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Political Dynamics Behind the Discrepancies in Poland's Refugee Acceptance Policy towards Refugees from Ukraine and Africa and the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

Poland hosts the most Ukrainian refugees as a result of Russian-Ukraine war. This reception clearly contradicts its closed-door policy, especially refugees from Africa and the Middle East. This article seeks to explain this contradiction. Using qualitative method by examining secondary sources, result shows that there are significant differences in Polish refugee policy concerning the recent Russo-Ukrainian War and the previous European refugee crises. Those differences are mainly driven by domestic and international politics. In the domestic realm, the rejection of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa is closely linked to the public negative sentiment and the rise of conservative political groups against those groups. In contrast, there is a large support of Polish political elements and public solidarity for Ukrainian refugees. Meanwhile, in the international realm, Poland's activeness in accepting a significant number of Ukrainian refugees can be understood as a manifestation of Polish concern and resistance to the aggressiveness of Russian expansionism.

KEYWORDS

Political Dynamic; Poland; Refugee; Ukraine

INTRODUCTION

A prolonged conflict between the Russians and Ukrainians has posed new challenges for the wave of Ukrainian refugees. In most cases, refugees from Ukraine migrate to neighbouring countries such as Poland, Germany, Moldova, Slovakia, Czechia, and Hungary. According to UNHCR, there were more than eight million Ukrainian refugees who crossed their country's borders to destinations in Western and Eastern Europe in following the war in Ukraine. It is estimated that 4.8 million people have been registered in the temporary protection schemes of the European Union (EU) or similar refugee schemes that are enacted in each country that receives refugees ([UNHCR, 2023e](#)). Despite the fact that the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees is governed by each government, national and local authorities are also responsible for protecting the social and economic rights of refugees. Indeed, as a regional body in Europe, the European Union and units of community organizations participate actively in the process ([UNHCR, 2023f](#)).

Among the many destinations for Ukrainian refugees, Poland is the largest recipient. The direct border between Poland and Ukraine makes it an ideal destination for Ukrainian refugees fleeing the ongoing war in their country. It is estimated that more than four hundred thousand Ukrainian citizens fled their country to Poland when the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory began on 24 February 2022. Up to this point, there are 1.8 million Ukrainian refugees in Poland ([UNHCR, 2023e](#)). Polish authorities have stated from the beginning that they have prepared the best evacuation plan, including integrating Ukrainian refugees into Polish economy and society. The Polish community even appears to support the government's position. It becomes evident from the efforts by non-profit organizations and local communities in Poland to provide assistance and other forms of protection to other Ukrainian refugee groups ([Berger, 2022](#)).

Poland's positive response to the wave of Ukrainian refugees appears to contrast with its previous practice of implementing restrictive policies in response to waves of refugees from the African Region and the Middle East. Despite receiving a quota of refugees from the EU, Poland closed its borders to African and Middle Eastern refugees from southern Europe. At the time, Poland's government even passed new legislation restricting local communities and humanitarian organizations from protecting refugees ([Pachoka and Sobczak-Sczlec, 2020](#)). After implementing this policy, the Polish government argued that accepting a significant number of refugees would lead to economic instability and social unrest in Poland. As stated by Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the chairman of the ruling party, the infiltration of refugees into Polish territory would not only pose a security threat but also damage the socio-cultural fabric of Polish society. Hence, it is vital for the government to reject the EU's decision regarding the allocation of refugees to Polish territory ([Cienski, 2017](#)).

Against this backdrop, the article examines how the Polish government implemented refugee policy during the Russia-Ukrainian War in comparison to their response to refugees from political upheavals in Africa and the Middle East. It argues that different policy responses in Poland reveal the strong political aspects involved in handling global refugee

issues. It is worth noting that decisions made by countries or other international actors regarding the acceptance or rejection of refugees are influenced by factors beyond their humanitarian responsibilities. The article begins with a review of several literatures related to the topic, followed by an explanation of the methods employed, a discussion of the topic, and a conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discussion regarding contradictions in Poland's refugee acceptance policy in this article refers to several previous articles discussing Poland's immigration and refugee acceptance policies. [Narkowicz \(2018\)](#) describes the rejection of the Polish government, religious institutions, and civil society towards the arrival of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. In contrast to the policy of the majority of European Union countries which accepted refugees on the basis of a relocation agreement in 2015, the Polish government openly rejected the refugees coming from the Mediterranean Region. Instead of opening its territorial borders based on the refugee quotas set by the European Union, until the end of the implementation period of the relocation policy, Poland did not accept any refugee arrivals at all. Poland's apathy couldn't be separated from domestic political dynamics, especially regarding changes in political power followed by an increase in religious sentiment and nationalism among its people. The Law and Justice Party (PiS), representing Poland's conservative political group, exploited the immigration issue at that time, forming a negative perception of refugees among the Polish public as an efficient political instrument in seizing government power. The rise in power of conservative political groups in government then had a significant effect on increasing xenophobia, antisemitism, and Islamophobia in Polish society which tends to be homogeneous.

