

RESEARCH

**REPORTS**

RECOMMENDATIONS

BEATA ŁACIAK, JUSTYNA SEGEŠ FRELAK

# **THE WAGES OF FEAR**

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN POLAND

INSTYTUT SPRAW  
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BEATA ŁACIAK, JUSTYNA SEGEŠ FRELAK

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IN POLAND

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Justyna Segeš Frelak

## Migration to Poland: numbers, debates, perception

### Migration profile

With few foreign-born residents, Poland is a country of 38 million people that remains one of the most homogeneous countries in Europe. Only since its accession to the EU has there been an increase in immigration flows, with a particularly dynamic intensification witnessed in recent years. These changes in migration dynamics are correlated with a number of factors, including the growing demand for cheap labour, geographical and cultural proximity, and relatively liberal migration policies compared to those of other Central European countries.

Yet, according to the available data, the phenomenon of mass immigration still does not concern Poland. With the exception of the Czech Republic (4,5%), the countries of the region—Hungary (1,6%), Poland (0,4%) and Slovakia (1,2%)—are among the states with the lowest percentages of non-national population in the European Union. By comparison, typical migrant destination states such as Ireland, Austria or Germany have immigrant populations of 10% or higher.<sup>1</sup> It should also be underlined that despite the dynamic increase in immigration, Poland still remains a country of emigration with 2,397,000 Poles residing abroad, mostly in the United Kingdom, Germany, Holland and Ireland.

In January 2017, according to official statistics, 266,218 foreigners held a valid residence card in Poland, an increase of 54,349 compared to 2016. The highest number of foreigners lived in the Masovian Voivodship (the region in which Warsaw is located). Ukrainians are the largest demographic group of immigrants living in Poland, and their number is constantly growing as a result of, among other things, the deteriorating economic situation in Ukraine, extensive migration networks, geographical proximity as well as a relatively liberal migration policy. Other groups include Germans, Belarusians, Russians and Vietnamese.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Eurostat. (2016). *Non-national population by group of citizenship*. Retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Non-national\\_population\\_by\\_group\\_of\\_citizenship\\_1\\_January\\_2016\\_\(%C2%B9\).png&oldid=331045](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Non-national_population_by_group_of_citizenship_1_January_2016_(%C2%B9).png&oldid=331045).

2 Office for Foreigners. (2017). *Liczba osób, które posiadają ważne dokumenty potwierdzające prawo pobytu na terytorium RP* (stan na 1.01.2017 r.). Retrieved from <https://udsc.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Zestawienie-liczbowe-dotycz%C4%85ce-post%C4%99powa%C5%84-prowadzonych-wobec-cudzoziemc%C3%B3w-w-2016.xls>.

<sup>4</sup> Beata Łaciak, Justyna Segeš Frelak

Table 1. Number of people who hold valid documents confirming the right of residence in the Republic of Poland (2014–2016)

Citizenship	2014	2015	2016
Total	175,066	211,869	266,218
Armenia	3,586	3,817	3,516
Bielarus	9,924	11,172	11,428
China	4,782	5,675	7,042
Germany	20,200	22,010	23,924
Russia	10,739	9,972	10,583
Ukraine	40,979	65,866	103,457
Vietnam	9,042	9,130	10,269

Source: Office for Foreigners, 2017

Most of the migrants come to Poland for work—in 2016, the number of work permits exceeded 127,000. The majority of work permits in Poland were issued to citizens of Ukraine (106,223 in 2016), followed by citizens of Belarus (4,870) and Moldova (2,844).

Temporary migration of an economic character is much more common compared to medium and long-term migration. Unfortunately, short-term flows are very often not incorporated into national statistics, and it is, therefore, difficult to provide a detailed comparison between countries. Nevertheless, in 2016, 1,314,127 declarations of intention to commission work for foreigners were registered. The greatest interest in seasonal employment was noted in agriculture, services, and construction (57% concerned simple manual labour).<sup>3</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that official statistics do not fully reflect the actual scope of foreign employment in Poland, since certain groups are allowed to work without a work permit. A considerable number of migrants are also employed illegally. According to available estimates, this number could be as low as 50,000 or as high as 450,000.

