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Refugees or Guests: Polish Rural and Small-Town Residents' Response to the Influx of War Refugees from Ukraine

Abstract: Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Poland experienced an unprecedented influx of war refugees, mainly women and children. This study analyses the attitudes of Polish non-metropolitan areas residents towards Ukrainian refugees in the first months of the conflict and examines how traditional patterns of rural hospitality intersect with infrastructural limitations. The analysis is based on recollections collected as part of the "My Local Community Towards Refugees" competition. The study uses qualitative textual analysis to explore personal accounts of aid, taking into account the changing dynamics of the relationship between refugees and host communities. While many villagers actively integrated refugees into their social networks, narratives of scepticism, resentment and nationalistic hostility also emerged, often shaped by economic concerns and historical grievances.

Keywords: Ukraine, refugees, rural areas, autobiographical method, memoirs

Introduction

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, which exacerbated the military conflict that had begun in 2014, the highest ever recorded number of refugees crossed the border into Poland, 87% of whom were women and children (*Obywatele Ukrainy w Polsce — aktualne dane migracyjne* 2023). The scale of Ukrainian migration to Poland increased unprecedently in the first weeks after the conflict's escalation, reaching its peak in the first week of March 2022 (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk 2022). Polish people responded to this with a philanthropic spurt, organising aid stations, transport, accommodation and financial assistance for those in need (Jarosz & Klaus 2023).

Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, it was Poland's biggest cities that witnessed the influx of an unprecedented number of immigrants; they were the first to have to deal with the disruption this involved (Firlit-Fesnak 2022; Halamska 2023). Some of the people fleeing the war were relocated but, for many, big cities turned out to be more attractive places to stay (Perchinig & Perumadan 2022). According to public statistics, at the end of the first quarter of 2023, 81% of Ukrainians under temporary protection in Poland lived in urban areas (Wysocka et al. 2023).

In this article, I seek to provide insights into the course of the human mobility pressures from the viewpoint of non-metropolitan areas, a perspective that is usually ignored or inadequately represented in public debates and academic discourse. The primary purpose

of my work is to recapture the Polish countryside inhabitants' attitudes towards refugees from Ukraine from the perspective of hospitality theory, as sharing their homes was one of the most significant experiences for Polish rural residents involved in providing support.

The perspective of the inhabitants of non-metropolitan areas seems interesting because of the cultural and socio-economic factors that condition the relationship between hosts and visitors differently than in cities. Namely, hospitality patterns in the countryside are shaped not only by cultural factors (Usatenko 2021), but also by infrastructure shortages, especially in terms of transport and public services and a relatively low level of trust with people outside the family and intimates. In the Polish countryside, these factors do not seem to be conducive to welcoming newcomers from outside the local community, ethnically and religiously different (although linguistically and culturally similar, which should be borne in mind). Despite this, some residents of rural Poland have taken an active role in helping war refugees, and it is their perspective that I would like to capture in this article.

Rural hospitality is defined as more traditional compared with modern patterns implemented in cities. It requires the host to make sacrifices (Skowrońska 2020): meeting all the needs of the guest (and beyond), taking responsibility for the course of the visit, the atmosphere, and the wellbeing of the meeting participants (Rancew-Sikora 2021). However, as Jacques Derrida notes, there is a tension between unconditional and conditional hospitality, leading to a paradox: in order to be a host, one must have power and a home, but this prevents them from being fully open to the guest (the other/stranger) (Derrida 2000). In rural Poland, conditional hospitality in its institutional dimension—understood as the state's migration policy and systemic support for refugees and asylum seekers—was almost non-existent during the period of the largest influx of people from Ukraine (Homel 2021; Jarosz & Klaus 2023). Most of the rules for coexisting with newcomers from Ukraine were therefore determined by cultural norms and socio-economic conditions.

The core of the cultural pattern of hospitality is common to all societies and is based on mutual respect between guest and host (Pitt-Rivers 2012). In the Judeo-Christian world, hospitality is seen as a duty and a virtue. Anthropological studies emphasise the special status of the guest as a semi-divine being, someone on the borderline between the sacred and the profane (Otto 1999; Pitt-Rivers 2012). This belief is also reflected in the founding myth of Poland—the legend of Piast Kołodziej (Lisiecki 2013). However, researchers point out that hospitality is closely linked to its opposite, hostility. Just as a stranger coming from outside the familiar world is ambivalent, so too is the relationship that is formed with them. It is based on hierarchy and thus legitimises hierarchical structures (Selwyn 2000). In the context of taking in refugees from Ukraine, this is confirmed by Kamil Luczaj's research conducted in cities in south-eastern Poland (Luczaj et al. 2024). The author noted that the host-guest relationship is fraught with tension and requires the guest to be submissive. It is, in fact, a power relationship in which guests remain dependent and subordinate to their hosts.