The next reference in writing this article is research conducted by Witold [Klaus \(2017\)](#) regarding the securitization policy implemented by the Polish and Hungarian governments towards the arrival of refugees from the Mediterranean region. Both governments are dominated by conservative "right-wing" political groups who firmly reject the arrival of refugees, especially from conflictual areas in the Middle East and North Africa. Klaus further emphasized that there were two policy pillars implemented in both Hungary and Poland. The first is to develop a discourse among the public that refugees are enemies of the country's national integrity. Even the government has developed the opinion that refugees are the equivalent of a terrorist group that must be fought and eliminated. Second, the two conservative governments often use security priority reasons as a basis for legitimacy in rejecting agreements with European countries to accept the movement of a number of refugees from the South. Moreover, the Polish and Hungarian governments implemented various additional policy instruments to prevent the arrival of refugees and force refugees out of their sovereign territory.

Karen [Hargrave's research \(2022\)](#) explains in detail the history, the basics of immigration and refugee policy as well as the development of Polish public opinion towards

immigrants and refugees. The Polish Government's openness to immigrants and refugees began in line with the democratization transition process in 1989. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Polish Government at that time had accepted refugees from Russia and other Eastern European countries in significant numbers. The basic rules regarding accepting refugees in Poland are actually contained in the National Law on International Protection which has been adopted since 2003. These rules actually contain all the procedures that need to be carried out by asylum seekers in order to obtain official protection from the Polish Government. However, in its implementation the local government applies different standards. From the start, the Polish government had a tendency to accept refugees from Eastern Europe, while strictly selecting and even rejecting the arrival of those from conflictual areas. Furthermore, this article also explains that there are dynamics in Polish public opinion towards immigrants and refugees. At the beginning of the 2000s, the local public predominantly had a positive view of the arrival of immigrants, especially regarding their contribution to the development of the Polish economy. However, following the refugee crisis and increasing terror activities in Europe, the Polish public's views changed significantly, especially towards Muslim and ethnic Arab migrant groups. However, following Russia's invasion of Ukrainian territory, the Polish public showed its support for the government in accepting Ukrainian refugees in significant numbers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The discussion regarding the contradictions in Poland's refugee acceptance policy in this paper is based on the basic conceptual understanding that the country's policy response to immigration and refugees is always based on considerations of the domestic and international situation. Instead of using humanitarianism as a policy determinant, national governments tend to use rational considerations regarding the dynamics of domestic and international politics as a reference in rejecting or accepting the arrival of immigrants and refugees. As mentioned by [Lippert \(1999\)](#) in his research that humanitarian assistance, including evacuation, cannot simply be viewed as ethical and moral responsibility. As a matter of fact, intervention policies, as well as other manifestations of handling refugee issues, are closely related to the dynamics of international politics. As with the phenomenon of an increase in refugees from Eastern Europe and Russia following World War I, Western intervention in the refugee problem of that time had to be understood as a moral-political tactic rather than a purely humanitarian one. It was through their direct involvement in refugee problems, acceptance, and protective measures that Western countries tried to establish the notion that the Soviet Union was an illiberal and uncivilized regime, in contrast to Western life, which was both advanced and prosperous.

[Bobadilla \(2018\)](#), another scholar, emphasizes the importance of internal political conditions for determining the government's decision to accept or reject refugees. As a reflection of the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015, several EU member states, including Austria and Poland, were strongly opposed to the decision of regional institutions to

distribute refugees in Italy and Greece. In the case of Austria – following the election of the conservative Freedom Party (FPÖ) to power – the nation's scepticism of the EU increased, resulting in Austria refusing to comply with European refugee distribution regulations. A similar reason for Poland's decision not to accept refugees was the success of the conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) in controlling the government, coupled with an increase in nationalistic and racist sentiments in the country.

By the same token, [Castells et al. \(2014\)](#) contends that a country's refugee management policy should not be separated from its underlying political dynamics. During the Cold War, for instance, Western nations appear to be reluctant to accept refugees from the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries as a form of propaganda. As the number of refugees from developing countries increased during the 1980s, developed countries in Europe and North America also began implementing restrictive policies to prevent refugees from troubled African and Asian regions from entering their countries. In the domestic sphere, they appear to have pursued a strategy of politicization and securitization, which resulted in heightened hostility towards refugees.