There is also growing interest in Poland as a place of study. In 2016, there were 57,119 foreign students from 157 countries studying in Poland. Ukrainians account for over 53% of all foreign students in Poland.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. (2017). *Informacja nt. zatrudniania cudzoziemców w Polsce* (marzec 2017r.) Retrieved from [https://www.mpips.gov.pl/gfx/mpips/userfiles/\\_public/1\\_NOWA%20STRONA/Analizy%20i%20raporty/cudzoziemcy%20pracujacy%20w%20polsce/sprost\\_zezwolenia\\_280311.pdf](https://www.mpips.gov.pl/gfx/mpips/userfiles/_public/1_NOWA%20STRONA/Analizy%20i%20raporty/cudzoziemcy%20pracujacy%20w%20polsce/sprost_zezwolenia_280311.pdf)

The refugee phenomenon concerns Poland to a much lesser extent than other EU member states, both in terms of the number of applications and people actually residing there. In 2016, 12,321 persons applied for international protection in Poland.

Citizens of the Russian Federation constituted the largest group of applicants for international protection—8,994 people (73%); followed by Ukrainians—1,306 people (11%); citizens of Tajikistan—882 people; Armenia—344 people; and Georgia—124 people. Refugee status was granted to 108 foreigners, subsidiary protection to 150 foreigners, while 49 applicants received tolerated status.

Table 2: The number of application for international protection in Poland between 2001 and 2016 – selected / most numerous nationalities

Nationality	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
<b>Overall</b>	4,529	5,170	6,906	8,079	6,860	7,093	10,048	8,517	10,587	6,534	6,887	10,753	15,253	6,621	12,325	12,319
<b>Afghanistan</b>	416	598	247	57	6	17	10	7	14	25	36	103	50	34	19	22
<b>Armenia</b>	638	224	104	18	27	48	43	50	147	107	216	413	206	126	195	344
<b>Georgia</b>	92	39	30	47	47	35	31	71	4,214	1,082	1,735	3,234	1,245	652	394	124
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	4	3	10	19	18	39	21	7	13	37	43	41	67	101	147	72
<b>Pakistan</b>	31	55	154	210	69	66	61	21	19	27	20	43	36	48	26	28
<b>Russia</b>	1,501	3,055	5,563	7,183	6,248	6,405	9,239	7,760	5,726	4,795	4,305	6,084	12,849	2,772	7,989	8,992
<b>Syria</b>	10	1	4	7	7	3	6	10	7	8	12	107	255	104	295	47
<b>Tajikistan</b>	---	4	1	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	0	9	5	107	541	882
<b>Ukraine</b>	146	103	86	72	84	60	55	40	36	45	67	72	46	2,253	2,305	1,306

Source: Office for Foreigners 2017

As it has already been mentioned, the immigrant population is still relatively small, yet the recent inflows, especially in terms of short-term migration, have had a strong local impact both on the population and on the labour market, education and services.

### Recent trends in immigration policy (since 2015)

Steps to facilitate access to the Polish labour market were taken several years after the country joined the EU in 2004. This decision was primarily brought about by labour shortages, especially after a major wave of Polish emigration in 2004 and sustained economic development. These factors have given employers more incentive to seek out workers from outside of the country. As a result, the business community lobbied to open the Polish labour market to foreigners, which resulted in the liberalization of the access of selected

groups of foreigners to the national labour market, starting in 2006 with the introduction of relaxed rules for seasonal work.

Three main instruments have been employed in the partial opening of the Polish labour market. First, in order to deal with sectoral (mostly low-skilled) work shortages, citizens of Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia or Georgia were allowed to be employed seasonally without the need of a work permit. Foreigners from these countries have thereby obtained easy access to the Polish labour market (relative to other foreigners outside the European Union). In 2017, the system was amended to comply with the Seasonal Workers directive. Second, students in certain fields and university graduates have been granted the same employment rules and conditions as Poles. At the same time, the EU Blue Card, aimed at facilitating the immigration of qualified workers, remains essentially a dead letter in Poland. Finally, the Polish Card (Karta Polaka) allows people of Polish origin to obtain a long-term visa, with both entry and exit rights, as well as the right to secure legal employment without having to obtain a work permit and access to the Polish education system free of charge.

The above-mentioned policy decisions prioritize seasonal employment and immigration from Eastern Europe, mostly from Ukraine, which has been the unambiguous priority of past and present Polish authorities, targeting culturally and linguistically aligned migrants that do not pose a significant challenge in terms of integration.

These regulations allowing access to the labour market have, however, not been accompanied with any comprehensive integration measures. Due to a lack of political initiative and a perception of migration as mostly temporary and limited in terms of scale, no systemic integration policies have been implemented in Poland. Migrants encounter numerous barriers to their active participation in the labour market, including insufficient knowledge of the language, legal complications and unequal treatment by employers.

