refugees and asylum seekers had peaked at under 19,000 (see Figure 1). In 2022, the number of registered Ukrainian refugees in

Poland was equivalent to 3% of Poland’s population. The majority have settled in cities, particularly the capital Warsaw and cities close to the Polish–Ukrainian border, such as Lublin and Rzeszów (MEDAM, 2022). The arrival of Ukrainian refugees since February 2022 marks a new chapter in Poland’s migration context, and the policies surrounding it, building on over three decades of transformation since the country’s democratic transition (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5** Migration timeline, Poland



## 3 Current Polish immigration system and approach

### 3.1 Immigration policy

The PiS government has shown openness to labour mobility in response to clear gaps in Poland's labour market. This is of particular concern in the context of Poland's ageing population, with nearly a third (31%) projected to be aged over 65 by 2050 (UN DESA, 2019). Policies are particularly permissive towards migration from Poland's eastern neighbours, reflecting explicitly stated government preferences (Biuletyn Migracyjny, 2016; cited in Klaus, 2020). Regulations first adopted in 2007 – which remain in place today and have been significantly liberalised – allow citizens from selected countries in Eastern Europe to work in Poland for up to 24 months without applying for a work permit (see Box 1). Ethnic Poles who are citizens of post-Soviet countries can also apply for a 'Pole's card', enabling streamlined access to visas, citizenship and residence, as well as the ability to conduct business and access education on the same terms as Polish citizens (Migrant.info.pl, n.d.). Wider programmes encouraging labour migration from Poland's eastern neighbours include the 2020 Business Harbor Programme for information technology specialists, facilitating expedited visa access and the ability to conduct business without a work permit (Polish Investment and Trade Agency, 2022). In 2022 the Business Harbor Programme was expanded to cover a wider set of countries. Meanwhile, since 2017 there has been a steep rise in residence permits issued to individuals from South and Southeast Asia, including Nepal, Bangladesh, India, the Philippines and Indonesia (Klaus, 2020; Ministry of Family and Social Policy, 2021).

#### Box 1 The 2007 temporary work regulations

In 2007 the Polish government implemented regulations allowing citizens from Belarus, Russia and Ukraine – and later Moldova (from 2009), Georgia (2010) and Armenia (2014) – to work in Poland on a temporary basis without applying for a work permit. While this was initially intended to cover three months of work within a period of six months, the regulations were updated in 2008 to allow individuals to work in Poland for up to six months within a 12-month period (Okólski and Wach, 2020). They were updated again in early 2022 to facilitate work for up to 24 months (European Commission, 2022). Following the recent outbreak of conflict in Ukraine, in October 2022 the government barred access to the scheme for Russian citizens (Kopiwienc, 2022).

Under the regulations, instead of individuals being required to apply for a work permit, their employers must complete an ‘employment declaration’ procedure at a local labour office. Unlike the work permit process, this is free of charge, far swifter and does not require employers to meet a labour market test demonstrating that the vacancy could not be filled by a Polish citizen (Szulecka et al., 2018; Okólski and Wach, 2020).

Poland does not have a formal strategic framework for immigration or integration. The 2012 migration policy – developed in consultation with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and experts – was cancelled by the PiS government in October 2016 and never replaced (Okólski and Wach, 2020; Klaus, 2020).<sup>1</sup> The move was justified by PiS officials on the basis that the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe had rendered the strategy outdated. However, the PiS has also fiercely criticised the previous government’s approach (Okólski and Wach, 2020). In 2019, the Ministry of Interior shared a new, heavily security-oriented draft strategy for consultation (Ministry of Interior and Administration, 2019). This was roundly criticised and never adopted.<sup>2</sup> Many interviewees emphasised how a lack of formal policy has hampered the overall coherence and effectiveness of Poland’s approach to immigration. This is exacerbated by competing interests across different government departments, whose responsibilities remain ‘highly dispersed’ and ‘poorly coordinated’ (Okólski and Wach, 2020: 155). For example, there is friction between the Ministry of Internal Affairs and ministries responsible for the economy and labour market (Klaus, 2020).

Integration has long been addressed only in terms of a specific programme targeting recognised refugees, with NGOs and local authorities largely left to manage the day-to-day process of integrating migrants in the absence of central institutions or frameworks (Molęda-Zdziech et al., 2021). Concerns have periodically been raised about the exploitation of foreign workers, particularly those working informally (Klaus, 2020). This includes many individuals – and particularly Ukrainians – who arrived legally under temporary work arrangements but stayed beyond the permitted term (Szulecka, 2016).

### 3.2 Asylum policy

Poland’s asylum system (see Box 2) has its roots in international and EU law. Its origins can be traced to an incident in 1990, when a boat carrying several hundred refugees from Africa and Asia was turned back by Swedish authorities to the Polish port of Szczecin, with those aboard going on to seek international protection (Kulecka, 2007). The incident prompted various developments including Poland’s accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention (Molęda-Zdziech et al., 2021). These frameworks evolved over time, including as part of what has been termed the ‘Europeanisation’

1 In 2018 the Polish government issued a strategic document on migration. However, it was extremely brief, outlining only a small number of generic goals (Okólski and Wach, 2020).

2 In 2021 a draft document on ‘Polish migration policy – directions for action 2021–2022’ was submitted for a two-week stakeholder consultation (ISP, 2021). The draft was never adopted.



of Polish migration policy, as the country reconciled its legal frameworks with those of the EU (Lesińska et al., 2011; Łodziński and Szonert, 2016). In 2003 Poland adopted its first national law on international protection, incorporating key elements of EU frameworks (Pachocka and Sobczak-Szelc, 2020). This remains the key framework governing asylum in Poland today, albeit amended at various points in line with EU procedures (European Commission, 2012; Okólski and Wach, 2020).

## Box 2 Overview of Polish immigration and asylum policies

### Polish naturalisation policy

Individuals applying for Polish citizenship must have resided in Poland continuously for one to 10 years, depending on their type of residence permit, marital status and family origins (Ministry of Interior and Administration, n.d.). The shortest residence requirements (one or two years) are applicable to individuals holding a Pole's card, those with refugee status or those married to a Pole. All applicants must be able to demonstrate 'B1' (intermediate) fluency in Polish.

### Polish asylum policy

Individuals seeking international protection must lodge their claim with the Polish Border Guard. Applications are initially processed by the Office for Foreigners, in line with the 2003 Law on Granting Protection to Foreigners. The law outlines eligibility criteria for refugee status and subsidiary protection, as well as a national form of protection called 'asylum status' for cases where providing protection is considered to be in Poland's national interest (UNHCR, 2016; Pachocka and Sobczak-Szelc, 2020).

Individuals granted refugee status or subsidiary protection are entitled to access the labour market, social assistance and public services on the same basis as Polish citizens (Szulecka et al., 2018). They are also eligible for targeted assistance through Individual Integration Programmes (IPI), a one-year programme implemented through local authorities that includes cash benefits and advice on housing and social assistance, alongside wider support (Szulecka et al., 2018). However, relatively few asylum applications are granted: Poland has the third-highest asylum rejection rate in the EU (MEDAM, 2022).

The government's overall approach to refugees is characterised by selectivity based on country of origin. The government has been remarkably generous towards refugees from certain Eastern neighbours, with streamlined asylum procedures for refugees from Belarus and more recently Ukraine (discussed below), as a symbolic rebuke of the Russia-aligned Lukashenko government in Belarus, and an expression of solidarity with Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. Reflecting the former, in August 2020 Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki recalled the repression of protests

in Poland in 1980 by the communist authorities, explaining that, ‘Today the same is happening in Belarus ... we want to enable everyone repressed by the authoritarian Belarusian authorities to come to Poland, develop and live here’ (Borowski, 2020).

A more restrictive approach has been taken towards other groups, particularly from predominantly Muslim countries of origin. In 2016 this included the reversal of the previous government’s commitment to participate in the EU’s relocation scheme for refugees (see Box 3).

### Box 3 The EU relocation scheme for refugees

In 2015 the European Commission proposed a relocation scheme as a mechanism to relieve pressure on EU Member States such as Greece and Italy in the context of the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe. The proposed approach involved relocating refugees to other Member States, with numbers determined by their respective capacities to absorb refugees. In July 2015 the European Council agreed by majority vote to relocate 40,000 people from Greece and Italy – two months later revised up by an additional 120,000. However, by late 2017 fewer than 30,000 refugees had been relocated. Poland and Hungary were the only two countries that failed to resettle a single refugee from their allocated quota (see Šelo Šabić, 2017).

The government has also pursued the near-closure of Poland’s eastern border with Belarus to refugees of non-Belarusian origin (Klaus, 2020). Despite Poland’s long history of receiving Chechen refugees, from mid-2016 growing reports emerged of people – largely Chechens – being denied entry by Polish border guards, despite expressing their intent to seek international protection (Szczepanik, 2018). The government’s actions received successive rebukes from the European Court of Human Rights (Human Rights Watch, 2017; UNHCR, 2020). However, they proved a precursor for later approaches.

In mid-2021 individuals from conflict-affected countries in the Middle East and Africa began to arrive at the Poland–Belarus border, with well-documented involvement from the Lukashenko regime in Belarus in facilitating movements of people to the border, seeking to provoke a political crisis in Poland and the EU (Grupa Granica, 2021; Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). Events on the border are notable not primarily for the scale of arrivals – which numbered a few thousand per month by mid-2021 (Grupa Granica, 2021) – but for the highly restrictive response by the Polish authorities and the humanitarian crisis that this precipitated. In October 2021, the government passed an amendment to the Act on Foreigners allowing for the immediate removal of any individual arrested for crossing irregularly into Poland (ibid.). Numerous organisations have documented individuals being denied access to asylum proceedings on the border, as well as large-scale, systematic – and sometimes violent – pushbacks by Polish

border guards, alongside forced returns, violence and other abuses on the Belarus side of the border (Grupa Granica, 2021; UNHCR, 2021a; Amnesty International, 2022; Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022; Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 2022).