Researchers stress out that hospitality constitutes the subordination of the guest and gives the host the status of her or his patron (Pitt-Rivers 2012). This is particularly important in rural areas, where infrastructure deficiencies are compensated to some extent by the functioning of social networks (Perchinig & Perumadan 2022).

In the context analysed here, the relationship of hospitality is further complicated by the fact that the guests are also refugees; they represent the category of the 'unwanted' and 'uninvited', considered to be the cause (rather than a symptom) of the disintegration of world order (Bauman 2016). As Magdalena Środa writes, refugees "bring with them the distant sounds of war and the smell of plundered homes and burned villages, which reminds the locals […] essentially how illusory the safety of their homesteads really is" (Środa 2020: 97).

As research shows, rural areas are not an attractive place for migrants to settle due to an underdeveloped labour market (Vasyltsiv et al. 2020), poor access to public services (especially in terms of transport, childcare and access to medical services) (Janowska 2024; Lechowski & Jasion 2021; Rosner et al. 2017; Stanny et al. 2022; Stępniak et al. 2017) and relatively low human capital, translating into little community involvement in the integration of new residents (Glorius et al. 2021; González-Leonardo et al. 2024; Shcherbak et al. 2020). A combination of these circumstances causes the vast majority of refugees to settle in large cities (Wiśniewski et al. 2024), but it also shapes the way those who have chosen to live in rural areas function, as it influences patterns of rural hospitality. Limited access to food and beverage outlets, entertainment and public transport and lower wages compared to urban areas force hosts to make an extra effort to ensure the comfort of their guests, thus preserving traditional patterns.

Research over the years has shown that levels of trust in strangers and levels of openness to cooperation are lower in villages than in cities (Zaufanie Społeczne 2024), but correlate with higher social capital in social and neighbourly relationships (Bieńkuńska et al. 2020; *Gotowość Polaków Do Współpracy* 2018). At the same time, rural residents are more distrustful of strangers, public institutions and political parties than urban residents (*Zaufanie Społeczne* 2024). These conditions can be considered unfavourable from the point of view of people immigrating to the Polish countryside.

In this article, I would like to examine how restrictions on access to public services, patterns of hospitality and social trust affect how refugees are received and how they function in local communities. During the period under study, the impact of these factors was exacerbated by the lack of systemic solutions for the reception of refugees and the weakness of state institutions (Fuszara 2022; Jarosz & Klaus 2023; Kossowska et al. 2023). Furthermore, in rural areas, forms of hospitality remain strongly intertwined with infrastructural factors, which is rarely mentioned in the literature. My goal is also to examine how anti-Ukrainian attitudes influence the reception of refugees from Ukraine in local communities. During the period under study, these attitudes were rarely expressed, but they were still present in public discourse.

The article is structured as follows: after the introduction, an overview of the literature is presented, followed by a discussion of the methodology and material used to conduct the analysis. The section devoted to the presentation of the results is divided into three parts: 1) concerning the distinction between people fleeing Ukraine and refugees in general, 2) raising the issue of infrastructure deficiencies and their impact on the reception of refugees, 3) presenting anti-Ukrainian narratives and how they are perceived by the group under study.

Literature Review

Although large urban centres took in the greatest number of refugees from Ukraine, the inhabitants of smaller towns also felt the effects of the crisis caused by the escalation of the conflict, especially in the first months of the war, which is the period covered by the investigation. Few studies have been devoted to the reception of war refugees from Ukraine in rural areas in Europe. Most studies address this topic only to some extent: they either deal with the presence of migrants in general in rural areas (Baranauskienė et al. 2024; Shcherbak et al. 2020) or analyse the issue of the wave of refugees from Ukraine after the outbreak of war without taking account of a specifically rural perspective (Firlit-Fesnak 2022; Janowska 2024; Luczaj et al. 2024; Wiśniewski et al. 2024; Wnuk & Góralska 2024; Źróbek-Różańska 2024). Sociological studies on the reception of refugees from Ukraine in Poland do not take rural areas into account or mention them only marginally (Długosz & Izdebska-Długosz 20214; Luczaj et al. 2024; Scovil 2025). This is, of course, justified by the small percentage of Ukrainian refugees settling in rural areas.

Concerning the issue of villagers' attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees, it appears in the literature mainly as a factor in successful or unsuccessful integration (Glorius et al., 2021; Perchinig & Perumadan, 2022) or is examined in the context of social tensions caused by the influx of migrants (not specifically from Ukraine) (Bansak et al. 2016; Baranauskienė et al. 2024).

