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Unpacking the paradoxes of Poland's migration debate

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With roughly a million Ukrainian refugees now residing in Poland and fears about hybrid war and border security unabated, discussions about migration have become entangled with a range of domestic and foreign policy issues, from a rise in hate crimes to gaps in the labor market and support for Ukraine. Polish officials, meanwhile, are sticking to tough policies and even harsher rhetoric, even as Ukrainians give Poland an economic boost and continue to contain Russia on the battlefield next door. For The Beet, journalist and Turan Tales founder **Agnieszka Pikulicka** unpacks Poland's roiling migration debate.

Thousands of people marching through the streets and chanting anti-migrant slogans is nothing new in Poland. Shouting racist slurs has become a tradition for the crowds at Warsaw's November Independence March, an annual event branded by its far-right organizers as "the biggest patriotic demonstration in Europe."

But in late 2025, something feels different. Anti-migrant marches swept across the country over the summer. And according to the Never Again Association, a Polish anti-racist group, incidents of verbal and physical violence targeting migrants have been on the rise. Polish police recorded 543 hate-motivated crimes in the first seven months of this year alone, a 41-percent jump compared to the same period in 2024.

"We see a clear increase in the number of racist and xenophobic attacks in Poland. For months, we have been receiving reports every day from people who were subject to discrimination or violence," says Never Again co-founder **Rafał Pankowski**. "In large part, it is a result of a xenophobic political atmosphere, and it mostly affects people from Ukraine."

With Russia's full-scale invasion having sent millions of Ukrainian refugees fleeing across the border, debates about migration are no longer theoretical for Poland. While the country registered just 112,800 permanent foreign residents from 2001 to 2010, according to the national census, the number of immigrants in Poland is now estimated to be over 2.5 million.

Politicians across the political spectrum now support tough migration policies and espouse hostile rhetoric, and popular attitudes towards foreigners are complex and contradictory. At the same time,

an honest debate about Poland's need for migrants, their integration, and how to ensure human rights and dignity is badly needed — and long overdue.

'God bless Poland'

In early September, in the north-eastern city of Białystok, a judge from the nearby town of Hajnówka delivered a verdict the human rights community had long awaited. He found five activists who had provided humanitarian aid to migrants not guilty of enabling their illegal stay in Poland "for financial or personal gain."

The case began in March 2022, when Polish border guards arrested four activists caught with an Iraqi family of nine and an Egyptian man in their cars. Prosecutors in Hajnówka later charged one more person who had provided the migrants with food, dry clothing, and shelter after they crossed the Polish border unlawfully. The media dubbed the defendants the "Hajnówka Five."

At the time, the border crisis on the European Union's easternmost edge was at its peak. Tens of thousands of migrants irregularly crossed into Poland from neighboring Belarus, en route to Europe in search of a better life. The journey was still relatively easy then, as the massive fence topped with barbed wire had yet to be built along the country's borders with Belarus and Russia.

The prosecution called for 16 months of imprisonment for each of the Hajnówka Five. But as Judge **Adam Rodakowski** stated in his concluding remarks: "The more the prosecutor looked for evidence in this case, the less evidence there was." (The "personal benefit," he explained, must be for the person providing the aid — not the one crossing the border.) For some, the acquittal marked the triumph of humanity over heartless bureaucracy. It implicitly delivered a message that it's not illegal to be human. Yet the verdict has been bittersweet at best.

Many now look back at 2022 with nostalgia, remembering a time when empathy and solidarity were the emotions of the moment. While only a handful of activists like the Hajnówka Five risked infiltrating the Białowieża Forest under cover of darkness, often in snow, to save the lives of African and Middle Eastern migrants, a few hundred kilometers to the south, Poland was welcoming thousands of Ukrainians with open arms.

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Poles did their utmost to support their neighbors fleeing war. It was like a scene from some Hollywood disaster movie — heartfelt and dramatic. As millions of Ukrainians fled their homes, many carrying little more than the clothes on their backs, Polish border guards allowed refugees to enter the E.U. without passports. On the other side of the border, hundreds of Poles awaited them, offering transport and shelter.

In a collective act of selfless solidarity, thousands of Ukrainians were invited to stay with Polish hosts for days, weeks, and months, even before the authorities announced government support for families hosting refugees. In public debate, few voices opposed the open-arms policy toward Ukraine. From the president to ordinary citizens, all hands were on deck.

“I was shocked to see a city so hospitable. You can feel a lot of kindness. I’ve never experienced that before. You enter a shop, and everyone smiles at you. I’m not used to that,” 37-year-old **Alona**, who came to Poland with her daughter, told me in Kraków as I covered the crisis in 2022.

