From fatigue to friction—the rising tide of hostility toward Ukrainians

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Attitudes toward Ukrainians in Poland have shifted over the course of the war. (Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Adriana and her family were on their way to church when they noticed the family car had been vandalized. The Ukrainian license plates had been torn off, a tire slashed, and 'Go back to Ukraine' scrawled on the vehicle in Polish.

On another occasion, Adriana, who fled the war in her homeland in March 2022 not long after Russia launched its full-scale invasion, was accosted on a bus by a drunk man hurling nationalist abuse.

"He was screaming 'Why are you sitting here? You need to get out of here,' because I was speaking my language on the phone," she told TVP World.

Such abuse has made Adriana wary of speaking her own language in pubic and she has changed her phone settings to English so strangers cannot see she is Ukrainian.

The incidents make clear that after almost four years of war, the once warm welcome enjoyed by Ukrainian refugees in Poland has turned to fatigue, verbal abuse and even violence.

Physical assaults

In December, a 41-year-old Ukrainian man was critically injured in an attack by a gang of youths in Radom, central Poland. Prosecutors highlighted that the man was targeted specifically for his nationality, the attackers shouting nationalist insults during the assault.

Two months earlier, in the southern city of Katowice, a food-delivery rider was intercepted and beaten by a group of locals. The attack was sparked by the Ukrainian victim speaking Russian on his phone (many eastern Ukrainians speak Russian as their first language).

Though extreme examples, the incidents are symptomatic of a growing social trend in Poland. It was typified in December by video footage shared online of young men attacking a Ukrainian couple on a tram. Their ‘offense’ was speaking their own language.

A warm welcome

The trend of greater animosity toward Ukrainians is in stark contrast to the outpouring of good intentions shown to Poland’s eastern neighbors in the immediate aftermath of Russia’s invasion.

Then, Poles made international headlines for the warm welcome extended to Ukrainian refugees, greeting them at the border and opening their homes. Schools and workplaces held collections to support the “guests” as the government pointedly dubbed them, and solidarity was the theme of countless editorials.

Adriana recalls that when she first arrived, she stayed with a Polish family until her own family found an apartment.

“Everyone was so supportive,” she said. “Everyone at school, at university, at the workplace was so nice.”

Polish support for Ukraine peaked at the start of the war. (Attila Husejnow/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

Almost four years into the war, the reality for the around 1.5 million Ukrainians in Poland is very different.

Many report that they refrain from speaking Ukrainian in public for fear of verbal abuse. Others admit they are fearful of neighbors and workmates. Children often face ostracization or bullying at school.

Oleksandr Pestrykov, head of the Ukrainian House advocacy foundation in Warsaw, told TVP World that for every Ukrainian woman who decides to leave Poland for economic reasons, 10 do so due to xenophobia.

Shifting opinions

Research by CBOS, a major publicly funded pollster, found in 2026 that attitudes toward Ukrainians have taken a dark turn. A January poll put support for accepting Ukrainian refugees at 48% with 46% opposed. In March 2022, those same figures were 94% and 3%.

Some observers point out that the high support rate following Russia's invasion was likely an anomaly and that the current level is more realistic.

But whatever anti-Ukrainian or xenophobic sentiment may have been latent in society, it is increasingly surfacing.

Anti-Ukrainian demonstrations have been held in several Polish cities. (Beata Zawrzel/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

In the first 10 months of last year, Polish police investigated almost 900 reports of hate crimes against Ukrainians. In the whole of 2022, during the 'Solidarity phase,' the figure was 113.

Never Again (Nigdy Więcej), an anti-discrimination NGO that records incidents of xenophobia in its 'Brown Book' project, has reported a 73% rise in physical and verbal attacks on Ukrainians over the same period. The organization adds the caveat that for every crime on record, between four and five go unreported.