The Polish government's response has first and foremost treated those crossing the border as a threat to the country's security and, as an extension of this, the wider EU's external borders. In September 2021 Polish President Andrzej Duda introduced a state of emergency, restricting access across a three-kilometre-long strip along the border, including to the media, humanitarian responders and independent observers (Amnesty International, 2021; MSF, 2022). The state of emergency was lifted in July 2022. In June 2022 work was completed on a 186km border wall (Al Jazeera, 2022a), but individuals continue to cross into Poland (OKO.Press, 2022). In November 2022 the Minister of National Defense announced plans to build a similar wall on the border with Russia, following media coverage of new flight routes between Kaliningrad and countries in the Middle East and North Africa; the move was justified as an effort to pre-empt attempts by Russian President Vladimir Putin to manufacture another border crisis for Poland (Deutsche Welle, 2022).

### 3.3 Policy responses to Ukrainian refugees

From the outset of the recent outbreak of conflict in Ukraine, Poland has adopted an extremely open policy towards refugee arrivals. On 24 February 2022, as refugees began to arrive, the Interior Minister confirmed that Poland's borders would remain open to Ukrainians, stating that Poland would take in 'as many [refugees from Ukraine] as there will be at our borders' (Al Jazeera, 2022b). Poland's response has been part of a notably unified approach across EU Member States, which has included support to Ukraine's armed forces and wide-ranging sanctions on Russia (Council of Europe, 2022). On 4 March EU Member States activated the 2001 EU Temporary Protection Directive for the first time since its creation, effectively requiring Member States to grant temporary protection to all Ukrainians escaping the conflict, as well as persons with protection status in Ukraine, without a requirement to go through individual asylum claims (Motte-Baumvol et al., 2022; UNHCR, 2022b).

On 12 March the EU-wide approach on temporary protection was translated into national law through the Special Law on Assistance for Ukrainian Citizens (to date amended twice and with a third amendment pending).<sup>3</sup> The law gave immediate legal status for a period of 18 months (from 24 February 2022) to all Ukrainians escaping the conflict, alongside a streamlined pathway for

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3 While the initial version of the law applied only to Ukrainians who fled directly to Poland, it was amended on 26 March to include those entering Poland via other countries. A further amendment on 4 July added labour market flexibility, also aiming to increase access to Polish language courses and kindergarten services (Ministry of Family and Social Policy, 2022). A more controversial third amendment, announced in October 2022 but not adopted at the time of writing, would place an obligation on Ukrainians to obtain a PESEL number, remove streamlined procedures for Ukrainians to apply for temporary residence and require Ukrainians staying in Poland for over 120 days and living in collective accommodation to cover 50% of the costs (subject to certain limits and rising to 75% after 180 days) (Dziennik Gazeta Prawna, 2022).

individuals to apply for a temporary residence permit for up to three years (Office for Foreigners, 2022a; 2022b). It also guarantees Ukrainians access to the Polish labour market and provides the basis to apply for a Polish national identification number (PESEL), which can be used to access healthcare and social benefits (including universal child support) on the same basis as Polish citizens (ACAPS, 2022; Office for Foreigners, 2022a; 2022b).

Despite a highly permissive policy framework, the response has encountered several challenges. Third-country nationals escaping Ukraine – including large numbers of foreign students from Africa and Asia (BBC, 2022) and individuals from the Roma Community (Mikulska, 2022) – are explicitly excluded from the provisions contained in the March Special Law (Office for Foreigners, 2022b). In line with the EU Temporary Protection Directive, those receiving international protection (or equivalent national protection) in Ukraine, who are unable to safely return to their country of origin, can receive temporary protection in Poland. However, unlike Ukrainians they must apply on an individual basis. All other third-country nationals are allowed 15 days to legalise their stay in Poland through existing procedures, or must otherwise leave the country (SIP, 2022).

Interviewees largely saw central government as absent in terms of day-to-day work supporting Ukrainians. As with other groups of refugees and migrants, the onus has fallen on local authorities, NGOs and, in this case, ordinary citizens (MEDAM, 2022). It is estimated that in 2022 Poles will have spent €5.45 billion supporting Ukrainian refugees, equivalent to 1% of gross domestic product (GDP), over a third of which is made up of private donations (Polish Economic Institute, 2022). Poland's city authorities have been at the forefront of the response (see Box 4). Polish NGOs have also played a key role, and in many cases have expanded significantly to meet the needs of Ukrainian arrivals. National efforts are supported by a \$1.85 billion UNHCR-led interagency regional response plan, over \$740 million of which is allocated to the refugee response in Poland (FTS, 2022).

Interviews highlighted a perceived lack of long-term strategy from the central government, which was considered pressing in view of the challenges that a refugee population of this size is likely to pose in the medium to long term. In particular, challenges were noted in terms of public goods that were already under strain before the crisis, including housing, education and healthcare (Bukowski and Duszczek, 2022; Duszczek and Kaczmarczyk, 2022; MEDAM, 2022). The labour market integration of Ukrainians was considered a lesser challenge given the large number of Ukrainians already in the workforce. Targeted interventions may nonetheless be needed in view of the demographic makeup of today's Ukrainian refugee population, which chiefly comprises children and women (many with caring responsibilities), in contrast to the previous employment of Ukrainians primarily in male-dominated occupations (Duszczek and Kaczmarczyk, 2022).

### Box 4 In focus: cities, mobility and the conflict in Ukraine

City authorities have long played an important role in supporting the integration of refugees and other migrants in Poland (Okólski and Wach, 2020; Molęda-Zdziech et al., 2021). In 2016, in response to increasing immigration (particularly from Ukraine), Gdańsk became the first city in Poland to develop an ‘Immigration Integration Model’, intended to strengthen the city’s migration management (Molęda-Zdziech et al., 2021). Other cities, for example Kraków and Wrocław, implemented strategies supporting multiculturalism and migrant integration (Wach and Pachocka, 2022). In Warsaw – home to Poland’s largest migrant population – authorities have mainstreamed attention to migrants across programmes and strategies under an inclusive vision whereby all ‘citizens of Warsaw’, regardless of their nationality, can feel at home (Molęda-Zdziech et al., 2021; Wach and Pachocka, 2022).

Interviewees highlighted how such approaches provided strong foundations for responses to the arrival of refugees from Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> In Lublin, an organising committee was set up within the first hours of the crisis to coordinate the city’s response. The committee, comprising city authorities and three major NGOs active in Lublin, brought together people with long-standing experience supporting migrant integration and multiculturalism, for example through the ‘Lublin for all’ initiative (Council of Europe, n.d.). One interviewee described how the committee followed a blueprint established in 2015 to welcome Syrians, before the central government reneged on its participation in the EU’s relocation scheme.

In Warsaw, city authorities have played a crucial role managing large numbers of volunteers (with over 6,000 registered in the first two weeks of the conflict) (City of Warsaw, 2022a). Initiatives include setting up shelters in spaces owned by the city, vetting housing offered by city residents, setting up information lines, coordinating with the central government to use Poland’s National Stadium for PESEL registration and launching an employment service to assist Ukrainians (City of Warsaw, 2022b; 2022c; 2022d; 2022e; 2022f).

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4 City-led responses discussed here reflect those highlighted in interviews, providing a small illustration of a much wider response by cities across Poland.

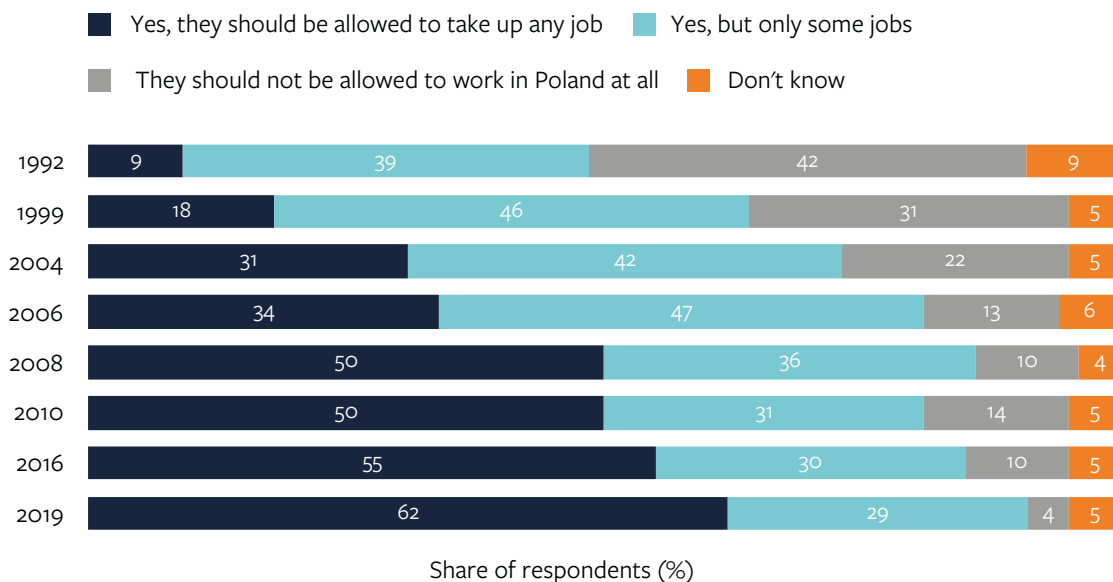
## 4 Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

As in other contexts, identifying trends in public attitudes in Poland is challenging, with data sensitive to ambiguities and bias in question wording, and reflecting unique features of individual survey questions, methodologies and timings (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017). Nonetheless, trends can be suggested, reflecting distinct historical periods.

### 4.1 The 1990s and 2000s: from mixed opinion to positivity

Data suggests a mixed picture of public opinion throughout the 1990s, as Poland opened up to immigration. As shown in Figure 6, data from the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS), a notable Polish public opinion polling institute, suggests increasingly positive attitudes throughout the 1990s towards allowing foreigners to work in Poland. However, data from the World Values Survey shows views on social integration moving in the opposite direction: while in 1990 just one in 10 Poles were opposed to having immigrants or foreign workers as neighbours, by 1997 this had risen to approximately one in five (21%), with opposition higher among older Poles (those aged 50 or over) and those with lower levels of education or income (Inglehart et al., 2014).