Christina, her nine-year-old daughter, recalled a man on the street giving them a 100-złoty bill after he saw them trying to exchange Ukrainian hryvnias, then at a record low. Alona said the gesture made her cry. “God bless Poland,” she told me.

‘The human rights perspective disappeared’

Those days in winter and spring 2022 were filled with adrenaline as a nation once widely viewed as racist, xenophobic, and self-centered — partly due to the violence and pushbacks against the “other refugees” crossing in from Belarus — undertook a mass humanitarian mobilization. For many Poles, the experience filled them with a sense of pride and a job well done, of having made a noble choice in difficult times and having landed on the right side of history.

Much has changed since the spring of 2022; today’s Poland is nearly unrecognizable. The acquittal of the Hajnówka Five came despite the efforts of the prosecution and backlash from right-wing groups. Two weeks earlier, President **Karol Nawrocki** — the right-wing former head of Poland’s Institute for National Remembrance, elected in June 2025 — vetoed a bill on extending assistance for Ukrainian refugees. He argued that only those Ukrainians who work and pay taxes should receive child payments.

In response, the more liberal coalition government under Prime Minister **Donald Tusk** developed a new bill that extended support for Ukrainian refugees until March 2026, but restricted access to certain social benefits and free healthcare services. After signing the amendments into law in November, Nawrocki declared it was the “last time” he would approve such measures — a move at odds with the Council of the European Union’s decision to prolong temporary protection for Ukrainian war refugees until March 2027. The E.U. policy grants access to the job market, education, and social services inside the bloc to those who fled Russia’s assault.

Poland’s humanitarian, economic, and military aid to Ukraine totaled 25 billion euros (about $29 billion) in 2022–2023, according to a government report published in October. But domestic political shifts have since led to a reduction in military aid, even as Poland remains the main hub for Western weapons deliveries.

On the diplomatic front, Warsaw has played only a small role in the Russia–Ukraine negotiations, with Tusk ruling out sending peacekeepers to Ukraine and, more recently, rejecting the **Trump** administration’s controversial 28-point peace plan as a threat to European security. (Meanwhile, Poland’s priority in its engagement with Kyiv remains matters relating to the Volhynia massacres — the mass killings of ethnic Poles by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army from 1943 to 1945.)

With the issue of support for Ukraine now inextricably linked to internal political debates, Poland’s ruling coalition has not only allowed far-right forces to set the tone but also adopted anti-migrant rhetoric and policies. In February, the government announced that Poland would not accept any migrants as part of the E.U. relocation plan (officially known as the Pact on Migration and Asylum).

It then suspended the right to asylum at the border with Belarus altogether, allegedly in response to human traffickers and dishonest migrants abusing the procedure.

In July, Poland temporarily reinstated passport checks on its borders with Germany and Lithuania to limit a supposed influx of "illegal migrants." This came after unsubstantiated reports of German authorities returning migrants to Poland prompted right-wing groups to send "citizen patrols" to monitor the border for irregular crossings from the west. (Tusk himself called for the vigilantes to stand down, chiding them for "paralyzing" the work of border guards.)

"It is an open secret that Prime Minister Donald Tusk shapes his policies not based on convictions or values but on opinion polls. Civic Platform forfeited the field to the far-right by adopting their rhetoric in the hope of increased public support. But research shows that such a strategy only strengthens the right," says **Olena Babakova**, a migration expert at Vistula University and columnist for the left-wing magazine Krytyka Polityczna.

"Instead of focusing on systemic reforms and ambitious social projects, politicians prefer to focus on migration. Even the left has little to offer beyond the argument that migration is good for the economy," she continues. "The human rights perspective disappeared somewhere in the Białowieża Forest — and we won't recover it."

The economics of integration

The left has a point when it comes to the economy. According to a joint study by Deloitte and the U.N. refugee agency, Ukrainian refugees have been an economic boon, contributing 2.7 percent to Poland's GDP last year and 2.3 percent in 2023. As of early 2024, between 225,000 and 350,000 Ukrainian refugees were working in Poland, with around 80 percent of refugee households deriving income from employment.

Meanwhile, demand for labor in Poland is growing. The Polish Economic Institute predicts that by 2035, the country's workforce could shrink by 12.6 percent — the equivalent of 2.1 million people — due to demographic decline. Several sectors are already facing significant labor gaps. This summer, for example, Polish farmers complained about a lack of workers to pick strawberries and other crops during the harvest season. Some farmers even offered increased wages, free accommodations, and daily payouts, but there were few takers, Polish media reported.

"The government has turned off the visa tap but thrown the baby out with the bathwater. It's become a regular problem, for example, that Belarusians accepted into medical school — who paid for their studies and want to be doctors in Poland, where there is a shortage — can't get visas," Babakova says.

