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The Ukrainian Diaspora in Poland after February 2022:
Lifeworlds of the Labor Migrants and Female Refugees

Abstract: The article examines the experiences of Ukrainians living in Poland after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, focusing on the interpretive patterns they use to navigate in their daily life in a foreign country. Based on focus group interviews with pre-war labor migrants and female refugees in Warsaw, Wrocław, and Łowicz, the data was analyzed using grounded theory methodology and Contact Theory. The article employs the concept of lifeworlds to explore differences between respondents' lives in Poland and Ukraine, their relationships with Poles and fellow Ukrainians, and their perspectives on the future of the Ukrainian community in Poland.

Keywords: Poland, Ukraine, refugees, grounded theory, Contact Theory

Introduction

Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, thousands of refugees began arriving in Poland. While some moved on to other countries or returned to Ukraine, nearly a million refugees remain in Poland (Statista 2024). They have joined the existing Ukrainian community, which numbered around 1.35 million before the war (Statistics Poland 2020), bringing the total to over two million Ukrainians in Poland today. This large presence marks a significant shift in Poland's demographic landscape, as the country was once very homogeneous and had a negative migration balance (King and Okólski 2019). In a short time, Poland has transitioned from a country of emigration to one of immigration (Kubiciel-Lodzińska and Solga 2023). The country's response to this influx, evolving from a cautious refugee policy to one of rapid adaptation, highlights the war as a "focusing event" that accelerated both policy changes and social acceptance (Andrejuk 2023).

Moreover, less than a decade ago, immigrants to Poland were mainly concentrated in a few areas, particularly in Mazovia and the Warsaw agglomeration (Górny 2017; Górny et al. 2010). Today, Ukrainian communities can be found across nearly all regions of Poland (Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk 2022). Lastly, over the past decade, Poles have generally shown hostility toward migrants, especially during the European migration crisis of 2015–2016 (Skrodzka and Stefaniak 2017) and the Belarusian border crisis (Feliksiak 2021). However, the influx of migrants and refugees from Ukraine has been met with a much more favorable reception from Poles, even if attitudes have somewhat soured over time (Scovil 2023). All of this suggests that, despite the novelty of the situation, the large Ukrainian

minority will likely become a permanent part of Polish society, playing a key role in its development and potentially altering its character.

The growing Ukrainian community in Poland has attracted the attention of social researchers in recent years. However, the vast majority of the research devoted to it so far was conducted before the mass influx of refugees and therefore focused on migration of a primarily economic nature. These studies explored diverse dimensions of this phenomenon, notably the processes of integration of the newcomers into Polish society, especially into the Polish labor market (Kindler and Szulecka 2022; Górny et al. 2018). The phenomenon of "entrepreneurship drain," where Ukrainians show strong entrepreneurial tendencies despite systemic challenges, highlights the potential yet often unmet needs of these migrants (Andrejuk 2019). Over the long term, the evolving profile of Ukrainian migrants, including the arrival of highly skilled individuals at risk of "brain waste," could impact Poland's socioeconomic landscape (Kubiciel-Lodzińska et al. 2023). Other common research topics include migration patterns (Górny 2017; Brzozowska 2022), identity formation at the intersection of two cultures (Głowacka-Grajper 2023; Jawor et al. 2020), daily relations with Poles (Kindler et al. 2022), and mutual perceptions between Ukrainians and Poles (Fomina et al. 2013; Konieczna-Sałamatin 2016; Troszyński 2019).

In these studies, a distinction is sometimes made between pre- and post-2014 immigration. Since 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk, immigration from Ukraine to Poland has not only intensified but also shifted from temporary and circular to more sedentary (Górny and van der Zwan 2024). However, this periodization of Ukrainian immigration to Poland should now be updated to include a third phase: migration after February 2022.

Research on the recent phase of Ukrainian migration to Poland remains limited, and existing studies are narrower in scope compared to pre-2022 migration research. Most of these are quantitative studies with a practical focus, examining the socio-demographic characteristics of newcomers, their labor market situation, and areas where refugees need support (Dudek et al. 2023; EWL 2022; IOM 2023). Fewer qualitative studies have been conducted, which would allow Ukrainians to share their personal experiences of life in Poland, their relations with Poles, and how they perceive them. A notable example is the ongoing project "24.02.2022, 5 am: testimonies of war," led by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in partnership with the Mieroszewski Center and the Polish Oral History Society. This project conducts in-depth interviews with Ukrainian refugees (Łukiankow and Wylegała 2023), but the focus is primarily on respondents' war experiences rather than their lives in Poland.