[Koser \(2010\)](#) maintains that even though migration and refugees have become global issues, the handling and management of refugees still depend heavily on the policies of each country. It is true that several organizations have begun to emerge, both within the United Nations and within each region, however, the state government remains the primary actor who has full authority in determining who is allowed to enter its territory or those who are not allowed to enter it. As of now, the state government has been reluctant to transfer the control of international migration waves to international organizations due to its full ownership of the territory and its rights and obligations. In light of the complexity of the current refugee problem, [Koser \(2010\)](#) therefore recommends implementing global migration governance reforms that would improve the participation of international and regional organizations in refugee matters.

METHODS

This article generally adopts a qualitative approach. According to Hammersley (cited in Silverman, 2011), the qualitative approach focuses on observing data in the form of words and sentences ([Hammersley, 2012](#)). This contrasts with quantitative research, which typically examines the dominant data in the form of numbers. In particular, this article serves as both a description and an explanation of the topic. It therefore focuses not only on describing the refugee acceptance policies of countries, but also explains the dynamics that determine these policies. This study relies on literature study techniques in order to gather sufficient information to describe and explain the main issues by studying and exploring previous research related to the policies of accepting refugees by countries. Furthermore, in-depth analysis was conducted on all secondary data in the form of books, articles, journals, and online news channels that pertain to the discussion. All data is then analysed and

processed to provide the best explanation regarding a country's policy towards accepting or rejecting refugees.

DISCUSSION

The Russian-Ukrainian War and the Refugee Issue in Europe

The new phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict began on 24 February 2022 with the invasion of eastern Ukraine, specifically the Donbas and Luhansk regions. In the same way as in Crimea in 2014, Russia's direct military attack on Ukrainian territory was prompted by its unilateral argument that the people of Donbas and Luhansk should be freed from the abuses of the Ukrainian government. The Russian government also believed that the special military operation was intended to counter the spreading of Nazism that had been deemed to have infiltrated into Ukraine. Consequently, not only targeting the eastern part of Ukraine, but the Russian military attack also reached the capital city of Kyiv, resulting in 1.3 million Ukrainian citizens leaving their country for neighbouring territory during the initial phase of the invasion. Around 756 thousand refugees were reported to have headed to Polish territory, 157 thousand to Hungary, 102 thousand to Slovakia, 149 thousand to Russia, while 170 thousand were scattered in Romania, Moldova, and Belarus ([CNN News, 2023](#)).

During the early stages of the Russian invasion, it appeared that the Russians were successful in occupying strategic areas in Ukraine, including Kharkiv, Mariupol, and Kyiv. However, as the conflict developed, the Ukrainian side's resistance forced Russia only to control Donbass and Luhansk, which were controlled by pro-Russian separatist groups. The prolonged war led to a significant increase in the number of refugees. According to UNHCR data (2023), more than 8.17 million refugees have crossed the Ukrainian border into various countries overseas. It is estimated that only 5 million of these people are registered in temporary protection schemes, or similar forms of protection, in each country in which they are seeking refuge. While most refugees are concentrated in ten neighbouring countries, many are also heading to Western European countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, Britain and France. Even a few Ukrainian refugees have sought asylum in Asian countries ([UNHCR, 2023a](#)).

Table 1 The Countries of Destination for Ukrainian Refugees

Countries	The number of refugees (in thousands)
Belarus	159,2
Czech Republic	519,9
Poland	1.607
Latvia	47,9
Lithuania	77,6
Moldova	-
Estonia	45,7

Romania	132,3
Slovakia	116,7
Hungary	36,3

Source: [UNHCR \(2023a\)](#)

According to the table 1, Poland has been the primary destination for waves of refugees from Ukraine. Polish territorial proximity to Ukraine, coupled with the nation's economic prominence in Eastern Europe, played a significant role in Ukrainian migration to Poland during the war. Between February and August 2022, the initial period of the Russian invasion resulted in a significant increase in border traffic between the Polish and Ukrainian borders compared to last year, as 10.1 million people moved between the two countries during that period ([Beqiri, 2022](#)). Towards the beginning of 2023, the movement of populations between the two countries was estimated at 10.6 million individuals, of whom 8.8 million moved from Ukraine to Poland. However, as Russian troops retreat eastward, the movement of population has begun to show a fluctuating decline ([Sas, 2023a](#)).

It is worth noting that not all cross-border activities between Ukraine and Poland are classified as refugees. Many refugees also use Polish territory as a starting point for their journey to other countries in Western Europe. Aside from these two factors, Poland is currently the country with the largest number of refugees from Ukraine (outside of Russia). The Polish government had accepted more than 750,000 Ukrainian refugees at the time of the invasion, and as of June 2023, the number of Ukrainian refugees registered under Poland's temporary protection scheme had reached 1.8 million ([UNHCR, 2023b](#)). Most Ukrainian refugees in Poland are women, especially those between the ages of 18 and 60. According to Figure 1, the majority of refugees in Poland are located in the Mazowieckie region, with a total of 210,000 refugees, followed by the Dolnoslaskie and Slaskie regions, each of which received 111.1 thousand refugees, as well as 98.1 thousand from Ukraine. Apart from these three regions, Ukrainian refugees are evenly distributed across the other thirteen districts in Poland.