The 'algorithm of hate'

Never Again founder Dr Rafał Pankowski says the transition from euphoric solidarity to open hostility is reminiscent of a pattern seen during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I think some of the mechanisms are actually similar," he told TVP World. "In the beginning, we have a big wave of solidarity, a kind of positive social mobilization, and then, over time, the mood changes, largely under the influence of social media. There is, more and more toxicity... conspiracy

theories...and then this solidarity is undermined."

Not only are the mechanisms familiar, but the perpetrators are often the same, according to Pankowski, who recalled that even during the 'solidarity phase' when such opinions were unpopular, some people sought to position themselves as anti-Ukrainian voices.

Among the most prominent of these was far-right firebrand Grzegorz Braun, whom Pankowski identifies as "by far the best example" not only of xenophobic nationalism, but of also "how you can mix anti-Ukrainian sentiments with antisemitism and conspiracy theories... to promote a kind of hateful cocktail."

Braun is by no means alone on the far right and other prominent hardliners such as Confederation leaders Krzysztof Bosak and Sławomir Mentzen have made political milage from social divisions around war refugees.

Far-right groups have organized 'citizen patrols' targeting Ukrainian refugees. (Marek Antoni Iwaczuk/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

By far the most influential voice on the right of Poland's political spectrum, however, is the president. Karol Nawrocki incorporated resentment toward Ukrainian refugees as a central pillar of his 2025 election campaign and has continued to play the counter-Kyiv card.

This, Pankowski said, has shown that “anti-Ukrainian sentiment has really spilled over from the margins into the mainstream discourse.”

Peak periods

Online signs of this opposition spiked in August 2025, when Nawrocki vetoed a government bill to extend social benefits for Ukrainian refugees.

Much of this content was dehumanizing and portrayed Ukrainians as social scroungers living off the Polish state, DFRLab (The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab) said in a report.

Official statistics negate this narrative. According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 78% of Ukrainians in Poland are employed and in 2024, they contributed PLN 15.2 billion (around €3.6 billion) to the Polish state budget while receiving PLN 2.8 billion (less than €665 million) under the Family 800+ child allowance program.

Foreign influence

It is not only domestic protagonists who stand to gain from stoking resentment. The Kremlin also has a vested interest in widening fissures in societies it deems hostile.

The biggest single surge in anti-Ukrainian sentiment on social media platforms followed a mass incursion of drones into Polish airspace. Poland’s government squarely attributed the breach in September of last year to Russia, but a surge of online content followed a different narrative.

Many social media comments apportioned blame on Kyiv, accusing Ukraine’s leadership of trying to derail peace talks and draw NATO into the conflict.

DFRLab found that "likely coordinated networks, often comprised of a small number of accounts, used social media manipulation to entrench anti-Ukraine views and undermine the Polish-Ukrainian Alliance."

Actions speak louder than memes

The Ukrainian House’s Pestrykov described the Polish online space as a “parallel reality” where abuse is rife though many of his compatriots see no hostility in the ‘real world.’

According to a report by the Mieroszewski Centre, a state institution supporting “the peoples of Eastern Europe", released in late January, an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians continue to have a positive or moderately positive view of Polish society, with less than 1% expressing active dislike.

Most Ukrainians still have a positive opinion of Poles. (Beata Zawrzel/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

In a survey published in late 2025 by the National Bank of Poland, 58% of Ukrainians said they expected their children to reside in Poland “for many years” and many report that the only hostility they encounter is online.

Perhaps most tellingly, the sight of Kyiv residents huddled against sub-zero temperatures amid energy outages in January sparked a grassroots social initiative in Poland. The ‘Warmth from Poland’ campaign raised over €2 million in 10 days to provide generators and emergency heating for the Ukrainian capital.

Poles raised over €2 million to provide generators for the people of Kyiv. (screenshot/TVP World)

Oleksandr Pestrykov also emphasizes that animosity is by no means universal.

“There remains a belief among Ukrainians that there are more good people in the world than bad, and that reason will prevail,” he said.

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https://tvpworld.com/91511918/ukrainians-face-increased-hostility-and-violence-in-poland