The qualitative study presented in this article—conducted among both pre-2022 Ukrainian labor immigrants and refugees—helps address the gap identified earlier. This exploratory study centers on three main research questions, each leading to more specific topics. First, how do respondents experience life in Poland compared to their life in Ukraine? Second, what are their relations with Poles and other Ukrainians in Poland? Third, how do they envision their future in Poland? The answers to these questions provide a vivid picture of the Ukrainian community in Poland, currently undergoing dynamic change.

At the outset, it's important to note that the two studied groups—pre-war immigrants and war refugees—differed significantly in socio-demographic terms, with the most notable

distinction being the overwhelming predominance of women among the refugees. This gender imbalance, largely due to wartime conscription policies keeping many men in Ukraine, influences their public image in the host society. Studies show that female-dominated migration flows are often linked to caregiving, domestic, or service roles, reinforcing traditional gender expectations (Kilkey, Perrons and Plomien 2013). As a result, Ukrainian women are often seen as resilient yet vulnerable "helpers" or dependents needing assistance, admired for their sacrifices but viewed as passive, with a focus on family rather than broader social or economic engagement (Morokvašic 2015; Freedman 2016). This demographic reality shapes integration expectations and may influence both opportunities and barriers within Polish society (Kofman and Raghuram 2015; Andrejuk 2018). Comparing the experiences of pre-war immigrants, consisting of both men and women, with those of female war refugees highlights these differences, revealing an important dimension of refugee integration into Polish society.

Methodology of Research

The study is based on five focus group interviews (FGI) with 7 or 8 Ukrainians aged between 25 and 45 [1]. The groups were divided into two categories: the first included respondents who came to Poland before the war, either for work or education, while the second included those who arrived after the war began in February 2022—Ukrainian refugees [2]. Since National Bank of Poland statistics indicated that almost all refugees who arrived in Poland immediately after the war broke out were women (NBP 2023a), only women were recruited for these groups. In contrast, the pre-war immigrant groups included both men and women in equal proportions. All groups consisted of individuals with varying levels of education and socio-professional status from different regions of Ukraine. However, these variables were not part of the selection criteria; the primary focus was the distinction between pre-war immigrants and female war refugees.

Interviews were conducted between November and December 2023 in three cities: Wrocław, where Ukrainians make up a high percentage of the population (Wojdat et al. 2022) and anti-Ukrainian sentiment is particularly strong (Scovil 2023); Warsaw, home to the largest number of Ukrainians in Poland (Wojdat et al. 2022); and Łowicz, representing smaller cities in the sample. In Wrocław and Warsaw, two interviews were held: one with the pre-war immigrant group and one with the refugee group. In Łowicz, only refugee women were interviewed due to the small pre-war Ukrainian population there.

For the Wrocław and Warsaw groups, we recruited Ukrainians who spoke relatively good Polish, which is undoubtedly a limitation of the study. However, our interlocutors often mixed in some Ukrainian or Russian words, and sometimes used Surzhik, particularly in the refugee groups, where members had been in Poland for less than two years. To address this, we conducted the final interview in Łowicz entirely in Russian, as our interviewees

[1] The age range was chosen based on statistics from the NBP, which show that people aged 27–44 make up the majority of both Ukrainian pre-war migration and refugees (NBP 2023a).

[2] I use the term "Ukrainian refugees" to distinguish this group from the pre-2022 Ukrainian immigration. However, it's important to remember that most of these people do not have refugee status under the 1951 Geneva Convention—they simply left their country after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began.

spoke it more often than Ukrainian. All interviews followed the same scenario and typically lasted around two hours. The interviews were conducted by a team of moderators from the Warsaw-based Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS), all of whom were Polish. However, the moderator who conducted the interviews with refugees was fluent in both Russian and Ukrainian, which helped improve communication and minimized the potential bias of the research team's Polish background.

Theoretical Framework

The aim of the study was to reconstruct the interviewees' "lifeworlds" as comprehensively as possible by analyzing their experiences, the shared knowledge they intersubjectively hold, and the stereotypes that guide their navigation of daily life in a foreign country. In phenomenological sociology, the lifeworld refers to the everyday, taken-for-granted reality in which individuals interact and make sense of their experiences, thereby constructing their social reality (Schutz and Luckmann 1973). To explore this in the context of Ukrainians in Poland, I employed the inductive methodology of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which is particularly effective in capturing the common-sense knowledge and cognitive frameworks of social actors.