A significant part of the literature devoted to the influx of war refugees from Ukraine after the escalation in 2022 consists of empirical reports. This is particularly true of publications describing the influx of refugees in the first months of the full-scale conflict, which is the period covered by this article. These studies were conducted primarily in large cities or, if they included provincial residents, did not distinguish between rural and urban areas in their analysis (Baszczak et al. 2023; Dudek et al. 2023; Health of Refugees from Ukraine in Poland 2022: Household Survey and Behavioural Insights Research 2023; Helak 2022; Jarosz & Klaus 2023; Sierakowski & Sadura 2022; Sobierajski et al. 2022; Wysocka et al. 2023). Some reports focus on rural areas, but this is not the main subject of interest for the authors; rather, it is a context for the reflections presented. The report edited by Małgorzata Fuszara included a chapter devoted to the reception of refugees in one of the villages near Warsaw (Fuszara 2022). However, it is worth remembering that the characteristics of suburban areas are very different from those of rural areas (despite their diversity). Robert Staniszewski's report also takes into account the perspective of rural residents. When examining the social perception of refugees from Ukraine and migrants in general, he included the border area with Belarus in his study in order to compare the results obtained there with a nationwide sample (Staniszewski 2023). However, the geographical distinction here refers more to the issue of migrants crossing the Belarusian border than to the reception of refugees from Ukraine.

Research on the reception of refugees from Ukraine in rural areas and small towns in Poland was conducted by a team led by Maria Halamska (Halamska 2023). The research focused on the ability of rural and small-town communities in Poland to accept and integrate refugees from Ukraine, with particular emphasis on urban-rural municipalities as a case study. It examined the perspective of rural and small-town communities,

focusing on their resources, reactions and attitudes towards migrants. The authors take into account the voices of the residents of these areas, analysing both their involvement in providing assistance and the tensions, fears and social changes arising from the presence of refugees.

Materials and Methods

The analysis presented in this paper includes material collected in a memoir competition called „My Local Community Towards Refugees" organised by the Polish Academy of Sciences' Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, in association with the RURall Rural and Urban Research Foundation and the European Fund for the Development of Polish Villages (Wilczyńska 2023). The competition was announced in order to document the atmosphere of the first weeks after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and how the situation of the refugees and the people helping them changed over time. The call for contributions was addressed to residents of villages and small towns (population up to 20,000). The competition organisers did not restrict the authors' inventiveness in terms of the form (allowing memoirs, journals, blogs, diaries) or length of the texts. Submissions were accepted between 15 April 2022 and 15 November 2022. Fifteen diaries dedicated to helping Ukrainian refugees and fulfilling the formal requirements were submitted during this time.

Due to the specific nature of a data source such as memoirs, their usefulness in scientific analysis has often been questioned (Dekker 2002; Giza 1987; Kaleta 2018; Pawłowska 2009). Aware of these limitations (to name but a few: subjectivity, selectivity of presented phenomena, specific motives ac-companying people writing for the competition, unreliability and imperfection of human memory, author's self-creation and the close relationship between memoirs and literature, as well as the problem of representativeness of memoirs), I consider autobiographies to be a valuable source providing insight into the experience of individuals and enabling in-depth analysis of their perspective.

The memoir as an expression of a subjective assessment of reality applies to qualitative research. It allows for insight into the individual situation of the author. Unlike an interview, it gives the interviewee time to reflect and gain distance from the phenomena described, which is why its use in scientific analysis requires anthropological and humanistic methods (understood as different from positivist approaches) (Pawłowska 2009). The primary technique for working with autobiographies in the present study is critical reading and textual analysis (Ferrarotti 2022; Giza-Poleszczuk 1991). As complementary data, I use statistical data from surveys by the Centre for Public Opinion Research and the Central Statistical Office. I also draw abundantly on grey literature, especially reports written in the first months of the increased migration to Poland. These are based on ad hoc empirical studies and describe the first reactions of Poles to the supernormal influx of war refugees. Almost all of them describe these issues from the level of large urban centres, but some of the conclusions presented in them are of a general nature and can also be applied to local communities living in rural areas.

Results

Memoirs collected in the competition refer mainly to the reception phase of the refugee influx—the first stage of aid activity focused on rapid response and fulfilling refugees' basic needs (Jarosz & Klaus 2023). The diaries powerfully reflect the instability and uncertainty of the first days after the Russian invasion from the point of view of small communities. Authors were mainly people actively involved in helping refugees by offering accommodation, organising collections, employing Ukrainian women or helping them find jobs, and providing transport, which means they represented a narrow group of the most committed helpers. In the period covered by the competition diaries, at least half the Polish people declared that they were voluntarily helping refugees (Polacy Wobec Wojny Na Ukrainie 2023). In April 2022, this kind of activity was declared by as much as 63% of Poles, but in most cases, this support was limited to offering in-kind and financial aid, while activity requiring time and energy was undertaken by less than 10% of those declaring that they were helping Ukrainian refugees (Babińska et al. 2022; Polacy Wobec Uchodźców z Ukrainy 2022). 29% of all the memoirs' authors took refugees from Ukraine into their own homes or offered them some other premises they owned, whereas in April 2022, this kind of support was declared by 5% of Poles overall (Polacy Wobec Uchodźców z Ukrainy, 2022), and in August—by 3% of big-city residents (Sobierajski et al. 2022).