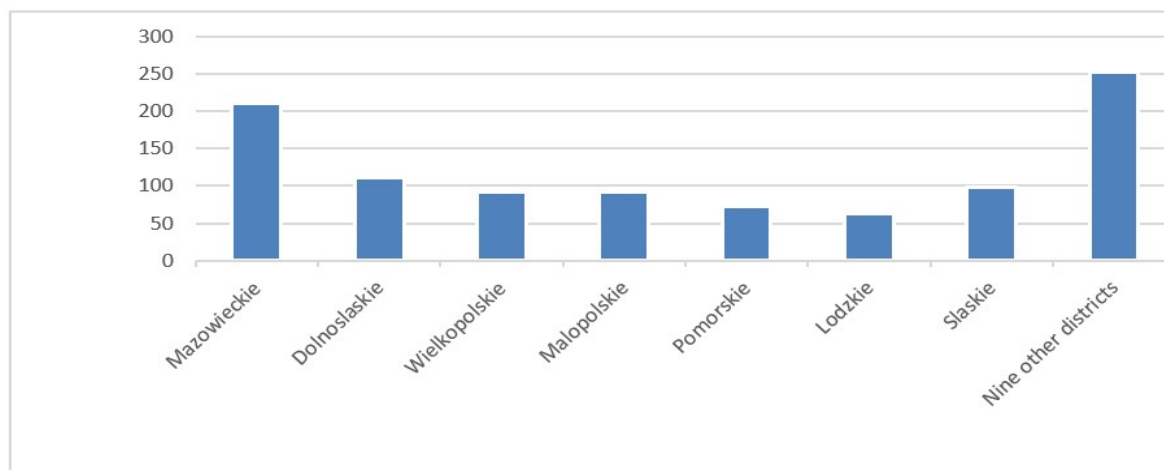


Figure 1. Distribution of Ukrainian refugees in Poland (in thousands). Source: [UNHCR \(2023b\)](#)

The Polish Government's Policy Regarding the Acceptance of Ukrainian Refugees

Since the first day of the Russian invasion, Poland has taken an active role in supporting Ukraine. Indeed, together with other European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member countries, Poland strongly condemned the Russian invasion as a clear violation of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty. The Polish government has consistently advocated the importance of massive international pressure in order to counteract the potential threat of Russian aggression. Financial assistance is also provided by the Polish government to the Ukrainian government and people. According to [Kiel Institute of World Economy \(2023\)](#), concerning the flow of government-to-government funds until January 2023, the Polish Government has provided assistance in bilateral schemes worth 3.6 billion Euros and 1.5 billion Euros in EU commitment schemes. With this number, Poland became the largest provider of aid to Ukraine after the United States, Germany, Britain, France, and Italy. Poland's overall assistance consists primarily of direct financial support, both in the form of gifts and loans. It differs from aid from the United States and other European nations, which consists of military equipment.

There is no doubt that the acceptance of refugees by Poland contributed significantly to the Ukrainian crisis, regardless of its diplomatic efforts or foreign assistance. As discussed in the previous section, more than 1.8 million Ukrainian refugees are registered with the national protection scheme and are issued an identification number (PESEL) by the Polish government. With the full opening of the borders of the territory for refugees from Ukraine, the Government of Poland has a considerable responsibility to ensure that their economic, health, and educational rights are protected. At least four principles govern Poland's protection strategy for Ukrainian refugees: 1) centrality and priority of protection; 2) government-led response followed by local and international elements; 3) transition from emergency response to a focus on protection based on individual resilience and inclusiveness; 4) preparation for a larger influx of refugees ([UNHCR, 2023c](#)). Given the large number of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, Polish refugee policy has also expanded in scope. The focus in 2023 will be on initiatives aimed at providing training (reskilling and upskilling) on technical and linguistic aspects, as well as financial and entrepreneurial assistance. Social cohesion between local communities and refugees plays a vital role in refugee acceptance policies, which is why Poland's joint refugee actions incorporate dialogue activities, mutual understanding, and the prevention of discrimination. These actions are to ensure that the presence of refugees does not result in disruption of the social and economic order of the Polish local community ([UNHCR, 2023c](#)).