**Figure 6** Should foreigners be allowed to work in Poland?

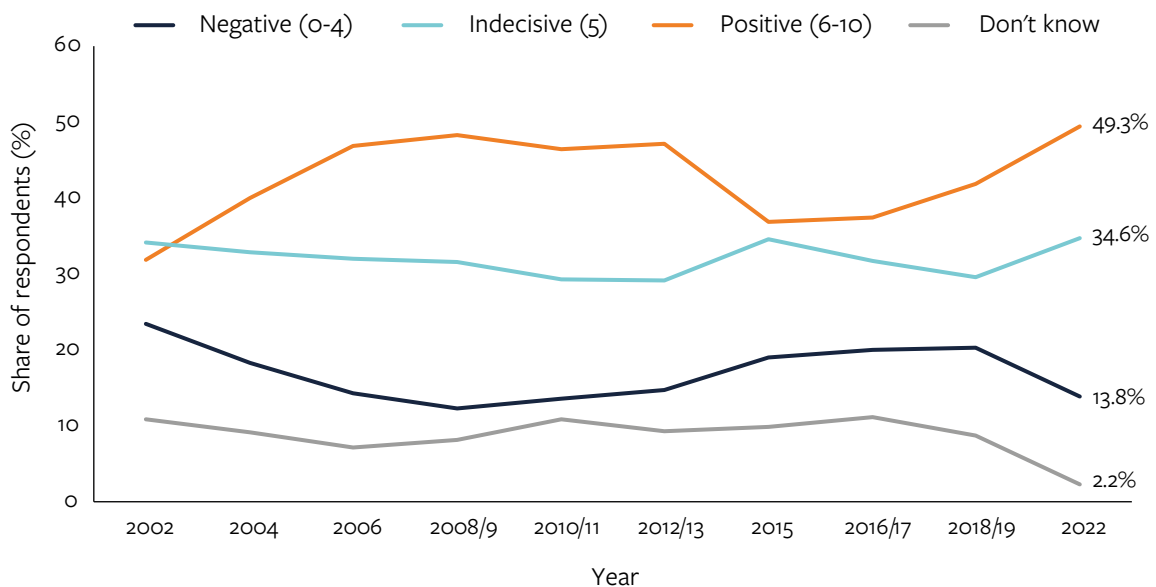


Note: This figure shows the proportion of Poles selecting each listed response to the following question: 'Should foreigners be allowed to work in Poland?'

Source: CBOS, 2020

A more unified picture emerges from 2000 onwards, with immigration attitudes becoming increasingly positive across most metrics and surveys (Claassen and McLaren, 2021). From the early 2000s European Social Survey (ESS) data suggests that Poles held some of the most positive attitudes in Europe towards immigration (Pszczółkowska, 2022b). In 2009, almost half (48%) of Poles thought that immigration made Poland a better place to live (Figure 7), considerably higher than the corresponding proportion around the same time in well-established countries of immigration such as the UK and Germany (ODI, n.d.). Attitudes towards refugees were among the most positive in Europe (Bachman, 2016).

**Figure 7** Attitudes towards immigration: does immigration make Poland a worse or a better place to live?



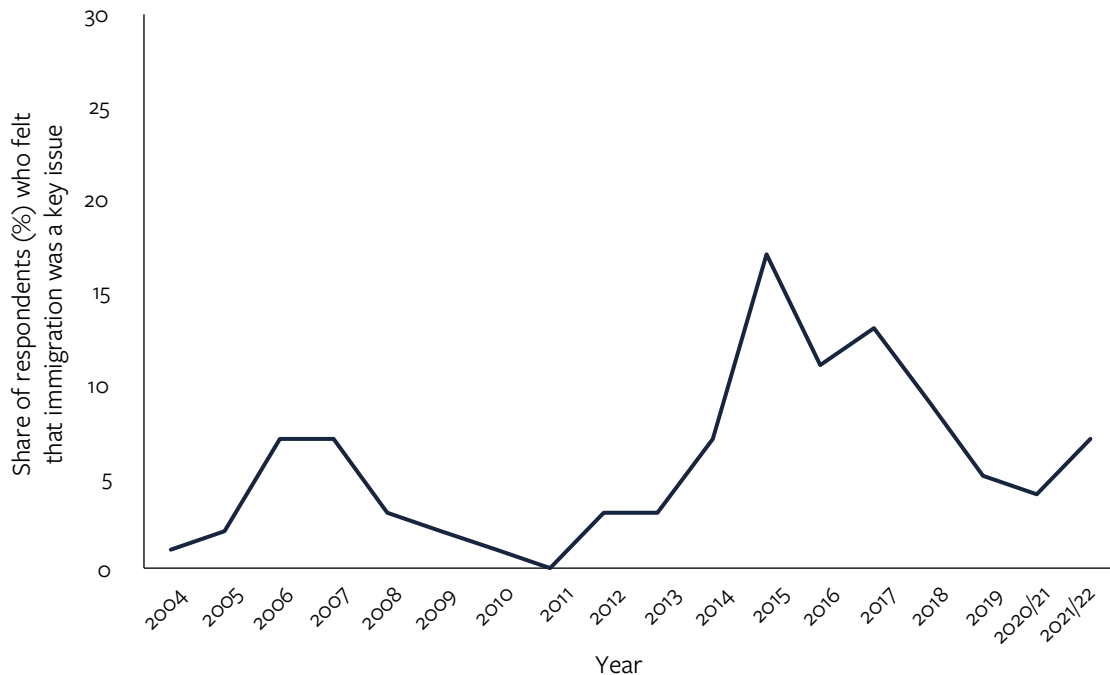
Note: This data has been extracted from the European Social Survey. The survey scores responses from 0 to 10 and records 'don't know' answers. We have classified survey respondents who scored 0–4 in their answers to the question 'Does immigration make Poland a worse or better place to live?' as holding 'negative' views, those scoring 5 as 'undecided' and those scoring 6–10 as holding 'positive' views. The dates shown here reflect the dates fieldwork was carried out and not the publication date of ESS survey rounds to give a more precise understanding of the timing of attitude changes. Wave 10 of the ESS should have taken place in 2020 but was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The most recent data available is from fieldwork conducted between January and May 2022, published in December 2022.

Source: European Social Survey, n.d.

During this period the salience of immigration also remained low, reflecting relatively limited immigration flows into Poland and virtually non-existent public debate on the issue (see Figure 8;

Klaus et al., 2018). According to Eurobarometer, in most years between 2004 and 2014 the share of Poles ranking immigration among the two most important issues facing the country remained under 4%.

**Figure 8** Salience of immigration as a key issue in Poland



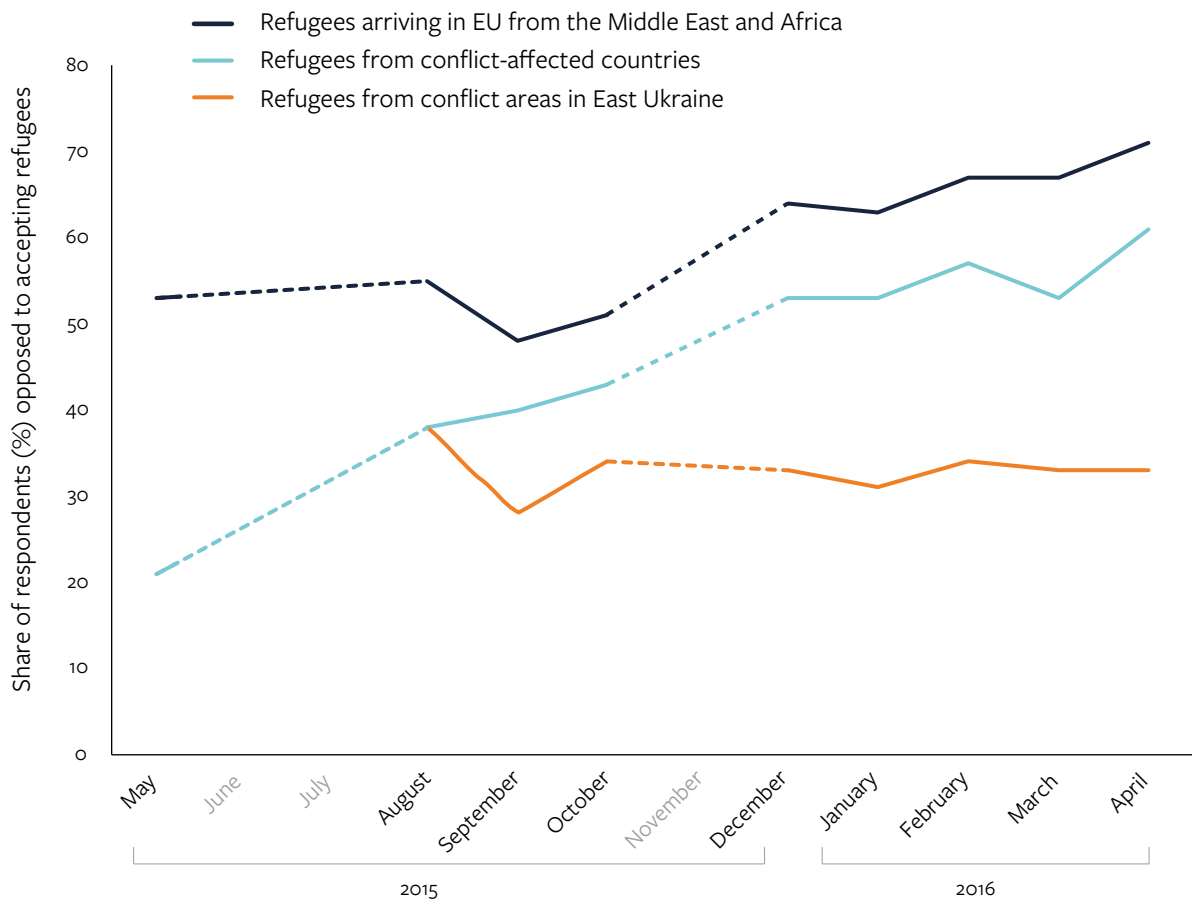
Note: This graphic shows the percentage of people answering ‘immigration’ to the question ‘What do you think are the two most important issues facing Poland today?’. Annual data is presented, with data taken mainly from autumn surveys, though the Eurobarometer surveys were delayed due to Covid-19, with the autumn 2020 and 2021 surveys shifting to winter 2020–2021 and 2021–2022.

