Central Europe Has Compassion Fatigue

By Paul Hockenos, a Berlin-based journalist
October 28, 2025

Nearly four years of hosting Ukrainian refugees is fueling a resentful backlash.

KRAKOW, Poland—When Russia launched its full invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, millions of Ukrainians fleeing their homeland were welcomed across Central Europe with overwhelming sympathy and kindness. In the war's first weeks, eight million people spilled over the border into Poland and Germany, and hundreds of thousands more across the rest of Central Europe and beyond. Ordinary citizens with no ties to Ukraine waited on train platforms with cardboard signs in Google-translated Ukrainian offering the frightened travelers accommodation and a hot meal.

As the war drags on, the Ukrainians who remain abroad tell mostly of great generosity and aid, from both citizens and states. Many settled down, hold jobs, pay taxes, and send their kids to school. For the most part, they will continue to qualify as temporary residents until the war ends.

But Europe's hospitality is dissipating as compassion fatigue sets in and misinformation creeps into public discourse. With increasing frequency, Ukrainian citizens living in Central Europe are recounting incidents of sporadic hostility from the native-born.

Take Poland, for example, where polls show increasing impatience with its nearly 1 million Ukrainian refugees, almost four years after they escaped the Russian invasion. In schools, on the street, and on public transportation, growing numbers of Ukrainians say they are insulted or spat at when overheard speaking Ukrainian. "Every day, Ukrainians come to us who have been assaulted or discriminated against," Rafal Pankowski of Never Again Association in Warsaw, which tracks hate crimes, told *Foreign Policy*. "It's not the experience of the majority [of Ukrainians] but it's growing."

Myroslava Keryk, CEO of the Warsaw community organization Ukrainian House, told *Le Monde* that a year ago incidents of shoving and exclamations of, "In Poland, we speak Polish!" were very rare. "We considered such incidents to be marginal. Now, not a day goes by without us being told new stories."

In Central Europe, including Germany, where the refugees' initial reception was no less generous, rightist populist politicos are stoking much the same kind of resentment: an intolerance that Moscow is deftly fanning. Central Europe (with the exception of Hungary) isn't giving up the fight against Russian aggression in Ukraine. But its role as host—as well as its determination in foreign policy—is waning nearly four years on.

"It's irrational because it's not true but many people think that Ukrainian refugees are being treated better by their own government than they are treated," said Michal Vasecka of the Bratislava Policy Institute in Slovakia. "They're resentful. 'Why,' they ask, 'should money come from our budget for Ukraine and Ukrainians when this isn't our war in the first place?'"

The results of October's election in the Czech Republic, for example, are bad news for the roughly 400,000 Ukrainians in the country—the highest number per capita in Europe. The election's victor, populist Andrej Babis of the right-wing ANO party, campaigned by lashing out at the cost of the ruling center-right government's immigration policies. "Czech mothers [get] nothing, and Ukrainians

everything," he said, echoing calls from two vociferously xenophobic right-wing extremist parties. A July survey by a Czech polling firm found that resentment of refugees is linked to economic factors, such as fears of reduced social support and competition in the job market, particularly among lower-income populations.

Unlike in Poland and Hungary, or among the Czech radical right parties, neither Babis nor most of ANO have yet proposed cutting Ukrainians' benefits or making them conditional, on employment, for example. A narrow majority of Czechs still think granting refugees protection was the right decision, according to the survey. But ANO's campaign rhetoric implies the desire to find a remedy at Ukrainians' expense, and its ultimate path to power could involve a partnership with far-right parties that openly advocate sending Ukrainians back to "where they came from," according to Pankowski.

In Poland, experts say that Warsaw is not backing away from its full-fledged military support of Ukraine. "This doesn't reflect sympathy for Russia in Poland, not at all," said Jacek Stawiski, incoming editor of the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*. "But rather it's three things coming together in one stream: [historical] antipathy toward Ukrainians, Poland-first populism, and misinformation including veiled Russian propaganda and fake news. This is a dangerous moment that can get out of hand if the dynamic shifts too far to the right."

Take Poland's historical grievances towards Ukrainians. During World War II, anti-Polish ethnic cleansing at the hands of Ukrainian nationalists took as many as 100,000 Polish civilian lives. These gruesome massacres, the largest of which transpired in Volhynia (today part of northwestern Ukraine), are regarded in Poland as a genocide. Karol Nawrocki, Poland's conservative new president and a historian, has put full exposure of these atrocities at the top of his agenda, saying that Ukraine should be blocked from entering the European Union or NATO until it atones for the "the crime of the Volhynia genocide."