Following the procedure developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), I began my analysis with the open coding stage, where I divided the collected material into distinct segments and created preliminary "codes" to label them. I then proceeded to the axial coding phase, in which I sought to identify connections between the codes from the previous stage and group them into broader categories that represented the central "axes" around which the codes were organized. Finally, I moved to the selective coding stage, where I identified relationships between categories, selected core categories, and constructed theoretical concepts around them. In this phase, I also eliminated codes and categories that lacked sufficient support when reanalyzed through the lens of the core categories.

Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport 1954) constituted an important theoretical point of reference for my research. It suggests that, under specific conditions, intergroup contact can reduce prejudice, enhance understanding, and promote social harmony. Allport identified four critical conditions for achieving positive outcomes: equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support. The theory has been applied in various contexts, including prejudice based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or disability (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). However, it has also been successfully used in studies examining interactions between immigrants or refugees and the host society. Recent research, such as analyses of the 2015–2016 European migration crisis, has explored how contact between newcomers and Europeans influenced the development of intergroup biases (Coninck et al. 2020; Knappert et al. 2021). The increasing proximity and interactions between Poles and Ukrainians since the 2022 invasion present a similar opportunity to apply Contact Theory in the real-world context of forced migration and host community adaptation.

Basic Allport's framework has been expanded and nuanced by other researchers. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) for instance, conducted a meta-analysis confirming the theory's broad applicability but also emphasized the role of empathy and anxiety reduction in im-

proving intergroup relations. They found that while Allport's conditions enhance positive outcomes, intergroup contact can still reduce prejudice even without all conditions fully met. Research has further extended Contact Theory to cover not only direct but also extended and vicarious contact. For instance, indirect interactions—such as hearing about positive contacts from others—can similarly reduce prejudice (Wright et al. 1997). All these concepts help me analyze the nature of intergroup contacts on a deeper level, whether between Poles and Ukrainians or among various subgroups within the Ukrainian community in Poland.

Socio-Cultural and Economic Contrasts between Poland and Ukraine

The simplest way to learn about the interviewees' impressions of life in Poland was to ask them to compare it to their lives in their homeland. Many began by highlighting what they found better in Poland, particularly factors that influenced their decision to stay. They often mentioned easier access to jobs, broader opportunities for professional growth, and options for further education or retraining (see also: NBP 2023b). Respondents frequently noted higher job security and greater respect for employees. Most comments, however, emphasized Poland's respect for leisure and work-life balance, often attributed to the more "Western" character of Polish society. These aspects were especially valued for their positive impact on family life. Lastly, many contrasted the pace of life in Poland with that in Ukraine, framing it within broader civilizational differences between East and West:

— Because the pace of life in Ukraine and the pace of life in Poland are the paces of two different planets, I would say. (…) It's not just about a faster pace. It's a frenetic lifestyle that…. (laughs) maybe even a little wild, which requires immediate decision-making. That is: the faster, the better.
— Whoever comes first is better.
— And wins, yes. This is the principle of the East. This is part of the Eastern culture, where one negates completely different things. In Poland, one cares about conditions, in the East one cares about the deadline. (…) For me, it was quite a surprise that sometimes in the offices you have to wait a while. At the bank, you have to wait too.
— Same thing: when you give your car to the Poles, they say: it'll be ready in a week, after Christmas. And then you talk to a Belarusian or Ukrainian: go have a smoke, I'll do it in 15 minutes.
— Shit, I gave my pants to the seamstress today and she says to me: it'll be ready in about 2 weeks (laughs). I say: lady, what will I wear for 2 weeks then?
— This is such a pace of life. (…) A Pole works until 2 or 3 pm and then drinks a beer, and plays PlayStation. And that's nice (Warsaw, pre-war immigration).

The above excerpt from the interview shows that the attitude of Ukrainians toward the slower pace of life in Poland was not unequivocally positive. On the one hand, they saw its advantages—less stress, more time for the family—but on the other hand, they looked with some indulgence at the slowness of Polish officials or service providers, who take a week to do something that an Easterner would do in 15 minutes. When the moderator asked the respondents which of these models of life they liked better, they pointed to the Polish one, but with the caveat that it was not fully available to them. Even living in Poland, they couldn't usually afford to live as comfortably as a Pole. Besides, they also derived a certain satisfaction from this, coming from the feeling of being "tougher", more resourceful, and more efficient than the comfortable Poles. In line with Contact Theory, the unequal status of Poles and Ukrainians clearly translated into shaping and reinforcing the prejudices Ukrainians had against Poles (Allport 1954).