Source: Eurobarometer, n.d.

## 4.2 2015: reversal of a positive trend?

In 2015, public opinion took a negative turn (Figure 7; see also Bienkowski and Swiderska, 2017; Ipsos, 2017; Claassen and McLaren, 2021; Kaczmarczyk, 2021). This is widely attributed to the prominence of the so-called European ‘refugee crisis’ in the run-up to Poland’s October 2015 parliamentary election (discussed in Section 5.2). This shift was most noticeable in terms of attitudes towards refugees specifically. While in May 2015 almost three-quarters (72%) agreed that Poland should accept refugees from conflict-affected countries, by April 2016 support had fallen to just one-third (33%), with over six in 10 (61%) opposed (CBOS, 2015a; CBOS, 2021a). CBOS data suggests a particularly sharp rise in negative sentiment towards refugees between October and December 2015 (see Figure 9), a period that spanned both Poland’s parliamentary elections and the November terror attacks in Paris (Bachman, 2016).



**Figure 9** Opposition to accepting refugees

Note: For refugees from conflict-affected countries, this captures individuals answering 'no' in response to the question 'Do you think Poland should receive refugees from countries affected by armed conflicts?'. For the other two categories, this includes those answering 'moderately/strongly disagree' to the questions: 'Due to the large influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa to some European Union countries, these countries are unable to cope with this problem. Do you think Poland should receive some of the arriving refugees?' and 'In connection with the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, there has also been an increase in the number of refugees from the country. Do you think Poland should accept Ukrainian refugees from conflict areas?'. Data on attitudes towards refugees from East Ukraine is available only from July 2015 onwards. Missing data points in the graphic (in June, July and November 2015) are represented by a dotted line.

Source: CBOS, 2016

This opposition developed across the political spectrum and within most demographic groups. However, the highest levels were seen among those identifying as right-wing, younger Poles (particularly those aged 18–24), those with lower levels of education or those living in rural areas (CBOS, 2015b; CBOS, 2018; Molęda-Zdziech et al., 2021). Studies by the Center for Research on Prejudice (CBU) found that, from 2015 to 2017, government measures characterised by physical or psychological violence towards refugees (for example, surveillance, forced deportation or

pushbacks, including the use of physical force) received the highest levels of support, particularly in comparison to positive responses such as supporting refugees to integrate (Świdarska et al., 2016; Bienkowski and Świdarska, 2017; Świdarska, 2017).

Notably, opposition to accepting refugees from East Ukraine did not increase during this period. Instead, opposition to accepting refugees overall started to increasingly track and converge with opposition to accepting refugees from the Middle East and Africa, which started off at a relatively high level (53%) in May 2015 and rose as high as 71% in April 2016. This built on wider negativity towards Muslims since 2001, following the terrorist attacks in the United States (Klaus et al., 2018). While in 2005 just under a third (30%) of Poles had a negative opinion of Muslims, by 2016 this had risen to two-thirds (66%) (Pew Research Center, 2005; Wike et al., 2016). Reflecting dominant narratives around these groups, a 2016 survey by Pew found that almost three-quarters (73%) of those surveyed agreed that refugees leaving countries such as Iraq and Syria were a major threat, while a similar proportion (71%) agreed that refugees would increase the likelihood of terrorism in Poland (Wike et al., 2016).

A decline was also seen from 2015 in terms of broader attitudes towards immigrants. Echoing trends around refugees, the negative shift was particularly marked in attitudes towards specific nationalities and ethnicities. ESS data suggests an increase in hostility from 2015 towards immigration from 'poorer countries outside the EU' and immigrants from a different race or ethnic group (Kaczmarczyk, 2021). However, it is important not to overstate the negative turn in broader attitudes towards immigration. For example, while the proportion of Poles pointing to positive impacts of immigration declined steeply between 2012/13 and 2015 (see Figure 7), those who were positive remained the largest group, with fewer than two in 10 Poles (19%) of a negative opinion. Similarly, while the salience of immigration also rose sharply (see Figure 8), the proportion pointing to immigration as a top-two issue facing the country – just under two in 10 (17%) in 2015 – remained low in comparison to other European countries, and particularly those receiving higher numbers of refugees (ODI, n.d.; Eurobarometer, 2015).

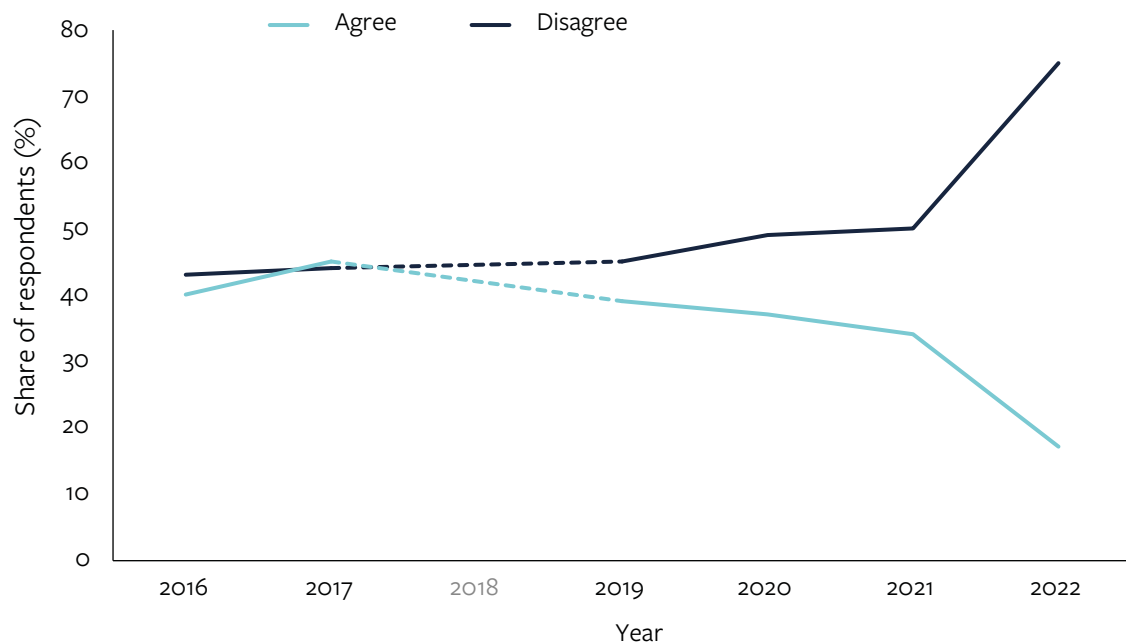
### **4.3 Post-2015: warming opinion and reduced salience**

Post-2015 the salience of immigration dropped back (see Figure 8), while attitudes towards immigration steadily warmed again. In mid-2022, almost half of Poles (49%) felt that immigration made Poland a better place to live; the highest proportion recorded in any round of the ESS, surpassing the previous peak in 2008/9 (see Figure 7). While this steep rise in positivity may to some extent reflect attitudes towards recent Ukrainian arrivals, discussed below, it also represents a continuation of a longer-standing trend.

Despite continued negative narratives, discussed in Section 5.2, wider attitudes towards refugees also appear to have warmed. Up until 2017 CBOS surveys consistently found over half of Poles opposed to accepting refugees from conflict (CBOS, 2017). However, the proportion strongly opposed decreased over time (CBOS, 2018; Mołęda-Zdziech et al., 2021). More recent surveys

suggest positive attitudes towards refugees gaining clearer ground. While the greatest drop in support for closing borders is seen in 2022, in the wake of large-scale Ukrainian arrivals, warming attitudes can be traced back to 2019, with Polish opinion in 2021 the least restrictive across 28 countries surveyed (Ipsos, 2022).<sup>5</sup> In 2021 a UNHCR and Kantar survey found a large majority (77%) agreeing that Poland should support those fleeing wars and persecution, with an even higher proportion (93%) agreeing that they would help a refugee if there was a need (UNHCR and Kantar, 2021). These figures were remarkably similar to a nearly identical poll in 2013, suggesting that negative narratives and opinion in 2015–2016 had not fundamentally changed social attitudes in the long term (UNHCR, 2021b).

**Figure 10** Polish opinion on closing borders to refugees



Note: This figure displays those agreeing and disagreeing with the statement ‘We must close our borders to refugees entirely – we can’t accept any at this time’. Data collected in 2022 was in April/May, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the arrival of refugees in Poland. Missing data points in the graphic (in 2018) are represented by a dotted line.

Sources: Ipsos, 2016; 2017; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022

Polish opinion has been more divided on the situation on the Belarus border, likely related to heavily securitised narratives and rhetoric indicating that those on the border are not ‘genuine’ refugees (see Section 5.2). From 2016 to 2021 the proportion of those agreeing with the statement that ‘Most foreigners who want to get into my country as a refugee really aren’t refugees. They just want to come here for economic reasons, or to take advantage

5 In 2021 approximately a third of Poles (34%) supported closing the country’s borders entirely to refugees, the lowest proportion across 28 countries surveyed (Ipsos, 2022).

of our welfare services' remained constant at approximately 60% (Ipsos, 2016; 2017; 2019; 2020; 2021). In late 2021, CBOS found that over half of Poles (54%) had a favourable view of the government's response on the border, with two-thirds supporting its plans to build a wall (although the latter question was phrased in somewhat leading terms) (CBOS, 2021b).<sup>6</sup>