"If a migrant who was supposed to pick carrots doesn't show up, that's half the problem. But if a chief web developer doesn't show up, Poland has a serious issue," she underscores. "People are currently waiting almost a year for a temporary residence permit, and in some regions, it takes almost two."

There's an argument to be made for controlling migration flows. Having a limited but well-integrated immigrant population, which avoids segregation, would be a desired outcome of a well-thought-out migration policy. However, integration doesn't appear to be a priority for the Polish authorities.

The creation of "integration centers" for foreigners, an E.U.-funded initiative the governing coalition inherited from the previous Law and Justice government, was meant to be a keystone of support for immigrants, offering language courses, counseling, and help in adapting to life in Poland. But the idea was met with resistance from far-right groups, who fueled fears that the centers would encourage irregular migration and crime. As a result, several regions opted out. In June, Polish media reported that out of 49 planned centers, only six agreements had been signed.

'Growing hatred and disinformation'

European politics has shifted to the right in recent years, and Poland's mainstream parties have followed suit. However, there is something deeper and specifically local about the country's resistance to immigration.

Even before Poland joined the E.U. in 2004, it was a country of emigrants. By 2013, according to Statistics Poland, 2.2 million Poles lived abroad. Every family knew someone working in the United Kingdom, Germany, or Norway, and it was generally accepted that living abroad equaled better pay and opportunities.

Poland's rapid economic development over the ensuing decade took many by surprise. Living standards improved significantly, with real GDP per capita rising by 42 percent, from around $12,600 in 2015 to nearly $18,000 in 2024. In that time, Poland went from a source of migrants — many of whom worked low-skill jobs in western Europe — to a country dependent on foreign workers for its survival.

However, Polish identity and attitudes have not changed accordingly. Poles do not feel wealthy, and many see Ukrainian refugees and other migrants as a threat or as competition for limited resources. (The heated debate about Ukrainians' access to child payments, which ultimately became contingent on employment, is a case in point.) According to **Mikołaj Winiewski** from the Center for Research on Prejudice at the University of Warsaw, there are two dimensions to the perceived threat from outsiders. "One is the 'realistic' dimension: people fear that migrants will take our jobs or bring crime and terrorists. These themes are easily exploited," he explains. "The other is the 'symbolic' threat, which suggests that if migrants arrive, the Polish language, our culture, and way of life will be under threat."

The slogan "Stop the Ukrainization of Poland" has indeed become a symbol of the nationalist right's fight to protect the Polish way of life. But according to polls from the Warsaw-based Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS), attitudes toward migrant workers have improved. While in 1992, 42 percent of Poles thought that outsiders should not be able to work in Poland, this figure has since fallen to 4 percent. Today, 58 percent of Poles believe immigrants should be able to work in any profession of their choice.

"It is partially due to increased contact with foreigners, especially in big cities. People order food deliveries, use taxis, and interact with migrants daily, not only Ukrainians," Winiewski explains. "Following the presidential election earlier this year, I analyzed the data and found that candidates using anti-Ukrainian slogans received far fewer votes in areas with many Ukrainians," he adds.

For **Daria Shevchuk**, a 36-year-old teacher's assistant from Ukraine who moved to Poland with her two children when the war broke out, the increasingly hostile political environment is a growing concern — although she says she has good relations with people in her social circles. "I haven't faced any xenophobic attacks myself. But once a drunk man shouted at my daughter and her friend to f**k off. I think he had heard them speaking Russian," she recalls. "It was very painful for me, and I told her to ignore such comments when I'm not around and to keep quiet or only speak Polish."

"I worry about the lack of reaction from the government to the growing hatred and disinformation," Shevchuk adds.

The way Pankowski sees it, however, inflammatory narratives and even hate speech are becoming normalized due to official rhetoric. "Various types of discourse, specifically hate speech, which is part of everyday life today, used to be unthinkable," he says. "Politicians use it openly in a very cynical way. Racism and hostility toward others used to be less overt, but we've seen a shift in the social norm."

With Tusk's center-right Civic Coalition taking a hard line on asylum seekers and the right-wing opposition pushing for even stricter policies, it is unlikely that Poland will see an honest debate about migration anytime soon. And given the demands of the labor market, the country will likely continue to draw migrant workers, if only in a roundabout way. Babakova predicts that laborers may try to obtain Schengen visas from other countries, like new members Bulgaria and Romania, before making their way to Poland for work. This wouldn't be entirely illegal, she warns, and it would leave them without key protections. Meanwhile, debates about employment conditions and labor rights have long been pushed aside.

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