In their own country, Ukrainians couldn't work less, either due to a more precarious labor market, but also a general sense of insecurity associated with a malfunctioning state riddled with corruption. This was another advantage of Poland over Ukraine mentioned by the respondents—a well-functioning rule of law state and predictable procedures, allowing them to make long-term plans and go beyond the daily struggle for survival:

> At home, we had (…) a mess of a state that was unable to provide us with any guarantees that we were safe. (…) And Poland gave us this sense of security. Not only after the outbreak of war, but also before. (…) I also know that in Poland you can try to fight for your rights, that is, the courts in Poland, despite everything, are independent and work, they do work. (…) In Ukraine, there was no such thing, and there is not to this day. (…) In Poland, I found what I lacked in Ukraine, namely: the state. (Warsaw, pre-war immigration).

Among other advantages of Poland over Ukraine, interviewees mentioned better public transportation, a richer cultural and entertainment scene in Polish cities, and greater politeness among Poles. Some suggested the latter was also linked to Ukraine's fast pace of life and general sense of insecurity.

The disadvantages of Poland (and the advantages of Ukraine over Poland) that our interviewees pointed out were also interesting. The inferior quality of the Polish health service was definitely among the most frequently mentioned—this thread appeared in each group and was generally widely discussed, as almost every respondent had already had bad experiences with Polish hospitals, queues to doctors, and especially with the emergency department (SOR), which aroused widespread horror. Respondents were unanimously saying that health care in Ukraine works incomparably more efficiently, even the public one. They also frequently mentioned the faster pace of life in the East in this context, but this time in clearly favorable words. It's characteristic that some respondents extrapolated the problems of the Polish health service to the entire European Union (EU). However, they did not refer to their experiences in other countries but rather relied on the already outlined contrast between the dynamic, chaotic East—where things are done not always within the law, but quickly—and the sluggish, bureaucratic West, where, admittedly, there are set rules, but they just slow everything down.

Two other advantages of Ukraine over Poland were also tied to this broader East-West divide. Respondents noted that electronic services, particularly in banking and official matters, were less efficient in Poland. Convoluted regulations made processes like issuing documents or online transactions more secure but significantly slower than in Ukraine. Additionally, respondents pointed out that stores in Poland have shorter operating hours and are sometimes closed on weekends. This was often the first difference they noticed upon arrival. Their feelings about this were mixed: while they appreciated the focus on workers' well-being (especially as some had worked in large stores themselves), they missed the convenience of shopping or spending free time at malls on their days off, as they did in Ukraine.

Relations with Poles

When comparing life in Poland and Ukraine, respondents focused primarily on differences in the labor market and functioning of various institutions. However, life in any society is also shaped by interpersonal relationships, with connections to the local population playing

a crucial role (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Cultural differences, particularly regarding work-life expectations, have subtly influenced how Poles and Ukrainians perceive each other, affecting integration and daily interactions (Górny et al. 2018; Fomina et al. 2013). According to the interviewees, the most positive experiences with Poles occurred right after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Both pre-war immigrants and refugees appreciated the spontaneous aid efforts organized by ordinary Poles during that time:

> I think it's impossible to evaluate this (…). Everyone will probably give wonderful examples of such care, affection, person to person. Everyone has such a story and there are lots of them (…). This help was tremendous, you can't reproach anything (Wrocław, pre-war immigration); We arrived on Sunday, and on Monday we went to school. The headmistress herself took my daughter by the hand and told her to choose a backpack, and inside there were even hair elastics, a pencil case, pencils, things that people had gathered. I cried (Łowicz, female refugees).

The overwhelming support Poles showed Ukrainian refugees in early 2022 reflects a historical sense of solidarity and shared regional identity, as noted in various studies (Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk 2022; Górny et al. 2023). These early interactions fostered cooperation and common goals, key conditions for reducing prejudice (Allport 1954), and laid a strong foundation for integrating Ukrainians into Polish society. Interestingly, some refugees felt the support they received during the first months of the war was even excessive or poorly planned. They also emphasized that initial aid came from ordinary Poles rather than the Polish state, which was unprepared and slow to act. This reinforces the image of a sluggish, bureaucratic Western state and highlights that institutional support was not essential for fostering positive intergroup relations (Allport 1954).