It should be also mentioned that measures aimed at the facilitation of labour immigration have not been accompanied by any information or awareness-raising campaigns targeting Polish society that would explain the reasons behind such decisions. Here it is worthwhile to look at a recent CBOS survey concerning attitudes towards other nations in Poland. Despite the fact that since the Orange Revolution a systematic decrease in the number of respondents expressing negative feelings towards Ukrainians has been observed, attitudes towards Ukrainians remain quite polarized with around one-quarter of the respondents expressing positive feelings and another third



expressing reluctance toward this nationality.<sup>4</sup>

Asylum seekers are allowed access to the labour market six months after an application for asylum is submitted if a decision has not been provided in this time frame, while refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection have access to the labour market according to the same rules as Polish citizens. The unavailability of (permanent) work and a surplus of jobs below their qualification, linked to their poor command of the language—a result of limited access to language lessons or their low quality—are the most critical problems faced by refugees. Access to appropriate housing, housing exclusion or even homelessness are also major problems immigrants face.

Only those who have been granted refugee status or subsidiary protection qualify for participation in the annual Individual Integration Program (Indywidualny Program Integracji - IPI), while other groups of migrants are not entitled to state funded support and have to rely on assistance from NGOs. Persons who have obtained permission for so-called tolerated stay are not entitled to the state-funded integration assistance, having only the right to assistance in the form of shelter, food, necessary clothing and designated benefits that cover the costs of food, medicines, household goods, etc.

When they first came to power, the new PiS government announced a continuation of the refugee relocation plan. However, after the March 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels, the new Prime Minister Beata Szydło abandoned the plan and announced that Poland would not accept any refugees. The Polish position, expressed by such government officials as Interior Minister Mariusz Błaszczak, emphasized that the redistribution mechanism is “a way to attract more migrants” rather than a solution to the crisis situation.

The new government first suspended and in March 2017, subsequently abolished the “Polish Migration Policy” document drawn up by the previous government. Reasons for this decision included the escalation of the refugee and migration crisis, as well as an increase in Ukrainian immigrants due to the military conflict with Russia. However, the most significant reason by far was the ideological incompatibility of the current government with the previous one. According to their official statements, the key differences included attitudes toward the idea of a multicultural society and the opening of doors to migrants of various cultures and religions. The political changes resulting from the elections in 2015 have put discussions on the Polish integration policy on hold. It should also be noted that the low priority given to the issue of

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<sup>4</sup> Omyła-Rudzka M. (2018). *Stosunek do innych narodów*. Centrum Badań Opinii Publicznej. Retrieved from <http://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/raporty.php>

integration is manifested not only by the suspension of work on integration policy but also by the reduction of funding for the NGO sector in these areas.<sup>5</sup>

The PiS government has recently expressed the following priorities in the field of migration policy: internal security (including border protection), the facilitation of channels for economic migration and the further easing of the inflow of people of Polish origin.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore safe to assume that integration policy will not be an important element in this new strategy.

### **Attitudes to migrants and refugees — changes since mid-2015**

Public opinion surveys show that Poles have very limited knowledge of immigration and are very sceptical regarding its possible benefits. This is directly linked to, among other things, a lack of direct experience and contact with foreigners as well as the relatively short history of Poland as a destination country. For example, according to an IOM/Ipsos opinion poll, the percentage of Poles who declared having contact with foreigners (mostly from Germany or Ukraine) during the last year is still very low at around 28%. Nearly two-thirds of respondents have some concerns about the inflow of foreigners to Poland, regardless of whether they have had any contact with foreigners in the last 12 months. Concerns related to the inflow of foreigners are more often expressed by persons relying on information from the mass media and from other people. About a quarter of the respondents consider the impact of migrants on the economy and labour market to be positive, while 45% see it as negative.<sup>7</sup>

Another public opinion poll showed that it is not only politicians who have a critical attitude towards refugees; a considerable share of Polish society also opposes admitting people seeking international protection. Between 2015 and 2017, Poles have changed from being cautious supporters to decisive opponents of admitting refugees into the country. In the early stages of the refugee crisis, Poles were less sceptical than citizens of other countries in the region, with 21% opposed to admitting any refugees and 58% agreeing to admit them temporarily into Poland. However, in the most recent research poll

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5 J. Segeš-Frelak. *Migration climate, discourse and policies in Poland*. In: *Migration politics and policies in Central Europe*, Bratislava: GLOBSEC Policy Institute 2017, p. 22-23.

6 *Potrzebne jest stworzenie nowej polityki migracyjnej*, <https://www.mswia.gov.pl/pl/aktualnosci/15912,Potrzebne-jest-stworzenie-nowej-polityki-migracyjnej.html>, [Access: 20.03.2017].

