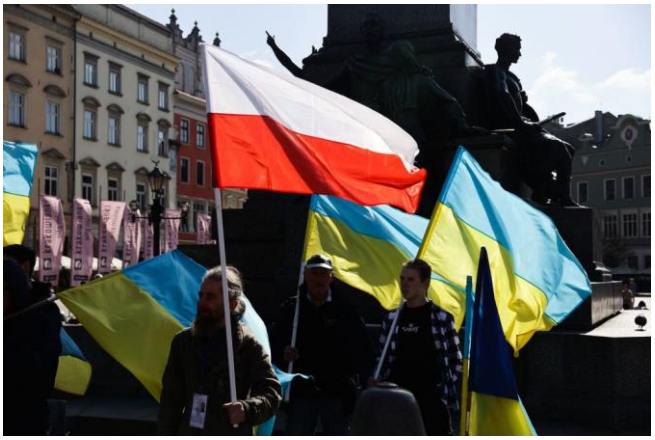
'Their flags are getting on our nerves.' Have Poles fallen out of love with Ukrainians?

Jun 06, 2025
By Svyatoslav Khomenko.

Three years on from the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian refugees in Poland say they no longer feel so welcome. BBC Russian asks Poles and Ukrainians what's changed.

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there was a wave of sympathy and affection for Ukrainians in Poland and the country welcomed nearly a million Ukrainian refugees. But three years on, both opinion polls and anecdotal evidence show that attitudes have hardened. What's going on and what does it mean for the future?

"My 10-year-old daughter often tells me she wants to be Polish. Why? Because she feels inferior," says Tatyana (not her real name).



Before the full-scale war began, Tatyana worked as a child psychologist in a regional town in Ukraine. In the spring of 2022, she moved to Warsaw with her daughter Maryana, who was six at the time. The girl started school and soon became the target of bullying by her classmates. Tatyana only recently managed to resolve the issue, and she admits she's not proud of the way she had to do it.

"To be honest, adult Ukrainians in Poland also feel inferior," she says. " At every turn we hear 'Wypierdalaj' ['Get the f*** out'], we're constantly being told to go to the front — regardless of our gender or age. Situations like this happen all the time, and in those moments you just freeze. You don't know what to do. You're not at home; you're not in your own country. And in those moments, you really do feel inferior."

Almost every Ukrainian we speak to on the streets of Warsaw — whether a taxi driver or hotel cleaner, journalist or waitress — agrees that over the past year or two, Polish attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees have noticeably worsened.

And it's not just about offensive comments on the streets, complaints that people shouldn't speak Ukrainian in Poland, or jokes like "You park like a Ukrainian".

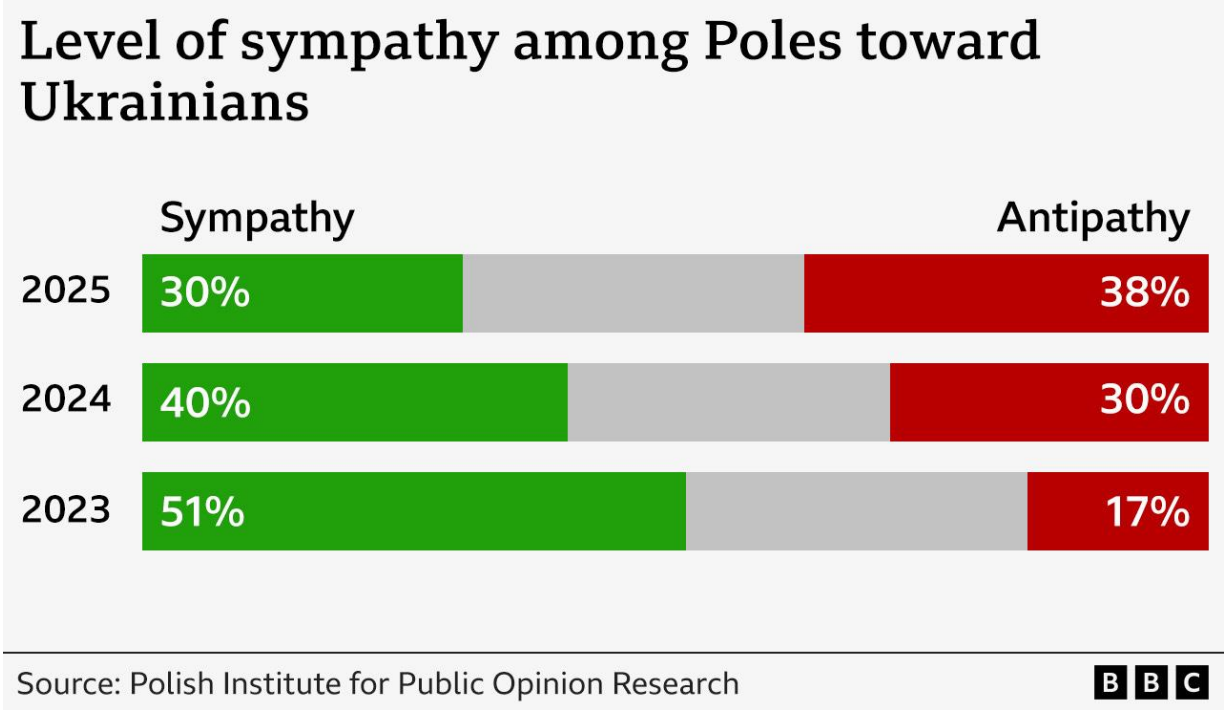
Journalist and Vistula University lecturer Olena Babakova, has lived in Warsaw for 16 years. She says Ukrainians in Poland are now encountering situations like Polish landlords refusing to rent to them — a particularly painful issue for single mothers, who make up a significant portion of the Ukrainian community in Poland.