It is not surprising that those who entered the competition were people showing above-average commitment to charity work, since they were experiencing the effects of the large-scale migration more sharply than most Polish people. No doubt, they also felt a greater need to share their observations and experiences, which could often be very difficult and exceed the capability of (often inexperienced) volunteers (Paryente & Frei-Landau 2024). This means, however, that the material provided by the diaries collected is biased and requires very careful interpretation.

Guests and Refugees

Regardless of the level of authors' commitment, the memoirs have an overwhelmingly positive tone towards the Ukrainians. What seems intriguing is that in the diaries, refugees from Ukraine are most often referred to as guests. One might treat this term as a euphemism aimed at accustoming people to a situation that was rather difficult for both sides and underlining the relationship of equality between hosts and arrivals, which is hard to recognise in relations between a benefactor and a person accepting aid. As Hannah Arendt noted, refugees themselves do not like to be referred to in this way because of the connotations it carries (needing help, being a stranger, being a victim) (Arendt 2007). However, one of the diary authors pointed out that she didn't want to use the word "refugee" because it aroused negative emotions, described someone of inferior status, which was absolutely incompatible with her attitude towards people coming in from Ukraine:

> My younger son has a drum set and piano in his room, so we decided to give the first guests (yes, guests, not refugees, because despite the facts, after the stories of migration to European countries in previous years, it sounds a little… demeaning?) the older son's room" (Diary 8: 3).

Though noted on the margin of the diary's main theme, this remark is rich in content. It shows that the neutral—until recently—word for someone forced to leave their country has assumed a pejorative tint in Polish. And although the diaries about refugees from Ukraine appear to prove that such an attitude is alien to Polish society, the public discourse connected with the migration challenges in Europe and the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border shows quite clearly that not all refugees are equal.

The diarists' avoidance of the term "refugee" to denote the people leaving Ukraine suggests its negative connotation, even though only one author expressed this explicitly. However, it is no ordinary coincidence that this term is avoided and replaced with warmer euphemisms, especially since the diary authors are very much aware of the situation of the people they are helping—these people left their own country due to the war unfolding on its territory or for other political, economic or environmental reasons, which makes them refugees by definition.

Researchers of public discourse see a connection between the pejorative connotation of the term "refugee" and the anti-refugee communication strategies used in the media since 2015 (Cywiński et al. 2019; Tymińska 2022b). Back then, the figure of the refugee was exploited for political goals: by identifying migration from outside Europe with a threat to the social order, politicians aimed to consolidate their voters around the party that was supposed to provide protection against this alleged danger (Cywiński et al. 2019). Disseminated on a large scale, this narrative turned out to be extremely effective, significantly influencing public opinion in Poland. The percentage of people who were against taking in refugees from countries experiencing military operations increased from 21% in May 2015 ("Polacy Wobec Problemu Uchodźstwa" 2015) to 52% in December 2016 ("Stosunek Polaków Do Przyjmowania Uchodźców" 2017), and researchers estimate that in the course of two years (2015–2017) as many as 11 million Poles changed their views on the issue (Cywiński et al. 2019).

The trend described above does not seem to apply to refugees from Ukraine, for whom support has remained high since the beginning of the conflict with Russia (since the annexation of Crimea). In September 2015, those against taking in Ukrainians from areas experiencing the military conflict accounted for 28% of respondents (Stosunek Do Uchodźców w Krajach Grupy Wyszehradzkiej 2015), and in October 2017, 32% (Stosunek Do Przyjmowania Uchodźców 2017), i.e. the percentage did not rise significantly. These differences in the approach to refugees from Ukraine and those from other parts of the world are determined not only by the influence of opinions propagated in mass and social media, but also by what Polish people have experienced. In connection with the conflict in eastern Ukraine, Ukrainians have been coming to Poland in growing numbers since 2014, becoming a part of local communities here (Babińska et al. 2022). They are real people, familiar to the Poles from daily contacts, making it harder to attribute untrue traits to them (Cywiński et al. 2019; Tymińska 2022a) and neutralising the communication efforts that made people start understanding the word "refugee" differently. In the course of a few months, it had acquired a completely different meaning: instead of a victim, a person in need, it started meaning danger. Furthermore, it became a synonym for a non-white Muslim, a potential terrorist and a "bogus" asylum seeker (Klaus & Szulecka 2023). It, therefore, seemed hard and out of place to the authors of the diaries to use this word to denote people

fleeing the war in Ukraine. Particularly as they exhibit characteristics that translate into greater acceptance by host societies: they speak the language of their hosts (or are able to learn it quickly), they are mostly women with children who "deserve" asylum due to their situation, and they are also well-educated (Dudek et al. 2023) Christians. This adds up to a picture of the asylum seeker that is widely accepted within European societies (Bansak et al. 2016).