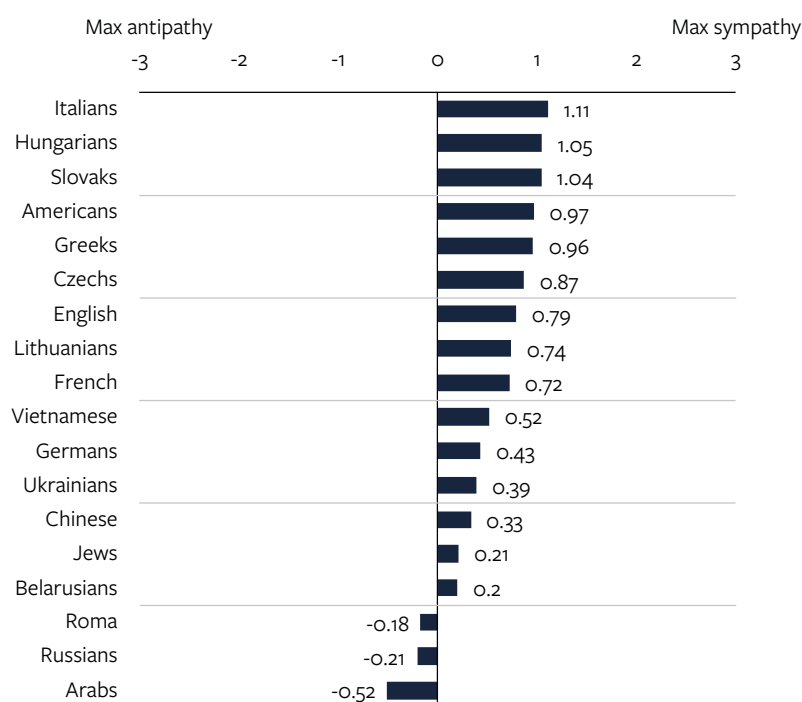
Far less support is seen for more extreme aspects of government policy, with almost three-quarters (74%) supporting access for humanitarian organisations on the Poland–Belarus border and a similar proportion (71%) supporting access for the media (*ibid.*). In December 2021 CBOS found that well over half of Poles (58%) were opposed to allowing those on the border to apply for asylum (*ibid.*). However, the survey indicated a large proportion (55%) who did not have very strong views either way, answering 'probably yes/no' or 'hard to say' to the question of whether those at the border should be able to apply for asylum. This suggests a majority of Poles may be undecided or occupying a middle ground, rather than being enthusiastically supportive of the government's hard-line stance (CBOS, 2021a).

In terms of broader immigration attitudes, Poles remain more positive towards migrants from other EU Member States, while opinion on non-EU migrants is more divided (Eurobarometer, 2019a). In 2021, the largest group of Poles (34%) pointed to both challenges and opportunities linked to immigration from outside the EU, with similar proportions divided between seeing it exclusively as a problem (30%) or as an opportunity (26%) (Eurobarometer, 2021). The same survey found that almost half (45%) felt that the integration of non-EU migrants had been successful in Poland, despite a similar proportion (47%) feeling that the government was not doing enough to promote integration.

Clear distinctions are also visible in attitudes towards those from different non-EU countries. In Poland, 'non-EU migrants' includes everyone from labour migrants from Ukraine, other neighbouring countries and Asia to refugees and other migrants from the Middle East and Africa. As Figure 11 shows, in early 2022 attitudes towards nationalities from outside the EU ranged from relatively neutral but on balance positive (for Ukrainian, Chinese, Vietnamese and Belarusian citizens) to leaning negative (for Russians) to more decisively negative (for Arabs). Notably, however, this data was collected prior to Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, with attitudes towards Russians likely to have grown more negative since. Negative attitudes towards Muslims have remained resilient. In 2019 Eurobarometer found that one in four Poles would feel uncomfortable working with a Muslim on a day-to-day basis, well above the average across EU Member States (13%) (Eurobarometer, 2019b).

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<sup>6</sup> The CBOS survey asked 'Do you support the construction of a wall on the border with Belarus, which would make illegal crossings difficult?' (CBOS, 2021b).

**Figure 11** Polish attitudes towards different nationalities/groups

Note: This data has been extracted from a CBOS survey in which respondents were asked to rate their attitudes towards different nationalities/groups on a scale of -3 to +3, or record a 'don't know' answer. The figure shows the average score across all respondents for each group. The survey was carried out in January 2022, prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Source: CBOS, 2022a

#### 4.4 Attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees in 2022: between acceptance and concern

Very distinct trends have appeared since late February 2022 in terms of attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees, characterised by remarkable levels of positivity. On the eve of the Russian invasion attitudes towards Ukrainians were by no means effusive (see Figure 11). One study documents the experiences of Ukrainians in and around Warsaw, describing their ambiguous position in society, feeling 'neither strangers nor the same' (Grzymała-Kazłowska and Brzozowska, 2017). However, in early-2022 outright rejection of Ukrainians was a minority opinion. One survey found just 6% opposed to a Ukrainian being employed in their workplace, and 10% to having a Ukrainian as a neighbour (Bulska, 2022). The same study found that attitudes had warmed significantly since 2017, attributed to increased contact between Poles and Ukrainians as a result of mass immigration and declining concern about Ukrainians' impact on Poland's labour market and social values.

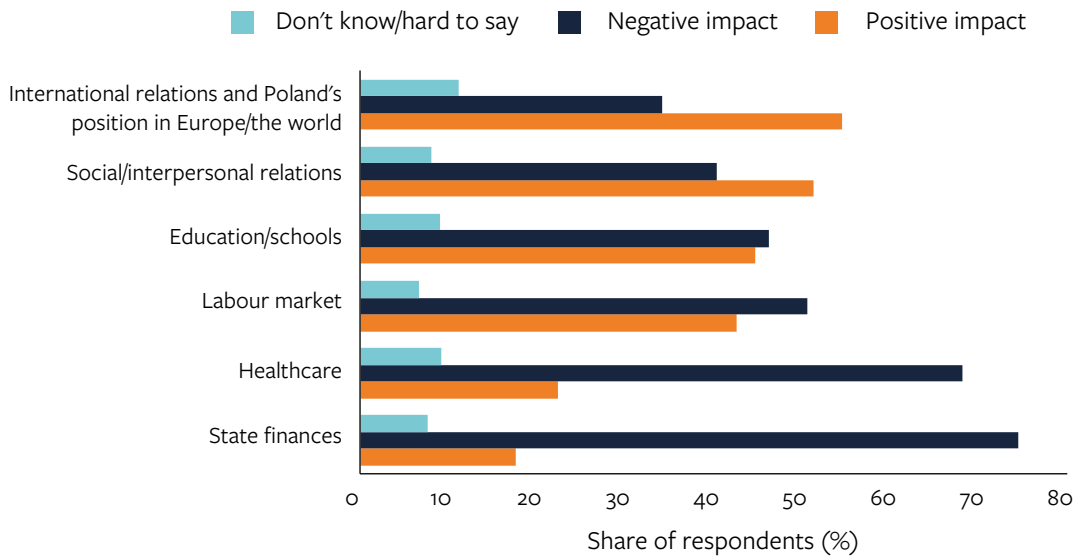
As highlighted above, a consistent majority in 2015–2016 – around two-thirds – supported accepting refugees from conflict areas in Ukraine. This support surged in the wake of Russia’s invasion. In March 2022 well over nine in 10 Poles (94%) supported accepting Ukrainian refugees, a figure which has dropped in recent months, but in November remained at 83% (CBOS, 2022b; 2022c). Opposition to accepting Ukrainians, though low overall, appears highest among younger Poles, those living in small towns or rural areas, and among those working in certain professions, for example customer service roles (likely due to perceived labour market competition) (CBOS, 2022c). In March 2022 three-quarters of Poles indicated that there were people escaping the conflict in Ukraine in their area of residence, with this figure as high as 80% in cities (CBOS, 2022d; 2022e).

Some surveys suggest that overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards Ukrainians have been matched by more positive attitudes towards refugees overall, for example with sharply declining support for closing Poland’s borders to refugees (Figure 10) and a significant increase in support for the principle of asylum (Ipsos, 2021; 2022). Where such results are noted, it is difficult to ascertain whether this reflects a genuine change in attitudes towards refugees, or whether Poles have simply become increasingly likely to associate the term ‘refugee’ with people from Ukraine, towards whom they are overwhelmingly supportive.

In general, surveys have elicited majority support for the Polish government’s response to the crisis, though opinion appears more positive with regard to local as opposed to central authorities (CBOS, 2022d; Union of Polish Metropolises, 2022a). A Union of Polish Metropolises survey of residents in 12 major Polish cities found that over three-quarters (76%) who were aware of central government activities had a positive perception of them. This rose to nine in 10 (91%) among those aware of activities led by city authorities (Union of Polish Metropolises, 2022a).

There are some notes of caution for the future, particularly as the crisis becomes protracted. In August, while the vast majority (87%) supported helping refugees to survive the first few months of the war, less than a third (31%) were supportive when asked about assisting Ukrainians to support themselves for the full duration of the conflict (CBOS, 2022b). Various sources point to concerns about longer-term impacts. For example, the Union of Polish Metropolises survey found particular concerns about the long-term consequences of hosting Ukrainians for state finances and healthcare, though with views more divided in terms of the labour market and education system (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12** Opinion in Poland’s major cities on the long-term impacts of hosting Ukrainian refugees



Note: The figure plots responses to the question: ‘In your opinion, will the presence of refugees from Ukraine be beneficial or unfavourable for Poland and Poles in the long run? Please consider the following ...’. Those answering ‘definitely/rather unfavourable’ are classed as pointing to negative impacts, while those answering ‘definitely/rather favourable’ are classed as pointing to positive impacts. The survey covers 12,000 respondents across Poland’s 12 largest cities.

Source: Union of Polish Metropolises, 2022a

For now, concerns around long-term impacts do not appear to be translating into widespread opposition to the presence of Ukrainians in Poland. However, this does not rule out their potential to do so in the future, particularly, as discussed elsewhere in this report, in the absence of strategic central government responses to such challenges. While Eurobarometer data suggests that the salience of immigration remained low in June/July 2022, following the large-scale arrival of Ukrainian refugees – with fewer than one in 10 Poles (8%) ranking immigration among the top two issues facing the country – top-ranking concerns included the rising cost of living, considered a top-two issue by over six in 10 (62%) (Eurobarometer, 2022). This suggests potential space for negative attitudes to develop, particularly if connected through narratives with this high-priority challenge.

## 5 Contributions, threats and solidarity: narratives around refugees and other migrants in Poland

Multiple distinct – although at times overlapping – narratives can be identified around refugees and other migrants in Poland. These largely distinguish between different groups of migrants based on their country of origin, as well as their reasons for entering Poland.