The Polish government's proactive response to hosting Ukrainian refugees certainly requires the active participation of other local and international elements. In March 2022, Poland established the Refugee Coordination Model (RCM) as a forum for collaboration and coordination between the government and international agencies in dealing with the arrival of refugees. A Refugee Coordination Forum (RCF) was also established to facilitate the participation of the local community and government. According to the Regional Refugee

Response Plan for Ukraine ([UNHCR, 2023c](#)), 83 organizations and agencies are managing the problem of Ukrainian refugees in the Polish region, including 6 UN agencies, 24 INGOs, 48 NGOs, IFRC, and four faith-based organizations. The UNHCR-the highest international agency with a mandate to address refugee issues-plays a crucial role in the Ukrainian refugee management system in Poland. In 2022, the requested funding from the UNHCR reached more than 500 million USD. The funds are allocated for a series of programs including assistance with obtaining employment opportunities, providing legal counselling, offering direct financial assistance, building and requesting repairs to shelters, as well as providing food and non-food needs for refugees in collaboration with NGOs and local government communities ([UNHCR, 2022](#)).

A total of US\$ 710 million is estimated to be allocated to the handling of Ukrainian refugees in Poland by 2023. The funds are distributed among 83 international and local agencies and organizations in Poland. A total of US\$ 294 million is used for the operational activities of six UN Agencies including the International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and World Health Organization (WHO). In 2023, funding allocations for 24 INGOs and 48 NGOs will amount to US\$ 137.5 million and US\$ 160 million, respectively. Meanwhile, a total of US\$ 85.5 million and US\$ 33 million will be distributed to the IFRC and faith-based organizations. In terms of the sector of activities, around 320 million USD are spent on meeting the basic needs of refugees. The funds allocated for protection and education activities among refugees are USD 164.6 million and USD 120.4 million, respectively. The remaining funds of 104 million USD are allocated to health and socioeconomic support programs for refugees in Poland ([UNHCR, 2023c](#)).

In these circumstances, it is very likely that the arrival of millions of Ukrainian refugees will pose a much greater socioeconomic threat to Poland. In the early stages of the invasion, for instance, the Polish Government was largely unprepared to accept a large number of refugees. There was an inadequate legal basis for evacuation, followed by the lack of a comprehensive refugee handling mechanism, especially in scenarios in which there are many refugees. Most of the response to refugees is the result of voluntary initiatives taken by local organizations and communities. Due to these situations, many refugees and even local Polish people were unable to access basic needs during the initial period of the Ukrainian crisis ([Livingstone, 2022](#)). As the number of refugees continues to increase, several organizations and local communities are beginning to run out of resources and personnel. The Polish government has even called upon all elements of the international community, especially those from the European Union, to show solidarity with Ukraine by helping to relocate Ukrainian refugees within the country. In the long term, if the conflict in Ukraine does not end, the Polish Government may be faced with not only food and health shortages, but also crises in other complex socio-economic areas. This can be seen in the case of the integration of Ukrainian youth and refugee children into the Polish education system, as

well as the issue of increasing the availability of many workers in order to meet a future demand for refugee work ([Egan, 2022](#)).

Poland's Refusal to Accept the Relocation of Refugees from the Mediterranean Region

Poland's willingness to accept Ukrainian refugees contradicts its refusal to comply with the European Union's quotas for accepting African and Middle Eastern refugees. It is a result of the political instability that followed the Arab Spring phenomenon in the early 2010s, resulting in a significant spike in the flow of refugees from the Mediterranean Sea to mainland Europe. According to UNHCR data (2015), the number of refugees reaching Europe from the Mediterranean Sea increased from around 9.7 thousand in 2010 to as many as 219 thousand in 2014. It is also estimated that over one million African and Middle Eastern refugees entered Europe in 2015. Most refugees come from Syria (34%), Afghanistan (12%), Eritrea (12%), Somalia (5%), and Nigeria (5%), while the remaining refugees come from several other African and Middle Eastern countries experiencing a crisis ([UNHCR Regional Bureau of Europe, 2016](#)).