Integration into a Social Network

Researchers point out that the operation of informal social networks is a response of local communities to the low availability of public services and to labour-market deficits, which are significant disadvantages of rural areas in Poland. Informal support can be given by neighbours and family in terms of childcare, transport, job hunting, etc. Migrants in rural areas who lack access to this kind of network, therefore, usually face substantial barriers to adaptation (Perchinig & Perumadan 2022). Ukrainian refugees in 2022 were quickly integrated into these networks, as they often went directly into villagers' homes, as is required in terms of traditional hospitality patterns. Thus, refugees became part of the family, as the diarists repeatedly write. This made things more accessible at the initial stage, as hosts used the potential of their own networks to ensure that their guests' various needs were met, including finding work or independent accommodation (Halamska 2023).

The research conducted in Ząbki near Warsaw between May and October 2022 showed the importance of the local networks, which take advantage of two channels: a formal one that provides a framework for individual actions and an informal one that enables rapid responses, including taking "shortcuts" (Fuszara 2022). The accounts in the memoirs from the competition discussed here enable an insight mainly into the latter, informal circle. People who took refugees into their homes usually found out about them being in need from family and friends:

> The information about a family seeking shelter as they fled the terrifying hell now taking place on Ukrainian soil reached me during a phone call with my sister (Diary 1: 1).

or posted information about being able to help on social media:

> At the end of February, we decided to announce on social media that we had premises where we wanted to shelter a family fleeing the war. The response was enormous (Diary 3: 1).

The memoirs contain many examples of how the networks functioned, most often in the form of neighbourly and family assistance, activities undertaken by local non-governmental organisations (mainly Rural Housewives' Associations [1]), local leaders and parishes.

> I announced a collection point at my house, even though I wasn't there, because I was… still away on a winter holiday. A quick call to my close friend, manager of the Rural Housewives' Association in my [village of] Koteże. "Basiunia…," and I quickly recount everything. "Could they bring the donated items to you, and then I'll collect everything on Saturday morning?"

[1] Rural Housewives' Associations [Koła Gospodyń Wiejskich] are nongovernmental women's organisations operating in rural areas—one village may have one such association. Their tradition dates back to the late 19th century.

"I've got COVID and I'm quarantined".
"Great, literally. It can't be helped, let them leave everything under the fence. Maybe no one will steal it in just the one night" (Diary 5: 3–4).

The first cooking, 26 February 2022, Saturday, was spontaneous. One friend bought żurek soup mix, another sausages, another eggs, cream, and that's how we made 80 litres of żurek with extras (sausage and [hard-boiled] eggs). The guys set off with full thermos containers, bread, disposable tableware, and this was delivered to the border on the Ukrainian side already on Saturday.
And that's how the avalanche of kindness started. People brought products [and] money to the community house where the kitchen is and where we cooked the meals. Every second day two thermos containers of hot soup and thermos flasks with hot tea travelled to the border, for the people waiting to enter Poland by car and on foot (Diary 7: 1).

The inclusion of strangers in the structure of villagers' own social "bubble" is a testimony to the involvement not only of the authors themselves but also of the local communities. Considering the low level of social trust among the inhabitants of Polish villages (Burdyka 2020; Halamska 2008; Sztabiński & Sztabiński 2018) and the economic and political-social conditions of the influx of refugees to Poland (Halamska 2023) it must be emphasised that the actions described in the memoirs demonstrate the overcoming of existing barriers during the initial period of refugees' stay in rural areas.

[…] for the first time since time immemorial, we were together, it wasn't important who was who, who supported what political option. We simply discarded all that: mutual hostility, sometimes hatred, in favour of all that is good and noble, in favour of helping our brothers from across the eastern border (Diary 11: 3).

It should also be noted that the efficient operation of the network requires activity on the part of all its participants, indicating a widespread willingness to help refugees in the communities described by the diary authors. This means that not only the authors—who are more than willing to help—are positively disposed towards war refugees, but a large part of the local community as well, which has not always been the case. Efforts to help refugees from Ukraine, which involved a large part of the local communities, contributed to their integration:

Sightseeing in Wrocław one time, I learned that Wrocław's residents didn't integrate until the flood in the 1990s. We, too, consolidated in the face of the war in Ukraine. Old and young people, natives and more recent arrivals. The only thing that counted now was sensitivity. Solidarity with our neighbours from across the River Bug. [Previously] knowing one another by sight, we became close. Sometimes you might hear:
"I knew I'd meet you here".
"Me too".
We think well of one another. Rightly so, I think (Diary 13: 5).

This type of engagement resulted in the development of existing networks, the densification of connections and the establishment of new ones. However, it is not known whether and how long they remained in this form. The diaries suggest that in rural areas, the enthusiasm for helping waned as those in need moved away. According to them, many Ukrainian families decided to return to their country or to move to a larger centre offering better prospects for independence (easier availability of schools and daycare facilities, a larger and more diverse labour market). This moment usually served as a pretext to interrupt the narrative and end the diary. Some authors mentioned that they were still in contact with their former guests, but it is difficult to say whether this was the norm. The diaries say little about the mood of the hosts after the refugees left.