The bullying of Ukrainian children in Polish schools has now become a very real problem. Tatyana, the child psychologist now works mainly with Ukrainian children in Warsaw, and she says that, based on her experience, about two out of three young Ukrainians in Polish schools experience bullying of some degree.

"A separate problem is that people very rarely want to talk about this kind of experience out loud, let alone on camera. Some fear it could negatively affect their legal status in Poland. Others rationalize this fear: sure, the situation is upsetting, and it shouldn't be this way — but what can we do, we're just guests here," Babakova explains.

It's all a stark contrast to three years ago when millions of Ukrainians fleeing the full-scale Russian invasion of their country found not just refuge, but genuine sympathy and support in Poland.

According to various sources, between 50% and 70% of Polish citizens were involved in helping Ukrainians in some way. Across the country, spontaneous humanitarian aid centres sprang up, and tens of thousands of Poles opened their homes and flats to Ukrainian refugees.



The scale of the spontaneously formed support movement surprised even the Poles themselves — not to mention Western observers. At the time, U.S. Ambassador to Warsaw Mark Brzezinski said that the Polish public's response to Ukrainian refugees demonstrated that Poland was a true humanitarian superpower.

A public opinion poll conducted by the Warsaw-based CBOS center in early 2023 showed that 51 per cent of Poles expressed sympathy for Ukrainians, while only 17 per cent reported feeling antipathy toward them.

"It was unrealistic to expect that such a state of overwhelming positive emotion — sparked by the shock of Russian aggression and the full-scale war against Ukraine — could last for years," says Łukasz Adamski, deputy director of the Mieroszewski Center in Warsaw. "It could last a few weeks, at most a few months. But then the processes inherent to human nature take over, and the situation reverts to a more rational approach."

A CBOS survey from February 2025 shows that the number of Poles openly expressing antipathy to Ukrainians has now reached 38 per cent — for the first time in many years, overtaking the 30 per cent of Poles who still say they sympathise with the new arrivals.

Previously, the average Pole had to go to the West to see people living a wealthy lifestyle. Now, they don't have to go anywhere — such people have come here. And the worst part is, they came from Ukraine.

Fear and fighting for opportunities

Professor Piotr Długosz, a sociologist from the UKEN University in Kraków, says the main reason for the shift in attitudes is the fact that Poles and Ukrainians now find themselves competing for the same resources.

Ukrainian refugees are often willing to work for lower wages, which creates pressure on the labour market in some sectors of the economy. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of new residents in Poland has driven up rental prices — especially in major cities where many refugees have settled. Poland's healthcare and education systems, which were already far from perfect, also had to accommodate hundreds of thousands of newcomers — and this has affected the quality of services, something Polish citizens have noticed.

Many Poles now speak of "war fatigue," even though their country is involved only indirectly. Goods are becoming more expensive, utility rates are rising — and politicians often explain this by citing the war in Ukraine. In many cases, they are not wrong.

The media warn that Poland could be the next target of Russian aggression, and that the army must therefore expand and modernize. There is even talk of introducing mandatory military training for adult citizens — all of which does little to reassure the average Pole about the future.