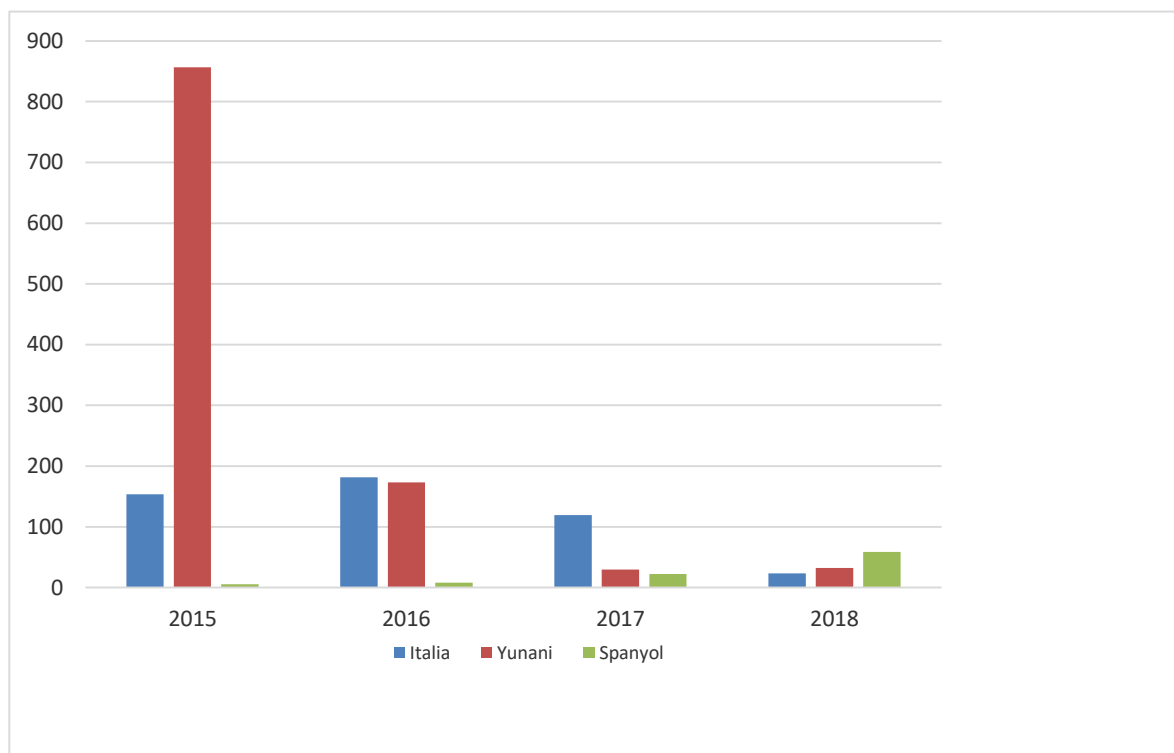


Figure 2. The number of refugees arriving from the Mediterranean route. *Source:* [UNHCR \(2023d\)](#)

The two countries receiving the most immigrants from the Mediterranean are Italy and Greece, which are in the southern part of the continent. In 2015, the number of refugees in Italy was approximately 153.8 thousand. Even though this number jumped to 181.4 thousand in 2016, it subsequently decreased to 119.3 thousand in 2017. A more significant number of refugees entered Greek via the Mediterranean route in 2015, which was estimated

at approximately 856.7 thousand individuals. After one year, however, the number of refugees entering Greece has decreased significantly to only 173.45 thousand. Aside from these two countries, refugees from Africa and the Middle East also migrated to countries located on the southern and eastern sides of Europe, such as Spain, Malta, and Turkey. Most of these refugees come from conflict-affected countries in Africa and the Middle East, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran ([UNHCR, 2023d](#)).

A refugee crisis in Italy and Greece has prompted the European Council to establish a policy for relocating refugees. This policy provision generally stipulates that EU member states are responsible for accepting the distribution of refugees from Italy and Greece in accordance with their area of jurisdiction and economic capacity. As of mid-2015, there are estimated to be more than 160 thousand refugees who will be relocated to other EU countries. According to this relocation scheme, Germany and France are the countries responsible for receiving the largest number of refugees, approximately 40 thousand and 32 thousand, respectively. The next countries to receive refugees are Spain, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden, each of which receives less than 20 thousand refugees ([European Commission, 2017](#)). The obligation to accept refugees in significant numbers eventually prompted opposition, especially from Eastern European governments. The obligation was then deemed a failure when fewer than 30% of the quota of evacuees were successfully relocated. In this regard, there are several countries that accept refugees in large numbers, while several others have only accepted a small number, or even none at all ([Czachor, 2021](#)).

Table 2 Largest quotas in the European Union's refugee acceptance program

Countries	Total Quota
Germany	27.536 persons
France	19.714 persons
Netherlands	5.947 persons
Spain	9.323 persons
Poland	6.182 persons
Sweden	3.766 persons

Source: [Sabic \(2017\)](#)

Poland has become one of the countries that have consistently rejected the EU's policy of relocating refugees. With Poland having the largest and most successful economy in Eastern Europe, it is understandable that it receives a significant number of quotas for accepting refugees compared to other EU countries. Having said that, it appears that the Polish government ignored the mandate of receiving many refugees by closing its border entirely to the arrival of refugees from the South. Data indicate that no refugee has been successfully relocated to Poland until the end of 2017 ([Sabic, 2017](#)). Along with other countries in Eastern Europe, such as Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania, Poland has consistently opposed the EU's refugee relocation policy. Their stance differs

from those of several other countries that have accepted refugees relatively openly, such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Portugal, even though they still do not meet the acceptance quota requirements ([Sabic, 2017](#)).