### 5.1 Narratives around labour migration

Despite fast-rising numbers of foreign workers entering Poland, labour migration is not a prominent topic of public debate and hasn't been so over the past decade (Szałańska, 2020). Despite the PiS government's overt anti-immigration position, particularly in terms of refugees from the Middle East and Africa (discussed in Section 5.2), interviews pointed to the PiS' quiet acceptance of Poland's need for foreign workers. While announcements on the topic are rare, government ministers have sometimes spoken publicly about contributions made by foreign workers. For example, in June 2022 Minister of Family and Social Policy Marlena Maląg emphasised in a media interview that 'foreigners working in our country contribute to the development of the Polish economy and partially supplement staff shortages in many industries ... We are very pleased that these people find employment in Poland' (Polskie Radio 24, 2022). While the Polish private sector is not especially vocal publicly on the issue of foreign workers, interviews suggested that it has played a key role in influencing the government's approach through private lobbying.

Although rarely a prominent issue, the media, including right-leaning outlets, has also covered labour migration in a positive light. Coverage has focused on migrant entrepreneurship, as well as labour activity and contributions, including in the healthcare sector in the context of Covid-19 (Ciszak, 2021; Polskie Radio 24, 2022). Media coverage has often paid particular attention to contributions made by Ukrainian workers entering Poland since 2014. Other groups receiving positive attention include Belarusians, Vietnamese and Chinese migrant workers.

Academics, civil society and some media outlets (particularly left-leaning ones or aligned with opposition parties) have sometimes spoken out on the lack of strategic vision behind the government's approach to foreign workers. Some attempts have also been made, including by far-right political parties, to advance narratives and initiate protests vilifying migrant workers for taking jobs from Polish citizens. Polish trade unions have taken a mixed approach, in some cases echoing these narratives, while also taking nascent steps to organise and represent Poland's growing foreign worker population (Kubisa, 2017; Kosz-Goryszewska and Pawlak, 2018). However, interviewees suggested that narratives framing migrant workers as a threat to Polish jobs have



had limited traction. Given the labour market situation, there is significant support for foreign workers' presence in Poland (see Figure 6), who – even as support for immigration fell from 2015 – on balance were not seen as a threat to Polish workers (EVS, 2022).

This does not necessarily translate into foreign workers' widespread social acceptance, or mean that narratives are positive across the board. This is particularly true for those from nationalities or religious groups about whom, as discussed in Section 4.3, Poles are most negative. In these cases, wider negative narratives and stereotypes, including those advanced around Muslims in the context of asylum, have sometimes filtered through to affect those in Poland for wider reasons. Analysts have pointed to a rise in hate crimes from 2000, likely fuelled by discriminatory narratives, often targeting Muslims and other ethnic or religious minorities (Bienkowski and Świdorska, 2017). One study illustrates how these sentiments have impacted high-skilled migrants in Wrocław, documenting experiences of racism including physical violence, threats, micro-aggressions and verbal expressions of prejudice (Jaskułowski and Pawlak, 2020). Another study (Never Again Association, 2019) points to verbal abuse and physical attacks on people with dark skin, those perceived to be Muslim or people speaking foreign languages.

## 5.2 Narratives around refugees

Dominant narratives around refugees in Poland – largely espoused by the PiS government and echoed in conservative media – tend to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' refugees. Interviewees explained that 'good' refugees (often overlapping with 'good' migrants) were characterised as 'deserving' of Poland's support. This largely covers refugees from Eastern European countries viewed as culturally or ethnically similar to Poles, or where Poland's support to refugees reinforces the government's foreign policy positions, for example in the case of Belarus, or more recently Ukraine (see Section 5.3). In contrast, 'bad' refugees encompassed those from the Middle East and Africa, particularly from predominantly Muslim countries of origin and arriving spontaneously.<sup>7</sup>

### 5.2.1 'Fake refugees' and threats: narratives around refugees from the Middle East and Africa

Negative narratives around refugees from the Middle East and Africa first emerged in mainstream public discourse in 2015, in the midst of Europe's 'refugee crisis' and as a centrepiece of the PiS' successful parliamentary election campaign. This is credited as being the first time that migration, and particularly policies around refugees, became the subject of national debate (Szczepanik, 2018). Negative narratives were later revived by the PiS for regional elections in 2018 (Main, 2020), and more recently in response to events on the Poland–Belarus border.

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7 Notably, an exception is made for Afghans who were in 2021 evacuated by the Polish government (having cooperated with the government or its armed forces), though not for Afghans arriving spontaneously.

While outright hostility towards refugees and Muslims had previously been the domain of small far-right outlets, in 2015 this entered the mainstream media, which began reporting on ‘invasions’ and ‘assaults’ on Europe and Poland at the hands of Muslim refugees (Klaus et al., 2018). Since then, negative media narratives have been reinforced by shifts in Poland’s media landscape under the PiS government, including an unprecedented level of government control over public TV and radio stations, alongside financial and other support to private media outlets echoing the government’s stance and the targeting of critical journalists (Jaskułowski, 2019; Kalan, 2019; Makarenko, 2022). Prominent outlets espousing negative narratives around refugees from the Middle East and Africa include *Gazeta Polska Codziennie* and *Do Rzeczy*, in 2022 ranked by the Media Monitoring Institute (IMM) as the top two opinion-forming weekly news magazines in Poland (IMM, 2022).<sup>8</sup>

Negative narratives around these groups have been echoed by parts of Poland’s influential Catholic Church. In response to the Pope’s call in 2015 to welcome Muslim refugees, the Polish episcopate made a non-committal statement that the issue was primarily a matter for the government (Goździak and Márton, 2018; Narkowicz, 2018). Individual members of the clergy took markedly different positions, with some overtly supportive and others vocally opposed (Goździak and Márton, 2018). Those opposed include religious figures affiliated with prominent media outlets, in particular Radio Maryja, a conservative radio station founded by a Catholic priest, Tadeusz Rydzyk (see Radio Maryja, 2021).

Refugees from the Middle East and Africa are characterised as not being ‘genuine refugees’, but instead economic migrants. This idea – which, as discussed in Section 4.3, has found significant traction – is rooted in the notion that ‘true’ refugees are those who are visibly needy, poor and vulnerable, alongside assumptions that women, children and the elderly best fit this description. Television coverage and social media discourse in 2015 around arrivals from the Middle East and Africa to Europe were dominated by pictures of young men talking on mobile phones and wearing Western clothing (Goździak and Márton, 2018).

Many analysts have charted the emergence since 2015 of xenophobic, racist and Islamophobic rhetoric, casting Muslim refugee arrivals as a threat to Poland’s culture, health and security (Łodziński and Szonert, 2016; Cap, 2017; Goździak and Márton, 2018; Klaus et al., 2018; Szałańska, 2020; Molęda-Zdziech et al., 2021). As discussed in Section 4.2, these narratives have found significant traction, often building on longer-standing stereotypes of Muslims and Africans. For example, far-right groups have often invoked the memory of Polish King Jan III Sobieski, remembered as a defender of Christian Europe against the Ottomans in the 17th century (Goździak and Márton, 2018). One representative from a migrant-led organisation explained what they saw as a long-held perception among many Poles of Africans as uneducated, poor and

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8 The IMM ranking of opinion-forming media is based on analysis of the frequency with which different media sources are cited across social media, print media, radio and television.

bringing disease. The interviewee described sessions with children in Polish schools, explaining: ‘I show them pictures showing the true side of Africa. Beautiful cities. They say “no, no way, Africa cannot be like that”’.

In 2015 the alleged threat to health posed by refugee arrivals to Europe became a prominent theme in public discourse (it has been less prominent more recently). In a series of infamous remarks in October 2015, later echoed by President Andrzej Duda, Jarosław Kaczyński, PiS Chairman, suggested that refugee arrivals had already brought ‘signs of the emergence of very dangerous diseases which haven’t been seen in Europe for a very long time’ (Al Jazeera, 2015; Molęda-Zdziech et al., 2021: 184).

Narratives focusing on cultural threats have centred on Muslim arrivals to Poland as a Catholic country, suggesting that they would seek to impose their own religion, cultural values and customs (Bachman, 2016; Szałańska, 2020). Such narratives often draw on exaggerated and often outright false representations of Muslim immigration to other parts of Europe. For example, in September 2015 Jarosław Kaczyński gave a widely reported speech in parliament, pointing to various such ‘examples’ across Europe and proclaiming, ‘Do you really want the same thing to happen in Poland: that we stop feeling at home in our own country?’ (cited in Krzyżanowska and Krzyżanowski, 2018: 615). This is set within the context of broader appeals by the PiS and supportive media outlets for the conservation of traditional Polish values in the face of perceived threats. For example, the editor-in-chief of *Do Rzeczy* has spoken of the alleged dual threat of Islam and ‘feminist-homosexual movements’, that ‘strive for the universal conquest of the world’ (*Do Rzeczy*, 2019).

Since 2015, narratives focusing on security have sought to connect Muslim arrivals in Europe with threats of terrorism, later portrayed as being vindicated following successive terror attacks across Europe (Szałańska, 2020). Security-focused narratives have also portrayed male refugees as a sexually aggressive threat to Polish women. For example, a controversial cover page of *wSieci*, a popular right-wing weekly magazine, following the alleged mass sexual assaults of women in Cologne, referred in its headline to ‘The Islamic rape of Europe’ (Goździak and Márton, 2018).

More recently, the PiS government has been vocal about the alleged security threat posed by refugees arriving at the Poland–Belarus border. The media blackout on the border has contributed to an information vacuum which the government, reinforced by right-leaning outlets, has filled with highly securitised narratives, describing the situation as a ‘hybrid war’ initiated by authorities in Belarus, with alleged cooperation between arrivals on the border and Belarusian and Russian security forces (Babakova et al., 2022). One interviewee described the party’s hard-line stance as an effort to pre-empt more extreme right-wing parties that might try to attract support by manipulating the crisis. However, another interviewee, a journalist, explained how the involvement of Lukashenko’s regime in Belarus in transporting people to the border had created a highly

complex situation in terms of public debate: ‘Even between people who know the issue, who are open to accept refugees coming to Poland, we still have a question, what is the right strategy to do so? How to help people without helping Lukashenko?’.