Most Ukrainian interviewees believed that after the initial surge of solidarity at the start of the war, Poles' attitudes toward Ukrainians began to worsen—a trend also confirmed by qualitative and quantitative studies among Poles (Scovil 2023). They noted increased resentment in daily interactions and less favorable or more critical coverage of Ukrainians in Polish media. What caused this shift? Many Ukrainian respondents expressed some understanding of the change. They often attributed it to the overwhelming presence of Ukrainians in Poland, noting that their large numbers increase the likelihood of individuals behaving inappropriately, which can harm their collective reputation. Additionally, the constant media focus on Ukrainians was seen as contributing to fatigue among Poles.

Secondly, some respondents believed that Poles blamed Ukrainians for the rising cost of living, which they referred to with less understanding, as the prevailing belief among the interviewees was that the influx of Ukrainians was profitable for Poland. Thirdly, some attributed the shift in attitudes to negative issues publicized by the media, such as the grain and transportation crises (Jastrzębiec-Witowska 2023) or the "Eurovision controversy," where Ukrainian jurors gave no points to the Polish singer—a topic even referenced by the Polish president in a speech to Ukraine's parliament. Such media-driven, indirect contact with Ukrainians likely reinforced Polish prejudices (Wright et al. 1997). Some interviewees also suggested that this media focus might be linked to Poland's upcoming parliamentary elections.

The perceived deterioration in Poles' attitudes toward Ukrainians likely contributed to the fact that, while some interviewees described friendly or close relations with Poles, these accounts were far outnumbered by stories of conflicts, misunderstandings, or verbal attacks. Such incidents often involved accusations of living at Poland's expense, and even speaking

Ukrainian or Russian in public could provoke reactions. Female refugees from Wrocław, in particular, reported numerous instances of conflict, reflecting the city's heightened anti-Ukrainian sentiment after the outbreak of war (Scovil 2023):

— I was recently at a free lunch at school and one lady asked me: do you work? Yes. How long? Four hours. Why just four? Because I have a disability. Well, then we don't need such people here, she told me, you should go back to Ukraine (Wrocław, female refugees);
— On the streets and on the bus too, you hear it.
— And at the doctor's office. (…) Once I was in a queue in a thrift shop and I heard: why are you here, you are just living on welfare…. (…) In the tramway, I heard this more than once. Recently some older person started to insist: speak Polish. But the guy was simply chatting with someone, talking on the phone. But this person started to shout at this man (Wrocław, female refugees).

Although we came across a particularly large number of such stories in Wrocław, similar ones also appeared in other groups, including those composed of pre-war immigrants. In general, however, the situations described have happened in recent months. Some Ukrainians who came to Poland before the war even suggested that once the postwar "love" for Ukrainians had passed, Poles' attitude toward them became worse than ever. One female immigrant, who spent almost half of her life in Poland, said that it was after the war when she had encountered anti-Ukrainian comments from Poles for the first time.

The growing resentment of Poles toward Ukrainians also affected Ukrainian children. While some interviewees mentioned friendly welcomes from Polish peers, especially right after the war began, stories of unpleasant experiences in Polish schools were more common. A notable example came from Wrocław, where Polish children allegedly teased a Ukrainian classmate by singing pro-Putin songs, all under the teacher's watch. These issues compounded the cultural challenges and language barriers Ukrainian students faced when joining the Polish educational system (Bielecka-Prus 2024; Antoszewska et al. 2024).

It's worth noting that the Ukrainians we interviewed were aware of most of the negative beliefs about them held by Poles. For example, refugees were aware that they did not often fit into the widespread image of the war refugees held by many Poles, as some drove expensive cars or walked around in clothes from exclusive brands. They referred to this with resentment:

If I look like this because I take care of myself, and someone looks bad, it's not my problem (…) Should I look worse, if I'm Ukrainian? (…) Here in Poland people ask why Ukrainians have such big, expensive cars, how can we? Do they think we look like alcoholics or what? (…) I worked 13–14 hours in Ukraine, I had my business before the war, and I just put all my money into this business, and I left with such a car that I don't look like a refugee (Wrocław, female refugees).