When people cannot vent their frustration on the true source of that frustration, they usually find another, more accessible target, says Professor Długosz, even if that target is not actually to blame.

"It's possible that [Poles] subconsciously blame Ukrainians for the war dragging on."

Wrong refugees?

One issue that seems to be driving resentment is that many of the new arrivals just don't look refugees in the eyes of their Polish hosts.

A significant portion of Ukrainians in Poland are young, educated middle-class people from big cities, says Professor Długosz. Those who are poorer mostly stayed in Ukraine or moved further west from Poland — to countries that offered Ukrainian refugees more generous social support.

Refugees — who don't rely on Polish state aid, who are ready to rent nice apartments and buy the latest smartphones — don't fit the image of refugees often seen in the news about Syria or Afghanistan.

"Of course, this doesn't apply to all Ukrainians," Długosz explains, "but previously, the average Pole had to go to the West to see people living a wealthy lifestyle. Now, they don't have to go anywhere — such people have come here. And the worst part is, they came from Ukraine — not from Germany, the Netherlands, or the UK, because then they wouldn't have caused this kind of dissonance. These are Ukrainians, who Poles have always looked down on, because 'everyone knows things are worse in Ukraine,' 'it's poor there,' and so on. And suddenly it turns out people came from there with a high standard of living and a high level of culture."

Długosz suggests that the negative attitude toward Ukrainians among less affluent Poles — the group where it's most commonly observed — can be seen as a psychological defense mechanism.

Researchers at the University of Warsaw, who have also noted a sharp decline in Polish attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees, have another theory. They point to *roszczeniowość* as the main cause. This Polish word is difficult to translate precisely, but it implies a mix of entitlement, demandingness, and presumptuousness.

Professor Robert Staniszewski, who leads this series of studies, spoke about it in an interview with TOK FM. According to him, people surveyed say Ukrainians they interact with often claim they deserve more resources, assistance, and respect than Poles themselves.

"A narrative is emerging that says: 'We're not fighting for Ukraine's territorial integrity, we're fighting for Poland's freedom — even more for you than for ourselves.' And this is coming from Ukrainians who are living in Poland and who are not fighting — mostly young people and women," he quotes respondents as saying. According to Staniszewski, Poles do not appreciate this stance.

Professor Długosz in Kraków is aware of the research by his Warsaw colleagues but declines to comment on it directly. "In my three studies, when answering open-ended questions, Ukrainians thanked Poland and Polish society for their help and support," he says. "The media say that *roszczeniowość* is the main reason [for worsening attitudes]. But it could also be that when people are asked about Ukrainians, they just repeat what they've heard in the media."

The Ukrainians we spoke with in Poland do not deny that, among the thousands and thousands of displaced people, there are also those who are far from pleasant. But they believe it is unfair to project negative attitudes onto all Ukrainians.

Missiles and farmers

Many of the people we spoke to for this story said that there was a connection between Polish attitudes toward Ukrainians living in Poland and the state of intergovernmental relations between Warsaw and Kyiv.

When leading Polish politicians speak positively about Ukraine and Ukrainians, Polish society tends to be more favorable toward them. But when problems arise in relations between the two countries, public attitudes shift accordingly.

The first months of the full-scale war were marked by nearly ideal bilateral relations between Kyiv and Warsaw — which, as the media reported, were largely built on the strong personal friendship between Presidents Andrzej Duda and Volodymyr Zelensky.

The first major misunderstanding between the two countries occurred in November 2022, when a missile fell on the Polish village of Przewodów near the border with Ukraine.

Two local residents were killed. Ukrainian authorities claimed it was a Russian attack, but an investigation showed that a Ukrainian air defense missile had fallen on Przewodów. The missile may have malfunctioned during a massive Russian strike on that day.

Warsaw declared at the time that it did not intend to blame Kyiv for the incident, while Ukraine never acknowledged responsibility.

"Ukraine expected that we in Poland would agree it was a Russian missile, that NATO had been attacked — and that this would help Ukraine," says political analyst Łukasz Adamski. "That significantly cooled the attitude of the Polish elite toward Ukraine."

In the second half of 2023, mass protests began among Polish farmers — a large and politically influential group. One of the main causes of the protests was what they saw as the uncontrolled import of Ukrainian grain into Poland.