Across the board, threat narratives have played into a wider feature of dominant discourse, which has sought to anchor discussion around arrivals from the Middle East and Africa within a story of ‘us’ and ‘them’. In the run-up to the 2015 parliamentary election, the PiS tapped into popular suspicion of ‘Brussels elites’ – and Angela Merkel in particular – trying to impose their will on Poland through the proposed EU relocation scheme, and sharply criticising the incumbent Civic Platform government’s alleged acquiescence (Szczepanik, 2018; Szałańska, 2020).<sup>9</sup> The moment has been characterised as ‘one of the loudest and most divisive’ disputes in Polish political life (Mołęda-Zdziech et al., 2021: 183). Cap (2017) explains how, alongside appeals to sovereignty, the PiS successfully drew on a wider vision of Polish identity, establishing an ‘us’ (deserving of freedom, security and the right to choose whom to welcome) in opposition to a ‘them’ (threatening ‘others’ and European elites) (Cap, 2017). In November 2015, a rally in Wrocław against the EU’s relocation scheme, where thousands marched shouting anti-Islamic slogans, culminated with the burning an effigy of a Hassidic Jew wrapped in an EU flag (Gozdziak and Márton, 2018).

Appeals to sovereignty and identity politics are reinforced by narratives putting forward the argument that, unlike other countries in Western Europe with colonial pasts, Poland does not have a responsibility to refugees from the Middle East and Africa.<sup>10</sup> For example, Kaczynski is quoted as arguing in 2015 that ‘we did not exploit the countries from which refugees come today. We did not use their work, we did not invite them to Europe. We have every moral right to say, “No!”’ (cited in Szałańska, 2020: 29). At the same time, the PiS has sought to establish that Poland has already accepted large numbers of people fleeing the Chechen wars and conflict in Ukraine, and thus taken significant responsibility in addressing refugee issues on the continent. For their part, in 2015 the incumbent Civic Platform government failed to make a positive argument for Poland’s responsibility to welcome refugees, instead couching their support for the EU relocation scheme in terms of the need to show solidarity with other EU Member States, rather than obligations towards refugee arrivals (Szałańska, 2020).

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9 The Civic Platform Party is a centrist political party established in 2001. The party served two terms in government from 2007 to 2015 under the leadership of Donald Tusk, as the head of a coalition with the Polish People’s Party.

10 It should be noted that some left-leaning commentators have disputed Poland’s ‘non-colonial’ past (see, for example, Radynsky, 2014; Leszczyński, 2019).

### 5.2.2 Human rights, Catholic values and solidarity: dissenting voices and alternative narratives

Some have pointed to European, Catholic and Polish values, as well as human rights norms, to emphasise the need for a response to refugee arrivals grounded in empathy, solidarity, compassion and tolerance. In 2015 the United Left, an alliance of left-wing political parties, emphasised the need for solidarity with refugees (Szałańska, 2020). Other supportive voices have included members of local authorities, liberal-leaning media outlets (for example, *Gazeta Wyborcza*), church representatives and academics (Klaus et al., 2018; Narkowicz, 2018; Main, 2020; Klimowicz, 2022). In 2016 a letter was published from various churches calling on Poland to uphold its national tradition of hospitality (Narkowicz, 2018), and the following year 12 city mayors from the Civic Platform Party published a joint letter committing to working together to support migrant integration, provoking fierce criticism and threats of violence (Buras, 2019; Main, 2020).<sup>11</sup>

Polish civil society has sought to put forward alternative narratives around refugees through public and political advocacy, education activities in schools and the community, and activities focused on bringing communities together (Goździak and Márton, 2018; Goździak and Main, 2020). This is often situated within broader work on discrimination, multicultural education and misinformation. One NGO in Warsaw has set up a football league aimed at bringing together Polish people, refugees and other migrants (Mayblin et al., 2016).

Anger at government and public responses in 2015 appears to have driven the growth of Polish NGOs supporting refugees. One civil society representative described the creation of their organisation in 2015 as a ‘reaction to a wave of contempt towards refugees spreading over the Polish internet’. However, interviewees described these organisations as ‘a bit of a lonely voice’ and ‘on the peripheries’. They have faced a hostile environment in Poland since 2015, including loss of EU funding previously channelled through government and antagonism from the public (Goździak and Main, 2020).

More recently, alternative narratives appear to have gained strength in response to the situation on the Poland–Belarus border. The government’s approach has crystallised the civil society response, including through the formation of *Grupa Granica* (‘the border group’), a platform of 61 Polish NGOs (*Grupa Granica*, 2022). Local communities along the border have shown openness to arrivals, providing assistance and in some cases offering a place to hide from border guards (Surmiak-Domańska, 2021; Tondo, 2021). Some have referred to their own grandparents’ efforts to hide Jews during the Holocaust, and descendants of Holocaust survivors have been some of

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11 In some cases, opposition to support for refugees shown by city mayors veered into hate speech. For example, in 2017 a nationalist youth organisation published a fake ‘public death certificate’ of city mayors who had spoken out in support of refugees (Buras, 2019). This included the Mayor of Gdańsk, Paweł Adamowicz, a leader of the pro-refugee movement of city mayors, whose assassination in 2019 is linked by some to his vocal support of refugees (Buras, 2019; Cienski, 2019).

the most vocal critics of the government's approach (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2021; Tondo, 2021). Local leaders too have been prominent critics. In November 2021 the Mayor of Michałów, a town that became a centre for protests against the government's approach, published an open letter to the Prime Minister and the Council of Europe highlighting the situation as a humanitarian tragedy (Michałów Town Hall, 2021). For its part, the government has praised the 'heroism of Polish officers and soldiers' on the border, and has denounced those assisting people on the border as 'fools and traitors' (Government of Poland, 2022).

One civil society representative explained how calls for a more humane approach had received far wider support than in 2015. Since 2021 it was 'totally different. LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning] organisations, feminist organisations, ecological activists, youth activists, they were really openly supportive to the cause'. The same interviewee highlighted support from Polish celebrities who had visited the border themselves and spoken out publicly about the situation there. Prominent critics of the government's approach have also included two of Poland's most notable Ukraine-led organisations, Our Choice Foundation and the Ukrainian Union in Poland. A joint statement issued by the two organisations explained, 'It amazes us that Poland, the same country which helps Ukrainian refugees in such a wonderful way, shamelessly and with cruelty drives families from outside of Europe into the forest and kicks them out to Belarus' (cited in Pszczółkowska, 2022b).

## 5.3 Narratives around Ukrainian refugees

### 5.3.1 Narratives of support and solidarity

Since their arrival in Poland in late February 2022, Ukrainian refugees have been met with a uniformly positive welcome across Polish public life, from all levels of government, the media and public figures to Polish society at large. From the early days of the crisis, Poles took to social media, or in many cases travelled to the border, to coordinate and offer support. Multiple surveys in the months that followed found around two-thirds of respondents reporting that they had taken action to support Ukrainians (CBOS, 2022e; Ipsos, 2022; Theus, 2022; Union of Polish Metropolises, 2022a). As discussed in Box 5, businesses of all sizes have played a prominent role as part of this groundswell of support.

The most common form of assistance has been in-kind support (for example, clothes or food), followed by financial assistance (CBOS, 2022d; 2022e). Other forms of support include 'free shops' for Ukrainians to collect essentials free of charge, cooking food in shelters, staffing assistance points for Ukrainians, and offers of transportation or housing (Pszczółkowska, 2022b; UNHCR, 2022c). Surveys have found that from 4% to 7% of Poles have hosted a Ukrainian in their home (Dražanová and Geddes, 2022; Polish Economic Institute, 2022).

### Box 5 Private sector support to Ukrainian refugees

The private sector has played an important role in the Ukrainian refugee response. Interviewees noted that in many cases this was the first time Polish businesses had provided support to refugees, having previously deemed doing so politically controversial or ‘bad for their image’.

At the outset of the conflict, NGOs and local authorities reported being inundated by financial and in-kind donations. One Polish NGO worker explained how ‘when the Ukrainian war started it went absolutely crazy. People were throwing money at us’, while another recalled ‘lots of corporate donors ... knocking on our doors, we didn’t need to convince them to donate. Spontaneously they are approaching and offering support’. Local government officials noted a similar pattern.

Many Polish businesses had, prior to 2022, employed large numbers of Ukrainian migrants and so offered them assistance directly, for example to bring their family to Poland or to enable them to return to Ukraine to fight. Polish companies with offices in Ukraine helped workers there to leave the country, sometimes providing them with support, such as housing, in Poland.

Other forms of assistance included the donation of physical space or staff time. The Polish bank mBank, in cooperation with the Polish Centre for International Aid, organised an educational centre for children in their offices (Strzałkowski, 2022). Businesses in Lublin seconded staff to volunteer at shelters and offered the city authorities free use of their warehouses. One interviewee explained how her son had allowed Ukrainians to stay in his hotel for free. Another explained, ‘my brother has a company, he doesn’t need employees any more, but he is still hiring [Ukrainians] to give them jobs. It is a time of crisis, so they can afford an additional one or two employees’. Interviewees spoke about how Poland’s private sector was also gradually adapting to Ukrainians as a key group of consumers, for example by translating adverts into Ukrainian. Several interviewees reported that international corporations with offices in Poland had begun to explore possibilities to support Ukrainians’ ability to access the labour market, particularly in terms of their requalification and language training.

This positive response has not always extended to everyone fleeing the conflict, and there have been anecdotal reports of Poles being reluctant to help, and even specifically asking not to host, non-Ukrainians. In the early weeks of the conflict there were reports of Polish nationalist groups in the border town of Przemyśl targeting refugees of colour (Babakova et al., 2022). However, such sentiments do not appear widespread: one poll in late March found that an overwhelming majority (84%) agreed that all refugees fleeing Ukraine should be treated the same way, as opposed to just a minority (13%) who felt that those with a Ukrainian passport should be given priority (cited in Pszczółkowska, 2022b).

### 5.3.2 From the role of Russia to refugee demographics: why supportive narratives have found traction

There is a sharp difference between dominant narratives surrounding Ukrainian refugees and those from the Middle East and Africa (see, for example, Sandecki, 2022). There are various, overlapping factors that explain the evolution of these diverging narratives and why they have found traction with Poland's public. Some interviewees pointed to the influence of racism and Islamophobia. As discussed above, negative narratives around refugees from the Middle East and Africa have often built on longer-standing stereotypes. More broadly, the wider literature illustrates how narratives painting refugees and other migrants as a threat, or advancing an 'us' versus 'them' narrative, succeed when framed in a way that resonates with individuals' broader worldview and with their underlying views of cultural outsiders (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017; Esses et al., 2017; Banulescu-Bogdan, 2022).