Our interviewees often fitted this problem into the broader issue of negative and simplistic perceptions of Poles about "Easterners," which were also mentioned by pre-war immigrants (and analyzed in the previous studies: Fomina et al. 2013; Zarycki, 2017). In the former section, we showed how Ukrainians' opinions about Poland were structured by the general juxtaposition between the legalistic, slow West and the wild but dynamic East—Ukrainians saw a similar mechanism at work in Poles' thinking, except that the East was to be contrasted here with the West as the symbol of backwardness and lower standard of living. Poles seemed to assume that everything in Ukraine was inferior and less developed, and any deviation from this "regularity"—such as a Ukrainian woman dressed better than

them—would arouse disbelief, suspicion and even hostility. Respondents provided many examples of perceptions about Ukraine that seemed absurd to them but followed this same pattern:

Someone asked me every day at the university (laughs): do you have electricity? And do you have internet? Or do you have a subway in the capital? (…) Or, for example, a friend of mine was in Lviv before the war. For her, it was a great surprise that there were expensive cars there (laughs). Or that something was new, or good or even better (Warsaw, pre-war immigrants).

It's worth noting that in the context of Polish attitudes toward Ukrainians, the basic assumptions of Contact Theory (Allport 1954) appear to be ineffective. Many Poles perceive Ukrainians as having, or as deserving, a lower social status, and encounters with Ukrainians of equal or higher status often reinforce, rather than reduce, prejudices toward this group.

The prejudiced image of an "Easterner" often encompasses multiple nationalities, and pre-war immigrants recalled that Poles frequently asked them about life in Belarus or Moscow. While this changed somewhat with the outbreak of the war, the transformation was slow. Our interviewees generally viewed such clichés with amusement and sometimes pity. They didn't attribute bad intentions to Poles asking these questions but saw them as stemming from ignorance, or even something more—a lack of greater interest in all that lies beyond Polish eastern borders. They often linked this to a broader West-East tendency:

I lived with guys my age, 24–25 years old. I wouldn't say that they were uneducated. It's just that they were not curious what was going on over there. Just like in the US—they don't know where Poland or Ukraine is. (…) It's a West-East thing, the further towards the East, the more prevalent are such attitudes. That's the attitude of the French towards the Germans, the Germans towards the Poles, the Poles towards the Ukrainians. This is a line that goes through probably all of Europe. (…) Ukrainians have it with Moldova, for example (Warsaw, pre-war immigration).

Our interviewees were aware of various concerns many Poles associate with the presence of Ukrainians in Poland, such as strains on social security and healthcare, competition for jobs and housing, or rising crime. While they acknowledged some of these issues as real, they believed the benefits of their stay in Poland far outweighed them. Refugee women were also aware of the fears they sparked in some Polish women, who saw them as rivals in male-female relations. However, they generally took a reassuring tone, claiming that they rather dislike Polish men. Interestingly, this was supposed to be due to their "progressive," partnership-oriented attitude toward women, associated with Western customs. While some of our female interviewees spoke appreciatively of the fact that Polish men are more likely to take care of children than Ukrainian men, they were much less enthusiastic about their lack of gallantry or lower level of protectiveness toward women:

Well, listen, let me be honest: Ukrainian women are not fond of Poles. (…) Ukrainians are more generous. (…) In general, Poles treat women differently, not only Ukrainian women, but all women. In our country, for example, a man will always open the door for you, he will always give up his seat in transport, which Poles do not do at all. Which for me was a shock. (…) You treat a woman as a partner, and we require a man to take care of us (Warsaw, female refugees).

Relations with other Ukrainians living in Poland

Each of our respondents had some contact with other Ukrainians in Poland. How did these relationships develop? While many respondents shared examples of cooperation with their fellow countrymen, especially in organizing aid at the war's start, they also expressed frequent complaints. Ukrainians who had lived in Poland for many years, in particular, often spoke resentfully about the newcomers, a sentiment also noted in previous research (Brzozowska 2022). Although pre-war immigrants sympathized with those fleeing Russian bombs, they often felt that refugees were receiving everything "handed to them" and didn't appreciate it. Similar to many Poles (Babakova 2024), pre-war immigrants accused refugees of being ungrateful and demanding, and cited examples of Ukrainians unfairly taking advantage of Polish aid when they didn't need it.

Some respondents also mentioned another division within the Ukrainian community in Poland: between those who want to integrate into Polish society and those who do not. This divide was said to cut across the line between pre-war and post-war immigration:

> I wouldn't divide people into those who came intentionally here to stay, and those who came during the war. We can divide Ukrainian community into those willing to integrate and those unwilling. Just as it was 5–7 years ago, a person would work here and not know Polish and have no desire to integrate into Polish society (Wrocław, pre-war immigration).