Ukrainian grain was much cheaper than Polish grain, which, farmers claimed, caused the price of locally produced agricultural products to collapse. In response Polish farmers decided to block the border with Ukraine, effectively paralyzing cross-border traffic.

These events caused a collapse in positive attitudes toward Poles in Ukraine. The protests, supported by much of Polish society, were perceived in the war-torn country as a stab in the back. Ukrainians were later shocked by footage showing Poles dumping grain directly onto railway tracks — grain harvested by Ukrainian farmers under shelling.

Zelensky commented on these protests very emotionally from the UN General Assembly podium: “It is alarming to see some of our friends in Europe play solidarity as political theatre, turning grain into a thriller. It might seem they are playing their own roles, but in reality, they are helping prepare the stage for the main actor from Moscow.”

The Ukrainian reaction angered Polish politicians, who saw it as ungrateful Ukrainians accusing their best friends of working for Moscow.

The grain protests continued, and the rhetoric of Polish politicians and farmers increasingly took on an anti-Ukrainian tone, spilling over into the media and then into the public space. The protests became an outlet for the frustration building up in Polish society during the first year and a half to two years of the full-scale war.

When Ukraine resumed grain exports via the Black Sea, the value of the export route through Poland effectively dropped to zero, and the farmers’ protests at the border ceased. However, the intensity of Polish rhetoric toward Ukrainians did not decrease.

Bullying Ukrainians in schools

Natalia Panchenko, head of the public initiative "Euromaidan Warsaw," who has lived in Poland for the past fifteen years, says that two large groups of Ukrainians living in Poland most often face negative attitudes.

The first group includes those who, due to their line of work, interact with many people — primarily service sector workers, who are the easiest targets for people's anger just because they speak Polish with an accent or have a Ukrainian name on their badge.

Panchenko notes that such stories happen not only to Ukrainians in low-paid jobs: "One dentist told me about clients who had been coming to her for ten years but recently said they would no longer visit because she is Ukrainian... This case only confirms that people often simply don’t think rationally in this regard."

The second group is Ukrainian children who face bullying in schools. Panchenko says she thinks it’s happening because of what Polish children are hearing from their parents at home. "For example,” she says. “Janusz argued with his wife in the kitchen all evening, and in the morning Janusz’s son went to school and started bullying his Ukrainian classmates because he heard from his father that all Ukrainians should be driven out."

Ukrainians we spoke to say Polish schools often do not adequately handle these problems. When it happened to child psychologist Tatiana and her daughter, they had to find a way to sort it out themselves.

After several months at a Warsaw school, first-grader Maryana began to cry in the mornings and asked not to be sent to class; later, she developed psychosomatic problems. The cause was one of Maryana’s classmates.

"This boy told her in class that she was, like, ‘poop’ because she was from Ukraine... Sometimes he pushed her, tripped her, and did other things," Tatiana recalls. According to her, the class teacher

suggested contacting the school psychologist, who in turn recommended the principal. The general opinion of the teachers was that the girl just needed to "build up" her resistance.

"In the end, I started working with my child on building that resistance. We helped her understand that she is strong and can respond. If someone hits her, she should hit back. If someone insults her verbally, she should also respond. And it all stopped only when Maryana began to stand up for herself," Tatiana remembers.

The "beauty salon effect"

Professor Długosz acknowledges that antipathy toward Ukrainians is prevalent across all demographic groups in Poland, but researchers point to two groups in particular.

The first is poorer Poles. They tend to blame Ukrainians for their own difficulties, believe that the Polish state should prioritize helping them first, or even envy Ukrainians who have come from a war-torn country but often feel better off than the locals.

The second group — somewhat paradoxically — is young women under 29 years old. Professor Staniszewski from the University of Warsaw says young women without higher education are twice as likely to have negative views about Ukrainians than the Polish population in general.

There is a theory that this stems from competition between young Ukrainian and Polish women over men. But Długosz says it's important to understand that Polish women have long been the most vulnerable group in the labour market, and so it's not men Polish and Ukrainian young women are in competition over - it's housing and jobs.

In an anonymous survey conducted by the Professor Staniszweski among female students at his university, other reasons rooted in cultural differences, also emerged for Polish young women's cooler attitudes toward Ukrainians. For example, students working as shop assistants complained about the rude behaviour of some Ukrainian customers, and others expressed bewilderment that a Ukrainian mother might yell at and hit her child openly on the street. Moreover, according to the surveys, Polish girls are not fond of the manners of some Ukrainian young men.