In many ways it is this same appeal to Poles' underlying worldview, values and experiences that explains why supportive narratives around Ukrainians have found near-universal traction. The demographics of Ukrainian arrivals, who, due to military conscription for Ukrainian men, have overwhelmingly been women, children and the elderly, have mapped closely onto the image constructed in Poland's imagination since 2015 of the 'genuine' refugee. This has made it difficult for 'threat' narratives to take hold in the way they have done for other refugee populations (Dražanová, 2022).

Perhaps the most important factor in crystallising positive narratives rooted in solidarity is the fact that Ukrainians are fleeing Russian aggression. The narrative of Ukraine as the victim and Russia as the aggressor (Barton Hronešová, 2022) resonates with Poland's own historical experiences of resisting larger, more powerful states, in particular Russia. In contrast, interviewees pointed to a general lack of awareness about conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, and their complexity and physical distance from Poland, making it difficult for Poles to understand and empathise with the reasons refugees from these regions had left their countries of origin.

Various interviewees explained how the conflict in Ukraine had engendered particularly strong feelings of solidarity and a feeling that Poles could, as one interviewee put it, 'see themselves in Ukrainians'. In this way, unlike refugees from the Middle East and Africa, Ukrainians are represented in popular narratives as part of an 'us' – one that is fighting for freedom and European values – in the face of a 'them', defined as Russia and its allies. A journalist, articulated that 'We know thanks to our history, what Moscow means for Ukrainians and for us ... Because of Russia, because of Putin, we knew we will do everything to help the people who are in such a danger'. One local authority official noted how images of Ukrainian cities in ruins recalled those of Polish cities destroyed during the Second World War. Another interviewee explained how, even before the recent outbreak of conflict, the 2013–2014 Maidan protest movement in Ukraine had engendered a newfound sense of respect among Poles for Ukrainians, demonstrating Ukrainians' desire, echoing Poland's own history, to break ties with Russia in favour of closer alignment with



Western Europe, and the EU in particular (Konieczna-Sałamatin, 2015; Grzymała-Każłowska and Brzozowska, 2017). There is also a broader sense that Ukrainians are fighting to defend wider European freedoms, and that Poland's freedom itself is at stake. As one NGO worker described: 'If Ukrainians fall, we will be the next attacked'.

Finally, narratives of solidarity towards Ukrainian refugees tap into underlying perceptions of Ukrainians in Poland – for example, as contributors to Poland's economy – as well as previous experiences, contact and relationships with them. In contrast, the relatively low number of refugees from the Middle East and Africa, particularly outside big cities – and Poland's ethnic homogeneity more broadly – means that opportunities for interpersonal contact with these groups have been far more limited. Interviewees highlighted a sense of familiarity between Poles and Ukrainians and increasingly close inter-group relationships following the mass migration of Ukrainians to Poland post-2014. One interviewee explained, 'everyone I know has a friend from Ukraine, they have families there, people were finding a husband or wife there'. The significance of this is supported by the wider literature, which points to intergroup contact as a key means of reducing prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Dempster and Hargrave, 2017; Dennison and Dražanová, 2018). Positive narratives around Ukrainians are also rooted in a sense of cultural and historical proximity between Poles and Ukrainians (Dražanová, 2022), often recalling the period when Ukraine formed part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This mutual history has not, however, always been easy. Most notably, tens of thousands of ethnic Poles were killed by ethnic Ukrainians towards the end of the Second World War, an event still remembered by older generations of Poles, though largely appealed to only by far-right actors, for example the Konfederacja party (see for example, Konfederacja, 2022).

### 5.3.3 Longer-term prospects

Interviews, corroborated by wider media reports and analysis (MEDAM, 2022; Nowosielska, 2022; Theus, 2022), indicate that the financial and material support offered to Ukrainians by ordinary Polish citizens has decreased over time, suggesting that Poles are growing increasingly tired or less able to offer support, particularly in the context of rising inflation and energy prices. Interviewees pointed to anecdotal examples of people hosting Ukrainians growing frustrated or ending hosting arrangements.

Interviewees were divided on the extent to which they felt that negative narratives around Ukrainians had begun to emerge. Some such narratives have been spread by far-right media and politicians, in particular the Konfederacja party. Some analysts have also cited possible efforts by Russia to advance disinformation that might create social tensions between Poles and Ukrainians (Boni et al., 2022). Parts of social media discourse and some media articles have focused on alleged privileges refugees have over Polish citizens, rising prices and queues for medical care, and have even criticised the 'Ukrainization' of Poland (EDMO, 2022; Gospodarka Podkarpacka, 2022; Nikolov and Hudec, 2022; Piwar, 2022; Trojan, 2022). Echoing narratives around other groups of refugees, critical voices have sometimes drawn on ways in which Ukrainian refugees were seen to

fall outside the image of a needy refugee that is 'deserving' of assistance. For example, critics have pointed to Ukrainians wearing designer clothes or driving luxury cars (see, for example, Babakova et al., 2022).

By and large, overt support for such critical narratives was considered a fringe position, though there are anecdotal examples of tensions bubbling below the surface, particularly among Poles on low incomes. Migration Policy Centre (MPC) data indicates that around four in 10 Poles agree that the Polish government has treated Ukrainian refugees a little or much better than them (Dražanová and Geddes, 2022). On the one hand, this points to the objective reality of the situation, particularly in the early months of the crisis, where Ukrainian refugees received a large volume of support from Poland's government and communities. However, on the other hand, such sentiment should be taken seriously, particularly in view of trends in large-scale refugee contexts across the world, where accusations of preferential treatment of refugees have often served as a flashpoint for tensions (Hargrave et al., 2020a; 2020b; World Vision, 2022).

Many interviewees were concerned that negative narratives, and associated attitudes, may grow over time, in particular given the high salience of Poland's evolving cost of living crisis. As discussed in Section 4.4, supportive attitudes towards Ukrainians have remained resilient thus far, though survey data shows significant appreciation among Poles regarding the long-term impacts of the Ukrainian refugee presence. For now, while these challenges are openly acknowledged in public debate (Do Rzeczy, 2022), for the most part Ukrainians are not being blamed for them. Local authorities and humanitarian actors spoke about activities being initiated with a view to anticipating possible future tensions, for example, communications campaigns and integration activities bringing together Polish and Ukrainian communities.

The main focus of concern, particularly among NGOs, experts and local authorities, is around perceived weaknesses in the central government's response (Piekarski, 2022). This is related to a fear that pre-existing challenges, exacerbated by large-scale Ukrainian arrivals, particularly around housing and healthcare, would worsen over time in the absence of an effective government strategy to mitigate them. One academic explained, 'We need a clear communication from the government. Where we are, where we are heading, what is the strategy, what actions we are taking and how to finance it'. Local leaders, particularly in major cities that have seen a large increase in their population as a result of Ukrainian arrivals, have repeatedly highlighted the need for more systemic solutions to the crisis across Europe and within Poland. They have also called for EU funds to be sent directly to local authorities to help ease the pressure on local budgets (City of Warsaw, 2022g; Wanat, 2022). In June 2022 the Deputy Mayor of Warsaw explained: 'If we fail to include Ukrainian society in our city today, some processes will be irreversible. What we can do at the local government level, we are already doing – on many levels. But systemic solutions are needed' (City of Warsaw, 2022h).

## 6 Conclusion

Poland has seen a remarkable transformation over the past three decades: from a homogenous society whose borders were largely closed to the outside world to an increasingly prominent country of destination. Today, Poland is host to over 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees, alongside some of the highest numbers of (largely temporary) non-EU foreign workers in Europe, also predominantly from Ukraine. During this time, public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants, and the public and political narratives that underlie them, have also seen significant shifts, from growing increasingly positive throughout the 2000s, to a negative turn post-2015, to a remarkable wave of solidarity since February 2022 towards Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion.

Since 2015, the dominant story told about immigration, refugees and asylum in Poland has been one of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. Ukrainians – who have long received greater openness in Poland, alongside those from other former Eastern bloc countries – are, for the time being, characterised as part of an ‘us’, standing together against Russian forces that have for centuries posed a threat to Poland’s identity and existence. In contrast – echoing narratives elsewhere in Europe and further afield – refugees from the Middle East and Africa have been successfully painted, in particular by the PiS government and right-leaning media, as a threatening ‘other’ seeking to destroy Poland’s culture, security and values. These narratives have spilled over to fuel broader experiences of racism and discrimination among other groups of migrants in Poland, particularly those who are Muslims, despite otherwise supportive narratives around foreign workers.

Various questions emerge looking to the future, the first being how far supportive attitudes and positive narratives towards refugees from Ukraine will be sustained, especially as the crisis grows increasingly protracted. Thus far, attitudes and narratives around Ukrainians have proved resilient. However, negative narratives may still gain traction, particularly in the absence of a clear strategy to address long-term challenges and with economic pressures at the forefront of Poles’ minds. A second, broader question is whether and how public attitudes and discourse around Ukrainians will over time impact other groups. On the one hand, the vast numbers of Ukrainians in Poland may justify a more closed approach towards others seeking asylum. On the other, there is an opportunity to build on the groundswell of support for Ukrainians to foster an optimistic image of a welcoming Poland.

There are many factors – from refugee’ demographics to the role of Russia – which render narratives and attitudes around Ukrainians highly distinct. However, efforts to build on ordinary Poles’ extraordinary willingness to help Ukrainian refugees could draw on initiatives outside Poland that have focused on articulating messages around refugees that focus on ‘the welcomer’.<sup>12</sup> There is a role here for actors already putting forward alternative narratives around

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12 See ODI (2017), Katwala (2019). For examples of relevant initiatives, see Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (2019); Welcoming America (n.d.); Welcoming Committee for Hong Kongers (n.d.).

other groups of refugees, including civil society and local authorities, with opportunities to explore a narrative that is less about 'them' and more about a tolerant, compassionate 'us', made visible in Poles' responses to Ukrainian refugees.

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