Financially speaking, Poland has thus far been generous, shelling out over 29 billion euros for refugees, second only to Germany's nearly 37 billion euros. While economists largely concur that the Ukrainian refugees in Central Europe have been a boon to stressed labor markets, not a burden, the region's populists have exploited misperceptions and fears around migration in general—as well as very real economic downturns—to paint Ukrainians as drains on public finances.

Germany's opposition far-right Alternative for Germany demands that Ukrainian refugees should return to their home country. The current German government has already promised to reduce welfare payments to Ukrainians.

Hungary terminated state-funded accommodation for Ukrainian refugees coming from western Ukraine, which it now considers safe for return. "They say we are simply wasting money on Ukraine and the Ukrainians, and it rather should go into health care, infrastructure, and social affairs," Vasecka said, referring to skeptical Central Europeans.

There is no better illustration of this phenomenon than Nawrocki, who was elected president this year on a platform of "Poland first, Poles first." Ukraine loomed large in the spring campaign. During his campaign, in April, he argued that Poles should have priority in queues for doctor's appointments. "Polish citizens are treated worse than our guests from Ukraine," Nawrocki claimed in August.

As president, he has refused to renew social welfare payments (such as child benefits) to unemployed Ukrainian refugees in Poland. However, a study by Poland's National Development Bank shows that Ukrainian immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits. The research concluded that pre-war immigrants and refugees from Ukraine contribute between 0.5 percent and 2.4 percent to Poland's annual GDP growth and have started up more than 13,000 enterprises since 2022.

Aside from Poland's foremost politician, the far-right opposition party Confederation, currently Poland's third-most popular party, complains about a "Ukrainization" of Polish society. It demands that Poland close its borders with neighboring Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus, and Slovakia, and begin deporting asylum seekers and refugees, including those from Ukraine. In July, right-wing protesters launched demonstrations in 50 cities across Poland demanding an immediate stop to the "immigration invasion."

Recent Russian drone incursions over Poland have also contributed to the shift in sentiment. "The debate has moved toward, 'This is enough, we have done a lot [for Ukraine] but now we have to defend our homeland, and [build out] our own defensive base, and civil structures,'" Stawiski said.

Even as Europe tries to build self-defense "walls" against Russian drones, Kremlin disinformation is seeping in—from Poland, which is traditionally hostile to Russia, to Russophile Slovakia—and it is playing no small role in the rising skepticism of Ukraine. Pro-Russian narratives spread by bots; AI-generated images and stories; trolls; fake websites designed to mimic real news sources; and exported conspiracy theories dovetail neatly with the dogmas of the radical right. The underlying messaging is the same, despite many guises: Ukraine is your bane and not worth the money.

In the Czech Republic, according to one U.S. study, pro-Russian groups within the country disseminate targeted disinformation about Ukrainian refugees from pro-Kremlin media outlets using the Czech language. These sources rely on longstanding anti-immigration narratives that feed fears about newcomers. (Much anti-Ukrainian refugee messaging on social media, according to the study, appears on accounts and profiles that previously shared anti-vaccine disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic.)

That the misinformation appears to be from Central European compatriots is crucial to its success. "If Polish people flagged it as Russian, then they'd reject it," said Stawiski. "But it's not recognizable as such and it creeps into minds as an anti-Ukraine agenda that serves Russian interests. It plays on many people's genuine fear of war as well as the same anti-immigration fears that one sees all across Europe and in the U.S., too. It picks up on President Trump's idea that Ukraine is going too far and that there can be peace if a deal is struck."

"Russian disinformation is really hardcore in Germany," said Iryna Shulikina of Vitsche, a Berlin-based Ukrainian think tank, referencing a massive pro-Russia disinformation campaign against the center-left government in 2024 that employed 50,000 fake accounts on the social media platform X. But even this, she said, is mild compared to the full-blown anti-Ukrainian hysteria in Hungary. In state-orchestrated campaigns, billboards announce that if Ukraine is allowed in the EU, it will destroy the bloc.

The bad vibes and simmering intolerance felt by many Ukrainians in Central Europe may be bearable for now, but it bodes ill for future refugees, should Russia make battlefield gains. More Ukrainians are certainly not welcome, and the ones already there will have to leave once the war ends—a fact they would do well to recognize now. Compassion fatigue is a polite way to put it.

Paul Hockenos is a Berlin-based journalist. His recent book is Berlin Calling: A Story of Anarchy, Music, the Wall and the Birth of the New Berlin (The New Press).

P. Hockenos: "Central Europe Has Compassion Fatigue". ForeignPolicy.com, 28.10.2025.

https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/10/28/europe-ukraine-refugees-poland-germany/