Our interviewees generally assumed that most Ukrainians in Poland belong to the group that wants to integrate. But why do large numbers of Ukrainians isolate themselves from Polish society? Respondents often pointed to working conditions—those who regularly interacted with Poles in their jobs were compelled to learn the language and take steps toward integration. However, many Ukrainians found lower-paying jobs, where they mostly interacted with other Ukrainians or foreigners. Studies have shown that Ukrainians working primarily within their community tend to isolate socially, complicating integration and fostering a sense of separation from both Polish society and other Ukrainian groups (Górny et al., 2018). Some respondents noted that these jobs, often avoided by Poles, typically involve long hours, making integration during leisure time even harder.

Most interviewees expressed some dislike for those who did not integrate (a group they were unlikely to belong to, as they generally spoke some Polish), often accusing them of laziness. Furthermore, isolated Ukrainians were said to form additional divisions, maintaining contact primarily with people from their hometowns or regions in Ukraine. These subgroups not only avoided interaction but sometimes even displayed hostility toward one another:

> In Poland, Ukrainians also stick together in groups. For example, Ukrainians from Lviv, Ukrainians from Crimea, from Kharkiv, or other places also stick together in groups, and they don't like each other either (Warsaw, pre-war immigration).

The tendency to form subgroups based on regional or cultural backgrounds, as seen in the Ukrainian diaspora, mirrors broader patterns observed in other refugee communities globally (Fomina et al., 2013). Some of our respondents referred to the Belarusian community in Poland as a certain model for the Ukrainian community:

> Belarusians have a good community in Warsaw and Poland in general. (…) They do not have this urge to quarrel with each other in foreign countries. (…) They already know that they will not go home. 90% of them learn the language, start some business and so on (Warsaw, pre-war immigration).

The Ukrainian community thus appeared deeply divided in its own eyes, with these divisions fueling mutual prejudices between subgroups. The initial period of cooperation and shared goals at the start of the war was short-lived, as status differences quickly took precedence (Allport 1954)—between long-term labor migrants who had settled in Poland years earlier and refugees receiving state support, as well as between more integrated and less integrated members of the diaspora.

The Future of Ukrainians in Poland

We also asked our interviewees about the future: their own plans, the future of the Ukrainian community in Poland, and the anticipated development of Polish-Ukrainian relations. Most who arrived before the war intended to stay permanently, having made their decision years ago after careful consideration. Refugees, by contrast, often decided to come overnight and had spent less than two years in Poland. Their plans were shaped not only by the ongoing war but also by complex family situations (Isański and Nowak 2024). Some refugee women hoped to return to support relatives left behind (especially men unable to leave), while others planned to bring their families to Poland. For several, their children's prospects in Poland were a key factor. Success in the Polish labor market also influenced decisions. However, most refugees expressed uncertainty, feeling their futures were largely shaped by factors beyond their control.

Our respondents rarely considered moving to another country. Many felt that relocating to Poland had already been costly both financially and psychologically. While Western countries might offer broader opportunities, they were often seen as too different culturally. Poland, being more similar to Ukraine, made it easier for them to settle and feel comfortable. Some even predicted an influx of Ukrainians returning from the West, disillusioned with life in non-Slavic and less welcoming countries.

Respondents generally believed that most Ukrainian refugees would prefer to return home if the war ended. However, much depended on the war's duration. The longer it continued, the more likely refugees were to "put down roots" in their host country or face having nothing to return to. Research suggests that prolonged stays increase the likelihood of integration, potentially resulting in lasting demographic and economic changes in Polish society (Kubiciel-Lodzińska and Solga 2023).

There was a widespread belief among our interviewees that, despite certain burdens or problems, the presence of their compatriots in Poland is very beneficial for the country, especially in economic terms. Interestingly, Poles' opinions on that matter were much more divided. Less than six months after the war began—when attitudes toward Ukrainians were much more positive—a national survey found that most respondents doubted the long-term economic benefits of accepting refugees (46% vs. 38% positive answers) (Scovil 2022).

When asked whether Ukrainians in Poland should gain additional rights as a growing minority, most interviewees said no. Some, however, suggested limited voting rights for long-term residents and simplifying procedures like obtaining residence cards. Most opposed establishing Ukrainian schools, arguing it would hinder children's integration into Polish society. Similar concerns were raised about creating Ukrainian Orthodox churches,

clubs, or neighborhoods, as these could disrupt integration. Many felt that pushing too hard for equal status with Poles might backfire, reinforcing prejudices and straining relations rather than improving them, contrary to Contact Theory (Allport 1954).