In his interview on TOK FM Professor Staniszewski referred to these kinds of issues as "the beauty salon effect" — sociologists believe that beauty salons are often the sites of conflicts between Ukrainian and Polish women.

Researchers point out that the most positive attitudes toward Ukrainians are found among older Poles — those aged 60 and above.

"These figures indicate that younger generations know much less about Ukraine and are less interested in it," says Łukasz Adamsky from the Warsaw Mieroszewski Centre. "They don't feel the influence of Polish cultural myths that made Poles sympathetic toward Ukrainians,"

Trolls and 'rural pensioners'

Young Poles also spend more time on the internet, which our interviewees all describe as a bottomless and unregulated source of anti-Ukrainian messaging.

Rafał Pankowski, head of the Polish human rights association *Nigdy Więcej* (Never Again), said that his organization began detecting the first such messages within weeks of the start of Russia's full-scale invasion.

His association's report, *How to Count Hate: Haters on Ukrainians*, published in February 2023, showed that in the first year of the full-scale war, almost 400,000 anti-Ukrainian statements appeared on the Polish internet, which together garnered 547 million views. Since then, the scale has only grown.

Today, hate toward Ukrainians can be found virtually everywhere — in any social media platform, in comment sections of sports websites, or under news articles on completely unrelated topics. Sometimes, the spread of anti-Ukrainian messages bears all the hallmarks of coordinated campaigns.

In early May of this year, after a gruesome murder took place at the University of Warsaw (a young man decapitated a cleaning woman with an axe), several social media accounts spread a rumor that the killer was a Ukrainian named Dmytro. The rumor spread so widely that a representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs was forced to publicly issue a correction.

A widely held belief in Poland is that Russian "troll farms" are behind the online hate targeting Ukraine and Ukrainians. Supporting this theory is the fact that many anti-Ukrainian messages posted online are written in poor Polish.

But the troll farms may not be the only culprits. Child psychologist Tatyana told me a story from her neighborhood group chat:

"Recently, a man wrote something like: 'Hey, on such-and-such street, in such-and-such house, someone started renovations in the middle of the night — where can I report this?' He wrote in perfect Polish, without mistakes. His name was Dmytro. In response, everyone promptly told him who he was, where he came from, and where he should *wypierdalać [*'Get the f*** out'] to."

"I have a friend who decided at some point that he would engage in legal activism — meaning that every time he's insulted online and there's a clear anti-Ukrainian tone, he reports it to the police and the prosecutor's office," says journalist Babakova.

"And what I think is, when the police started investigating who actually wrote these comments, it turned out that in only about a quarter to a third of the cases they came from Russia," she says. "The rest were full-blooded Poles — not radical nationalists with Polish eagle tattoos on their chests, but rural pensioners from the Polish heartland."

'Bad drivers' and conspiracy theories

It is precisely the internet where many of the myths and urban legends about Ukrainians in Poland originate, researchers say.

Some of them are naïve and seemingly harmless. For example, the belief that all Ukrainians are terrible drivers, don't know how to park, and that Ukrainian women do nothing but get their lips and nails done in hopes of landing a Polish husband.

"Apparently, every Pole has a friend who has a friend who personally saw a Ukrainian mother with a child enter a doctor's office without waiting in line — because she's Ukrainian and everyone owes her," one person told me.

Other myths can easily be debunked using statistics or basic common sense. For instance, the idea that Ukrainians are a burden on Poland's welfare system: in reality, legally employed Ukrainians contribute significantly more in taxes and social security payments to the state budget than they receive in benefits. And rumors about Ukrainian crime syndicates operating in Poland, feared even by Polish criminals, are not supported by police records.

Some of these myths take on the scope of elaborate conspiracy theories. Sometimes, as Pankowski notes, they combine both anti-Ukrainian and anti-semitic narratives. One example is the "Ukropolin" theory — a mash-up of "Ukraine" and "Polin," the Hebrew name for Poland. According to this idea, popular in far-right circles, there is a secret Ukrainian-Jewish-German plot to seize power in Poland.

An even more bizarre theory is that of the "Heavenly Jerusalem." "According to it, Jews are behind the war in Ukraine, planning to relocate part of the Ukrainian population to Poland and create 'Ukropolin.' Meanwhile, in the now-vacated southeastern territories of Ukraine, they aim to establish a second Jewish state called 'Heavenly Jerusalem,'" says Pankowski.