In Defence of the Guests

Unlike the picture outlined above, the influx of refugees from Ukraine was not met solely with a humanitarian response in Poland, but with nationalist hostility as well. It is true that Ukrainians are much more welcome than non-white immigrants in all of Europe (Balogun 2023; Costello & Foster 2022). However, in Poland, this is the effect not only of the racial and cultural closeness (Radzińska & Golińska 2024) of the receiving and immigrating nations but also of the long-lasting and noticeable presence of the Ukrainian diaspora. It needs to be remembered that migration from Ukraine to Poland intensified significantly in 2014 when the condition of the Ukrainian economy started deteriorating as a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea (Drbohlav & Jaroszewicz 2016). Since then, Ukrainians have been present, especially in big cities and in rural areas, offering employment in agriculture or industry (Górny & Śleszyński 2019). However, after the full-scale war broke out, anti-refugee/anti-Ukrainian slogans started appearing, disseminated especially on social media on pro-Russian profiles and those connected with extreme right-wing circles (Jakubowski & Tatar 2023; Tymińska et al. 2023).

Mentions of negative reactions to Ukrainian refugees are sporadic in the diaries, most often appearing as the opposite of the feelings of the diarists themselves, who think they are unacceptable and prove a lack of empathy.

> It's also terribly hurtful to hear that someone hates and dislikes another human being who is fleeing an area of danger in order to preserve their life and begin a new stage in it — who among us would want to be treated this way and be told to their face that they should go back where they came from? Anyone who uses such expressions represents the lowest of the low and should stop to think what they would do if they were in such a situation (Diary 1: 2).

It is worth pointing out that the opinions cited by the diary authors represent the full range of anti-refugee stereotypes and narratives observed by researchers studying hate speech on social media (Tymińska et al. 2023) or disinformation dissemination mechanisms (Pawela et al. 2022). As the authors of a report on anti-Ukrainian hate speech note, narratives unfavourable to refugees reference stereotypes and resentments that are rooted in the social imagination and are easy to activate in a situation of danger (Tymińska et al. 2023). In the case of anti-Ukrainian content, they mainly refer to historical issues (the most powerful symbols in this context are the massacres of Poles in Volhynia and the person of Stepan Bandera) and to socioeconomic factors (a sense of injustice related to the distribution of goods and access to public services). Both these belief complexes became a subject of observation for one of the competition prize-winners:

> Our conversations across the fence always touch on the issue of Ukrainians in the Łosice region, in Poland, and globally.
> "The things this government is doing, other countries say outright that they can take in a certain number so as not to make their own citizens poorer! And us, it's coming from our taxes! And Poland has so much debt already! Prices are terribly high, look at the prices of meat, milk, bread these days".
> "There are so many of them that they'll want to form a national minority. Why are the Poles committing so much, making such a big show of military aid!" "Older people are scared of Ukrainians, they remember themselves, or from their parents' stories, about Volhynia, about the UPA [Ukrainian Insurgent Army] gangs".
> "Slava Ukraini—that's the cry of the Banderites", a young boy who's been listening in adds. "And Poles associate Bandera with just one thing! Those genes will come to the fore again some day" (Diary 14: 32–33).

Another diary's author also remarked on the correlation between prejudice against Ukrainians and age: "the time when especially the older generation in the countryside, as I remember from my childhood, looked with hatred upon Ukrainians, has changed" (Diary 4: 18). Moreover, interestingly, the thoughts of older authors seem to confirm the existence of such a correlation, for example when they write:

> To conclude I'd like to write about one more thing, something that kept me from sleeping and forced me to think hard. The cause of my dilemma was the history […] of Polish-Ukrainian re-lations […] It's impossible not to mention, or to forget, the tragedy that happened in 1943 in Volhynia […] For a long time I was unable to explain to myself how that related to the current reality (Diary 11: 5).

> We also talked [with the woman refugee taken under our roof] about more serious topics, like, for example, when and how the Ukrainian state was established, the political system there in the past and now, political views, religion, the UPA and the brutal and dishonourable Volhynia massacre… (Diary 4: 14).

Of course the corpus of texts submitted in the competition is too small for any general conclusions to be formed on its basis. However, the above correlation is worth noting. Both authors resolved the moral dissonance arising from historical considerations by referring to the Christian duty to forgive and recognise the humanity in every other person. Another factor that helped to ease the conflict was the time that had passed since Operation Vistula and the Volhynia massacre.

The diary authors also encountered urban legends unfriendly towards the war refugees—Przemysław Sadura and Sławomir Sierakowski have called them "weed-like stories" (Sierakowski & Sadura 2022), i.e. narratives about unusual events, sensational in character and recounted as being true (Ostberg 2024). The means most often used to lend credibility to such accounts is to refer to someone the author knows:

> Here are a few real-life examples, my personal experiences and accounts from friends… A beauty salon: two ukrainian [sic!] women enter, all dolled up, with eyelashes almost covering their foreheads. They go up to an employee, say they want their nails done and they won't pay… Asked "Why?" they said they were from Ukraine and were entitled (Diary 14: 43).