Despite the post-war rapprochement between Poles and Ukrainians, interviewees were pessimistic about the future of Polish-Ukrainian relations. Economic rivalry, expected to intensify over time, was a key concern, both within Poland and between the two countries. This was already evident in issues like the grain crisis and protests by Polish truck drivers at the border, which were seen as early signs of tensions likely to escalate with Ukraine's eventual EU membership. Some respondents cited the Volyn massacre as a factor straining Polish-Ukrainian relations, frequently referenced by Polish politicians during the 2023 parliamentary election campaign (Babakova 2024). However, they generally believed progress on this issue would be relatively easy and were puzzled as to why it hadn't occurred. One respondent speculated that Polish politicians might have an interest in prolonging the issue.

Conclusions

The research presented in this article adds to the existing literature on the Ukrainian community in Poland, examining its experiences at a new stage of its history, which began after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The analysis reveals several widespread beliefs among Ukrainians in Poland, often tied to broader interpretive patterns that help them navigate life in a foreign country. For instance, respondents often explained differences between life in Poland and Ukraine by contrasting the secure, predictable, but bureaucratic and slow West (represented by Poland and the EU) with the less secure, unpredictable, but dynamic and bureaucracy-free East (represented by Ukraine and, to some extent, Belarus).

Respondents felt that after the initial surge of solidarity at the start of the war, Polish attitudes toward Ukrainians began to deteriorate. They often noted being viewed through a hurtful, simplistic lens as poorer, inferior "Easterners," with Poles showing little knowledge or interest in the real Ukraine. These findings highlight some limitations of Contact Theory, which suggests that prejudice can be reduced through intergroup contact under conditions like equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport 1954). This research shows that the issue of equal status is more complex. While Ukrainians' unequal status relative to locals did seem to fuel prejudice against Poles, testimonies from Ukrainians suggest that Poles were more prejudiced against Ukrainians when they perceived them as equal or superior in status. This is also supported by FGIs conducted among Poles (Scovil 2023).

In Polish-Ukrainian relations, cooperation, a sense of common goals, and empathy—triggered by the image of Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion—helped reduce intergroup prejudices (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). However, the impact of these factors has weakened over time, suggesting that reducing mutual prejudices requires a more solid foundation. Interviewees pointed to a lack of institutional support, citing statements by Polish politicians and media that reinforced prejudices against Ukrainians. These findings emphasize the need for tailored applications of Contact Theory, in line with Pettigrew et al. (2011), which advo-

cates for flexible, context-sensitive approaches. Further research could explore how sustainable intergroup cooperation and institutional support might address the unique challenges in Polish-Ukrainian relations, helping reduce prejudice as Contact Theory suggests.

Interestingly, respondents often spoke reluctantly about their compatriots in Poland, highlighting divisions within their community. Pre-war immigrants frequently criticized refugees as ungrateful and demanding. They also described a divide between Ukrainians who integrated into Polish society and those who did not, with further divisions based on their cities and regions of origin in Ukraine. Resentment toward the non-integrating group stemmed not only from differences in goals and lack of cooperation but also from their lower status in Polish society. It's important to note that most interviewees were integrated into Polish society, speaking at least some Polish (except for the Łowicz group), which likely influenced their views on those who had not integrated.

Pessimistic predictions about the future of Polish-Ukrainian relations were common among respondents. They cited economic rivalry, both within Poland and between the two countries, especially if Ukraine joined the EU, as a key concern. Most also believed that Ukrainians in Poland should not demand additional rights, as they already had many. Respondents seemed to recognize that emphasizing equal status with Poles could reinforce prejudice rather than reduce it, highlighting the complexity of the equal status issue, which goes beyond what Contact Theory's most popular version suggests.

Finally, it's important to note that the analyses presented here were based on data with significant limitations. Respondents were primarily selected based on their status as pre-war labor migrants or war refugees, without considering the regions of Ukraine they came from. Most spoke Polish, indicating a potentially above-average level of integration, which may have influenced their perspective. The study was exploratory and opens the door for further research. It would be particularly interesting to explore the recurring opposition between "West" and "East" in respondents' statements—how it shifts in different contexts and how it aligns with similar views held by Poles about Ukrainians. Additionally, examining how this interpretive pattern evolves over time could be valuable. One might assume that Poland has not always been seen as part of "the West" by Ukrainians, and as Ukraine moves closer to the EU, the East-West distinction may play a less decisive role in the perceptions of both nations.

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