"Unfortunately, even the craziest conspiracy theories find followers. I've often seen how, during far-right discussions, someone stands up and asks the speaker: 'What do you think of the Heavenly Jerusalem theory?' — and there's no need to explain what it is," he adds.

"We don't need your flags"

For the past two years, Poland has been living in a state of continuous election campaigning. In the fall of 2023, parliamentary elections ended the eight-year rule of the conservative Law and Justice party and brought the current team of liberal Prime Minister Donald Tusk to power. In 2024, local elections have already taken place, and the second round of the presidential election on June 1 saw victory for the opposition Law and Justice party's candidate Karol Nawrocki.

"The elections themselves don't change Poles' attitudes toward Ukrainians," says Panchenko. "But the election campaigns amplify negative narratives about Ukrainians and fuel these negative sentiments."

"Polish politics in recent years have become rather substance-free and populist. It's hard to find any concrete topic for real debate," says journalist Babakova. "As a result, politicians choose easy topics that polarize people and quickly drum up support."

One such topic during the presidential campaign has been the attitude toward Ukraine and Ukrainians living in Poland. The tone of the election discourse was set back in January by the now new president, Karol Nawrocki.

He stated that Ukraine could not claim membership in NATO or the EU until it repents for the Volhynia tragedy — a series of ethnic cleansings in the Volhynia region in the 1940s, which official Polish historiography regards as a genocide of Poles by Ukrainian paramilitary groups.

In April, when exhumations of victims of Ukrainian-Polish clashes began for the first time since 2017 in Ukraine's Ternopil region, the Volhynia topic seemed to fade from the mainstream. But when the liberal presidential candidate Rafał Trzaskowski proposed cutting child care benefits for some Ukrainian refugee women, the Ukrainian theme returned to the campaign trail again.

"At some point, it all began to take on a threatening scale, because it was everywhere: Ukraine, Ukraine," says Babakova. "But luckily, the good old Polish domestic issues returned — who stole what, who is whose godfather…"

The far-right presidential candidate Grzegorz Braun, long considered a fringe politician, built his campaign on anti-Ukrainian slogans. At a campaign rally in the eastern Polish city of Biała Podlaska, he supported a supporter of his who had torn down the Ukrainian flag that hung next to the Polish one at the entrance to the local city council. Braun later left the carefully folded flag in a bag at the doors of the Ukrainian embassy in Warsaw with a message: "We don't need your flags."

The following week at a march against illegal immigration in central Warsaw, I met three women carrying a placard featuring Mr. Braun. "It's getting on our nerves seeing their flags on our public

buildings," they told me. "Why are Ukrainian flags hanging on Polish institutions? This is Poland! Do we go to Ukraine and hang Polish flags there? When there were many Poles in England, did we hang Polish flags there? No! Because the British wouldn't allow it."

With his sharp anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and the slogan "Stop the Ukrainization of Poland," Braun came fourth in the first round of elections, receiving 6% of the vote — effectively entering the top league of Polish politics. A troubling sign for both Ukrainians in Poland and for Ukrainian-Polish relations.

"We can hope that a certain cooling of the political struggle will bring calm to public sentiment, which is trending toward xenophobia. But we cannot be sure of that," fears human rights advocate Pankowski.

What's next?

"I think that nothing much will change between Poles and Ukrainians in the future. The disputes will remain — about Volhynia and other issues," says Professor Długosz.

He believes the Polish authorities should approach the situation pragmatically, since if Ukrainians leave the country, it could negatively impact the Polish economy. According to a March report from the Bank of National Economy, Ukrainian citizens make up about 5 per cent of the total employed population in Poland.

They are mostly employed in the industrial sector, construction, transport, and services. Ukrainians account for between 0.5 per cent and 2.4 per cent of Poland's GDP growth, the report states.
"In the face of demographic challenges, such as an aging society and labour shortages, the presence of workers from Ukraine is strategically important for the stability and continued development of our country," said bank board member Jarosław Dąbrowski.

"The situation now is that the Czechs want to keep Ukrainians, the Germans are creating good conditions to retain human capital from Ukraine," says Długosz. "Perhaps our policy will go in that direction too, and after the elections are over, we'll start thinking about ways to normalize relations between Ukrainians and Poles."

S. Khomenko: "«Their flags are getting on our nerves.» Have Poles fallen out of love with Ukrainians?" BbcRussian.substack.com, 6.06.2025.

https://bbcrussian.substack.com/p/have-poles-fallen-out-of-love-with-ukrainians