The above excerpt is a comment from a local news service forum cited by the diary's author. The author distanced herself from similar opinions and wrote, "I haven't had this kind of experience with people from Ukraine so far" (Diary 14: 43), but she does not question the veracity of that story: "it doesn't surprise me at all that this kind of thing can happen… There was a period in our not-so-distant national history when our fellow Poles also migrated abroad in large numbers. Back then not all of them knew how to behave either" (Diary 14: 43).

The power of similar stories is based precisely on people believing them to be true and on making even a sceptical reader or listener believe that the events presented could have taken place. As a result, a sense of being threatened by the incoming war refugees might appear, and although researchers point out that this mainly applies to access to public services and financial benefits (Helak 2022; Sierakowski & Sadura 2022; Tymińska et al. 2023), sometimes people also fear that the refugees might commit crimes:

> However, not everyone trusts the Ukrainians, as I found out when I was in hospital. One of the patients was extremely surprised and even outraged that I'd been so naive and stupid as to leave a stranger in my home… and

a Ukrainian to boot—she could have robbed us of everything and fled into the unknown, they always do that—first they look you in the eye and win your trust and then they're gone… and in support of her suspicions, she kept up a barrage of examples confirming such occurrences (Diary 4: 18).

It appears that fears of a worsened quality of life in Poland caused by the arrival of a great number of war refugees are not so rare. Many of the diarists heard negative opinions on the Ukrainians, founded on concern about the Poles' own wellbeing.

That's when comments and [even] offensive remarks about the sense of helping Ukraine intensify. "Things are tough for us, and they're getting our money". "I wonder who'd help us if war broke out here?" "The Poles, as usual, are overdoing the aid effort". "Things will get even worse for us because of them". "Yeah, I have to go to a private specialist with my child, but a Ukrainian [mother] gets [a visit] for free". "They don't like anything; not only do they get stuff for free, they're picky about it. There's just no end to it, no end …" (Diary 5: 14).

[Quoting a comment posted on the forum of a local news service:] "Most of our society are blind, naive idiots. A Ukrainian has more privileges in Poland than a Pole. Instant access to doctors, community housing etc. almost on the spot, when a Pole has to wait many years. Food for free, money for free, medical care for free. They bear no costs, and politicians shift the payments onto us, onto citizens who are barely making ends meet already. It's a travesty!" (Diary 14: 43).

This corresponds with research findings that have shown a positive correlation between attitudes towards refugees from Ukraine and the resilience of host societies and individuals. Communities that are better equipped with resilience-enhancing mechanisms have a greater capacity to receive refugees and provide them with support (Kaim et al. 2024).

Interdisciplinary research conducted by Jowita Radzińska and Agnieszka Golińska (2024) also showed that Poles' hospitality is limited, among other things, by concerns about whether the resources that need to be shared with arrivals will be sufficient.

In the context of the infrastructural, institutional and social deficiencies of rural areas, it is therefore not surprising to see reluctance towards newcomers who will benefit from limited local resources.

The diary authors devoted much less attention to conspiracy theories concerning the escalation of the conflict and the hidden intentions of world leaders who were allegedly behind the launch of a migration wave in this part of Europe. Only one author encountered this kind of view, expressed by someone she knew:

The US is only taking in 100,000, other countries not many, and we're taking two million. They'll soon be a national minority with claims! They'll oust people from their jobs, and they have Banderite inclinations in their genes. Zelensky said that no one would choose their national heroes for them! He's a Jew, that explains everything! He wants the biggest possible number of Ukrainians to leave their country and make room for a new country, a new Jerusalem (Diary 14: 18–19).

The opinion quoted above invokes a conspiracy theory that was disseminated on social media, among other channels, and spoke of a new state of Israel being founded in Ukrainian territory. According to this theory, because of the danger from neighbouring countries, the Jews are allegedly looking for a new place where they might safely settle, and the war in Ukraine is meant to help them fulfil that goal (Pawela et al. 2022). It also draws on anti-Semitic resentments that have been alive in Polish society for centuries (Cała 2012; Leder 2014; Tokarska-Bakir 2008). The way conspiracy theories function in society is somewhat similar to the transmission of urban legends: they are based on anecdotal evidence and

invoke strong emotions like fear and a sense of threat (Pawela et al. 2022) while also being sensational in character, which makes for attractive narratives. However, surveys conducted shortly after the Russian invasion show that Poles find individual conspiracy theories unlikely (Babińska et al. 2022). These findings correspond to the frequency with which the problem of people believing in sensational theories appears in the diaries discussed here.