The Polish government under the rule of the Civic Platform Party (PO) and Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz initially approved the EU's refugee relocation policy ([Cienski, 2017](#)). Nevertheless, the direction of Poland's refugee acceptance policy has changed significantly since the election of the "right-wing" Law and Justice Party (PiS) in 2015 and the election of Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski. In rejecting the EU relocation agreement, the new government used two pretexts. The first reason is that the arrival of large numbers of refugees poses a serious threat to the defence and security of the country. The second concern is that differences in identity, culture, and culture among refugees may create socio-economic instability in Poland, which is a relatively homogeneous nation. Accordingly, the rhetoric of securitization was consistent with Poland's protectionist policies. A record shows that no refugees were successfully relocated to Polish territory from the beginning to the end of the crisis. Although the EU put pressure on Poland and threatened sanctions, it was unable to force Poland to comply, allowing African and Middle Eastern refugees to enter the country ([European Commission, 2017](#)).

Polish Refugee Policy Responses: Differences in Political Dynamics

Differences in Poland's attitude towards the refugee problem demonstrate that the policy of accepting refugees cannot be separated from the political dynamics context, both domestic and international. The strong rejection of the EU refugee relocation scheme in 2015 can be attributed to an increase in identity sentiment among Polish citizens, which was fostered by the political elite, particularly radical nationalists. As the opposition during the previous administration, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) used identity politics to win government and parliamentary seats from the Civic Platform (PO). Indeed, during its election campaign, PiS accused the PO and EU agreements regarding refugee relocation of betraying Polish national interests. It is through the control of the media that radical nationalist groups are aggressively advancing xenophobic messages that Polish society is restricted to white Catholics. While the arrival of refugees, most of whom are Muslims, are perceived as enemies, threatening the social and legal order of the country, and taking away its economic benefits ([Mazaraki, 2021](#)). A right-wing group's political agenda was supported by Radical Catholic religious leaders and right-wing radical organizations including the National Radical Camp (ONR), Ruch Narodowy, Stop Islamization of Europe (SIOE), and Polska Libra Obony. In doing so, they consistently convey messages of hatred against Muslims and non-white immigrants ([Dudzinka and Kotnarowski, 2019](#)).

In this sense, identity politics has been a successful strategy for bringing PiS to dominate the Polish government and parliament to date. This has resulted in an increased negative perception of immigrants, especially Muslim refugees, and blacks. Public Opinion Research Centre data ([cited in Dudzinka and Kotnarowski, 2019](#)) indicates that 56% of

Polish citizens rejected refugee relocation in 2015, while 33% still supported the policy of accepting refugees. A follow-up survey in 2018 revealed that the rejection of refugees had increased to 75%, compared to only 20% of those who accepted. In the same year, the percentage of Polish society holding negative views toward Muslim/Arab ethnic groups also increased from 41% to 65%. Most respondents argued that Muslims are intolerant, not in accordance with Polish culture and identity, and tend to commit violent acts. In a similar manner, black and ethnic Jewish refugees are also stigmatized as a potential threat to Poland's stability and security.

The negative sentiments of Polish society towards minority groups, especially ethnic Arabs and Muslims, were then strengthened by the increase in terror activity in mainland Europe in the mid-2010s. One of the biggest was the terror attack in Paris in 2015 which was initiated by an armed group affiliated with the Islamic State (ISIS). It was known that this act of terror had caused hundreds of thousands of casualties. This incident was then followed by a series of small terror attacks carried out by the same group in several cities in France and Belgium ([Statistia Research Department, 2023a](#)). Likewise, during this period there was an increase in terror activity in Germany. According to data from the [Stastia Research Department \(2023b\)](#), the number of terror activities in Germany increased drastically, reaching 136 attacks in the 2015-2017 period. Referring to the fact that France and Germany are the two countries that receive the largest number of refugees, the series of terror that occurred in these countries might strengthen the legitimacy of the Polish government and public to consistently close the doors of its territory to refugees from the Mediterranean.

The assumption that non-white refugees pose a threat to Polish society is basically exaggerated. First of all, minorities are not a major threat to the security, social, and economic stability of Poland, given that their presence there is very limited. Contemporary Polish society is very homogeneous with more than 90% of its citizens being ethnic white Europeans who are Catholic. In contrast, the Muslim population in Poland is only 0.02% of the total Polish population, which is 7.75 thousand people compared to 37.75 million Polish people. The Jewish and black populations of Poland are also below 0.1% of the total population ([Pew Research, cited in World Population Review, 2023](#)). The second reason is that before the Second World War, Poland had been a relatively harmonious heterogeneous society. In that period, there were approximately two million Jews living in the country, and since the 14th century, Muslim ethnic minorities have lived side by side with most of the Polish population. It therefore appears that the phenomenon of hate and negative views directed towards minorities in Poland is a relatively new one.

