

Anti-migrant rhetoric dominates politics in Poland ahead of October vote

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Politicians from across the political spectrum engage in anti-migrant language ahead of October 15 polls.

Warsaw, Poland – Dressed in a sharp suit, Rafal Pankowski, the amicable head of Never Again, a renowned Polish anti-racism organisation, delicately sips an Arabic coffee in the bustling centre of Poland’s capital, Warsaw.

The city is gripped in political fervour as Poland heads into a general election on October 15. Colourful political posters line the streets, and campaigners thrust leaflets at pedestrians enjoying the last throws of warm weather.

There is “no doubt” that migration is the topic dominating the election campaigns, Pankowski says firmly.

The right-wing populist government elected to power in the 2015 elections exploited the refugee crises to promote a relentless campaign of “xenophobic propaganda” that painted non-European refugees and migrants, especially from the Middle East, as “terrorists”, Pankowski had previously told Al Jazeera.

Recalling his earlier statement, he says it comes as little surprise that the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party and the far-right Confederation alliance have continued to push this narrative during the current election campaign to garner support among their existing voter base.

He says the conversation around migration in Poland has changed dramatically in the past three years as two different refugee crises have erupted on the country’s western borders.

One of them began in October 2021 and has seen thousands of refugees and migrants, mainly from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, attempt the crossing from Belarus while the other began in February 2022 when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, sending millions of Ukrainian refugees into Poland.

The first crisis was seized upon by right-wing parties, which incorporated it into an existing propaganda narrative aimed at generating fear over an “invasion” of non-Europeans.

When the second refugee crisis arose, there simply was not the same backlash. In contrast, support for Ukrainian refugees was felt across the political spectrum.

However, Pankowski has been surprised by a shift in rhetoric over recent months among the right-wing parties to include anti-Ukrainian sentiments.

In a further unexpected twist, other parties outside the right-wing political spheres have tried to “outdo each other”, Pankowski says, by supporting a firm response to non-European refugees and migrants entering the country.

A film sparks a heated political debate over migration

Rafal Wasowicz, a stocky, straight-talking office worker, stands outside an elegant art house cinema.

He has come to see the *Green Border*, a film directed by veteran Polish filmmaker Agnieszka Holland about the Poland-Belarus border crisis, which has sparked the ire of Poland’s right-wing parties, with Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro comparing the film to Nazi propaganda.

“I think this film shows the reality more than the government,” Wasowicz says. “They say we are at war, but the government does not see the migrants as people.”

The film focuses on a family from Syria and a woman from Afghanistan who are aggressively pushed back and forth by border guards and soldiers as local activists risk being sent to jail for trying to bring them to safety.

Rights abuses have long been reported on both sides of the border as Polish border guards and police routinely push those seeking asylum in the European Union back into Belarus, according to civil society groups and grassroots organisations working on the border.

Al Jazeera has spoken to several people who have tried the crossing since 2021 and have reported multiple human rights violations against them by both Polish and Belarusian authorities.

The constant back and forth in the often damp, freezing border forests have led to at least 37 deaths since October 2021, according to activists, but the true toll is feared to be far higher.

The government, in turn, has positioned itself as protecting the country from a hybrid war being waged by Belarus.

Belarusian authorities, mainly via tourist agencies in the Middle East, have been found to have promoted misinformation campaigns offering a route into the EU via Belarus.

This was viewed by Poland and the EU as a strategy by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, the closest ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, to destabilise the region.

Poland’s government plans to run adverts to defend its treatment of migrants and refugees crossing from Belarus before screenings of *Green Border*.

Deputy Interior Minister Blazej Pobozy, who describes the film as “disgusting slander”, told reporters: “Our ads show the context of the hybrid [border] operation and the course of this operation and what solutions we have introduced to secure the safety of Polish women and men.”

Anti-migrant and -refugee rhetoric across the political spectrum

It is not just the right-wing parties stoking fears of mass migration from non-European, primarily Muslim countries.

Former European Council President Donald Tusk, leader of the centrist opposition Civic Coalition, slammed the current government in July for involvement in an EU migration plan that he says would “allow even more people to come from countries like Saudi Arabia, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Nigeria and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan”.

In a series of social media videos posted in July in connection with unrest in France triggered by the police killing of a 17-year-old teenager of Algerian and Moroccan descent during a traffic stop, Tusk concludes: “Poles must regain control over this country and its borders.”

In an unexpected twist, the governing party, which had long promoted its tough migration policies, was recently embroiled in a scandal in which its operatives in consulates, especially in Africa and Asia, are reported to have handed out Polish visas for bribes.

The Civic Coalition seized the opportunity to discredit the ruling party, with Tusk describing it as “the biggest scandal of the 21st century in Poland”.

A rise in anti-Ukrainian sentiment

Pankowski says the far right is now promoting a fear that the millions of Ukrainian refugees in the country are threatening a Polish “mono-ethnic state”.

“For the first time in a very long time, Poland has become a country of immigration rather than emigration,” he says, which represents a seismic demographic change in a country where 10 years ago, just 0.3 percent of the country was born abroad.



Rafal Pankowski in Warsaw [Nils Adler/Al Jazeera]

Now, the hashtag with the slogan “Stop the Ukrainisation of Poland”, promoted by the Confederation alliance, has been trending on social media, and Pankowski’s organisation has received almost daily reports of hate speech directed at Ukrainian children in schools.

He says a racist trope centring around groups of non-European male refugees and migrants being a sexual threat to Polish women has been reversed.

With martial law in place in Ukraine, men 18 to 60 years old may not leave the country, which means almost all Ukrainian refugees are women and children.

“The stereotype is that Ukrainian women are out there to steal your husband,” Pankowski says.

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