The above quotes emphatically show that the socio-economic and cultural conditions hindering the friendly reception of refugees, which were overcome in the first phase of the conflict under the influence of the overpowering emotions of shock, fear and compassion, have not been invalidated. In addition, the shared history not only unites the two nations in their struggle for independence but also evokes antagonisms exploited by the actions of Russian services on social media (Jakubowski & Tatar 2023). Resentments surfaced during the integration phase,[2] when the situation stabilised and the threat of the front moving far to the west diminished. Surveys show that support for welcoming refugees from Ukraine in Poland peaked in March 2022 at 94%, and by the end of 2024 had returned to pre-war levels of 53% (O Ukraińcach w Polsce i Wojnie w Ukrainie 2024). The authors of the memoirs distance themselves from anti-Ukrainian narratives.

Conclusion

Readiness to help, understanding for the refugees' needs and deep concern over the situation in which they found themselves seem to have been shared by most Poles—especially early on in the conflict, when the course it would take was hard to predict and fear for the future of the Ukrainian state and its citizens predominated. However, the inhabitants of non-metropolitan areas had a different set of institutional, human and infrastructural resources at their disposal than urban residents.

Rural residents drew a clear distinction between refugees in general and people leaving Ukraine out of fear of military action. This distinction is motivated by the negative connotations of the term "refugee," which has its roots in anti-refugee narratives that emerged in Poland and Europe after the human mobility pressures of 2015. The semantic substitution used by the diarists—"guest" instead of "refugee"—was intended to preserve the autonomy of Ukrainians as human individuals and give them a slightly "higher" status. It was also perhaps a strategy to counteract the existing aversion to foreigners, as the level of acceptance of immigrants seems to be higher in cities (Natale et al. 2019).

Due to infrastructure deficiencies in rural areas, the conditions for the integration of Ukrainians differed from those in cities. The use of social support networks was necessary here to organise sufficient assistance and stabilise everyday life in the new place of residence. Despite the commitment of those hosting refugees, many of them decided to leave the countryside due to the poor situation on the local labour market and the low quality of public services it offers (González-Leonardo et al. 2024). Therefore, we have no insight into how the departure changed the situation of those who helped them. Most

[2] Integration is the second stage in the response to the crisis after the reception phase, which assumes creating long-term solutions to include the new arrivals in social life and decision-making processes (Jarosz & Klaus 2023).

authors who shared their homes with refugees ended their stories shortly after their guests decided to move to large cities or return to Ukraine. The diarists claimed that interest in helping declined as the Ukrainians left. It can therefore be concluded that the support networks built in the face of sudden need may not have stood the test of time. Joint action on behalf of refugees from Ukraine had the advantage of integrating communities, but it is difficult to determine from the material studied whether this was a long-lasting effect. This also illustrates how socio-economic conditions influence patterns and the sustainability of assistance/hospitality (broadly understood as the hospitality of the Polish nation towards the Ukrainian nation).

Alongside reports on the course that the human mobility pressures took, the diaries also provide information on Polish people's attitudes towards refugees. And although the diarists themselves display a positive attitude toward the people coming in from Ukraine, they also record other outlooks. Moreover, between the lines they, too, betray symptoms of prejudice against migrants other than Ukrainians.

Discussion

Due to their specific nature, memories are suitable material for in-depth analysis, but they do not allow for the formulation of general theses. The main limitation of this study is the number of memories collected during the "My local community towards refugees" competition. However, it should be remembered that the value of qualitative research lies in the possibility of gaining a deeper insight into the issue under study. The presented results can therefore serve as an illustration or counterpoint to quantitative research.

The collected texts were written in response to the competition announcement, which raises some concerns about the sincerity of the authors and their motivations. Taking into account the limitations of this type of material, it should be assumed that the authors present their point of view rather than an objective truth about the events described. Therefore, the subject of the analysis is not the facts themselves, but their interpretation by the people who decided to take part in the memoir competition. Furthermore, the competition was aimed at rural residents, usually those who provided help. The responses received are therefore a one-sided account of events. They do not provide access to the point of view of the people who benefited from this support. One can only assume that the guests interpreted the situations presented in the memoirs differently from the hosts, the authors of the accounts.

Another significant limitation of this study is the time period under investigation, i.e., the first months after the escalation of the conflict. The authors primarily expressed their own emotions triggered by the outbreak of war and anticipated the consequences it would have on their lives. They saw the influx of refugees in terms of a threat, sensing that the coming crisis might be difficult to manage. Psychological research indicates that a sense of fear is an essential motivation to engage in helping those in need and, in the case of Ukrainian refugees coming to Poland, was further influenced by a sense of common fate, the similar history of both countries' relations with Russia and the anticipatory threat of a Russian attack (Kossowska et al. 2023). These emotions must have influenced the interpretation of events and how they were perceived.

The reflections presented in this study may serve as a starting point for further research on the reception of refugees from Ukraine in rural areas in Poland. It might be interesting not only to compare the conditions and methods of receiving war refugees in rural areas and cities, but also to examine how people who left Ukraine after the escalation of the conflict and decided to settle in rural areas function in comparison to those who went to larger cities.

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