In contrast to the negative discourse towards non-white refugees, the Polish community has accepted Ukrainian refugees relatively favourably. According to CBOS data (cited in [Dudzinka and Kotnarowski, 2019](#)), the Polish community support the Polish government's efforts to engage in the situation surrounding Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Following the crisis in the Eastern Ukraine region caused by the activities of the Pro-Russian separatist group, various social organizations in Poland have

also urged the Polish government to become involved in the evacuation process immediately. When the Polish government decided to accept a massive wave of Ukrainian refugees following the Russian invasion in 2022, the acceptance rate of Polish citizens was still around 55%. There has been an increase in this number, as can be seen in [Brzozowski's report \(2023\)](#), which indicates that 77% of Polish people living on the Polish-Ukrainian border actively helped Ukrainian refugees in the first month following the Russian invasion. Today, millions of Ukrainian refugees are flooding into Polish territory and more than 82% of the Polish people are in favour of their arrival. By contrast, fewer than 2% of respondents express strong opposition to the presence of Ukrainian refugees in Polish territory ([Sas, 2023b](#)).

Poland's positive perception of today's Ukrainian refugees can be understood as a manifestation of shared solidarity. Both have a similar historical background, namely having been part of the Russian occupation during the Soviet Union era. The Ukraine itself was previously part of the Soviet Union along with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia from 1922-1991. Even though it has gained full independence since 1991, the Ukrainian region has become a central point of *tug of war* where the Russian government continues to try to maintain its influence. On the other hand, Ukraine itself is getting closer to Western countries and consider Russia as the biggest threat ([De Groot, 2022](#)). Similar to Ukraine, Poland was previously part of the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. The agreement between the winners of the Second World War gave the Soviet Union freedom to control eastern Europe, making Poland one of the "puppet" countries. However, the end of the Cold War era marked full independence for Poland. Even in 1999 Poland officially joined NATO and became a member of the EU in 2004 ([Soroka, 2022](#)).

The experience of being under the occupation of the Soviet Union made Poland develop as a country that is anti-Russian. Like other Eastern European countries, Poland considers Russia to have expansionist tendencies, posing the greatest threat to its territorial sovereignty. As a result, acting as the largest Eastern European country, Poland has been vocal in its opposition to a series of expansionist actions carried out by Russia to the eastern and southern regions in recent years. final. During Russia's open invasion of Georgia in 2008, Poland along with the Baltic States strongly condemned this action. Poland then became actively involved in NATO and other international forums to resolve the war. Apart from that, the Polish government also opened its territorial doors to the arrival of thousands of refugees from Georgia ([Thomsen, 2009](#)). Likewise, following Russia's annexation of the Crimea region in 2015, Poland, together with other European countries, opposed this action and agreed to implement heavy international sanctions against Russia. In the recent meeting with the President of Ukraine, Poland's President agreed to be involved in regional and international cooperation to reclaim Crimea and restore the integrity of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty ([President of Ukraine, 2020](#)). Currently, when Russia has launched its invasion of eastern Ukraine, Poland's position is clear, condemning Russia's actions and providing maximum assistance to Ukraine.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the discussion that Poland's response to the current Ukrainian refugee issue differs significantly from its response to the previous European refugee crisis. During the recent Russian military invasion of Ukraine, the Polish government has adopted an open policy by accepting millions of refugees from Ukrainian territory. This stance differs from that of the Polish government when it was responding to the arrival of refugees from the African region and the Middle East with rejection. Even though an EU agreement mandated the relocation of hundreds of thousands of refugees in Italy and Greece in 2015, Poland has consistently resisted the decision, closing its borders to waves of refugees from southern Europe. Therefore, until the final phase of the implementation of the policy, no refugee from Italy or Greece had been distributed to Poland.

Different Polish policies towards refugees have also demonstrated that aspects of political dynamics, such as the internal situation in the country, are inextricably linked to the country's humanitarian response, which includes accepting refugees. In the case of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, the first narrative was driven by opposition to Russian expansionism, which was followed by a dominant positive view of Ukrainian refugees among the Polish public. The government's attitude also plays a critical role in moving synergistically with its people, prioritizing high levels of solidarity with the Ukrainian government and people. There is no doubt that this situation contrasts with the context of the previous European refugee crisis from the Mediterranean. Negative views of African and Middle Eastern refugees, who are dominated by Muslims and non-whites, tend to be very common among Polish people. That situation was then harnessed by conservative political groups under the auspices of the Law and Justice Party as an opposition party to seize executive and legislative government power from the domination of the Civil Platform Party. Having successfully dominated government, the policy of rejecting refugees while maintaining negative public perceptions of minority refugees has become a reliable means of maintaining government legitimacy in Poland.

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