7 *Badanie na temat postaw wobec cudzoziemców w Polsce*, IOM: Warsaw 2016. Retrieved from [https://poland.iom.int/sites/default/files/IOM\\_Cudzoziemcy\\_raport\\_IX\\_2016.pdf](https://poland.iom.int/sites/default/files/IOM_Cudzoziemcy_raport_IX_2016.pdf)

conducted by CBOS, over half of respondents (52%) opposed the admission of refugees. Two out of five respondents (40%) believed they should be granted temporary shelter (until they can safely return to the country from which they came). Fewer than one in twenty respondents (4%) believed that they should be allowed to settle in Poland permanently. The same poll also showed a clear difference in attitudes between the supporters of the more conservative PiS political party and the more liberal PO. Among the supporters of PiS, 64% opposed receiving refugees and only 30% expressed support.<sup>8</sup>

The reasons for this shift in opinion are linked to, among others, the public debate and the rhetoric of political elites who have been using fear of immigration for their own political purposes. Furthermore, it has proved to be a very facile political tactic, with the majority of society being unable to ascertain the veracity of the often-xenophobic message. The general trend has also been to focus on the security issues connected with migration, which has resulted in the perception of refugees as a challenge to the state's internal security.

Additionally, the attitude of Poles towards accepting Ukrainian refugees has been more positive compared to accepting people from the Middle East or Africa. Significantly, more than half of respondents (58%) believed in helping their Eastern neighbours, while one in three (37%) did not.

At the same time, according to a Pew Research Center survey, a significant number of people see a connection between the refugee crisis and the threat of terrorism. Seventy percent of Poles believe that the presence of refugees could increase the likelihood of terrorism in Poland. Furthermore, a majority also think that they are a burden on the host country, taking jobs and social benefits.

Young people are the least in favour of receiving refugees. Young Poles, similarly to their counterparts in the Visegrad Group, are more sceptical towards migrants than young people in Germany or Austria. Only 26% of young Poles believe that immigrants contribute to a country's economic growth, compared to 42% of Germans. Moreover, Hungarians (79%), Slovaks (72%) and Poles (70%) do not see immigrants as having a positive influence on the demographic situation in their countries.

Furthermore, analysis of the various research results shows that PiS's strategy of building support by inciting fear—not only regarding the issue of

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8 *Stosunek Polaków do przyjmowania uchodźców*. CBOS: Warsaw January 2017, pp. 6.

migration—seems to have magnified society’s feelings of insecurity. Although Poland sees very few foreigners from Arab countries and has never been a victim of a terrorist attack, IPA/DEMOS polling from 2016 showed that Islamic terrorism is perceived as the biggest problem currently facing Poland.<sup>9</sup>

### **Public discourse, role of media and civil society**

Across the entire European Union, the refugee crisis has provided fodder for traditionally anti-immigration forces. In the case of the Visegrad countries, it has created a great opportunity for both populists and the mainstream right- or left-wing parties to garner support using fear and xenophobia.<sup>10</sup> The refugee crisis began at a very specific moment in the Polish public debate—just before the parliamentary and presidential electoral campaigns. “The invasion of refugees” and “are we ready for a wave of refugees?” are examples of common slogans appearing in the Polish press at the time. The crisis sparked a heated debate on the topic of migration on a scale previously unwitnessed. Typical anti-immigration talking points (“immigrants do not assimilate,” “they are terrorists,” “they are good for nothing,” etc.) became very popular and remain so. The public debate at the time was characterised by emotional narratives, the feeding of fears connected with Muslim refugees and a frequent neglect of facts and data.

The refugee crisis, combined with the political campaign rhetoric, caused an unprecedented outburst of xenophobia both in the public sphere and on the social media. At the peak of the campaign, PiS warned that Poland was in grave danger of a massive inflow of Muslim immigrants—and that only they could prevent it. At the same time, other parties (including left-wing parties) avoided taking a concrete position defending the decision to accept refugees in Poland. Only some activists in civil society tried (with limited success) to influence the debate with a positive message.

Unfortunately, the debate on refugees and migrants has been taking place on a very low level, and the stereotypical approach to the issue still seems to dominate. The media is also to blame, describing the phenomenon with military metaphors or comparing the refugee crisis to natural disasters and diseases. According to a report by Kultura Liberalna’s Public Debate

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9 “Mapping and responding to the rising culture and politics of fear in the European Union...” *Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself?* Demos: London 2017.

10 Ibidem.

Observatory, two motifs dominated the media: the “clash of civilizations” and the moral obligation to help and accept refugees. While radicalised language can be observed across a wide spectrum of the Polish media, news stories unfavourable or even hostile toward refugees could mostly be found in media closer to the right end of the political spectrum.<sup>11</sup>

The engagement of civil society demonstrates that solidarity with refugees is still not entirely lost in Poland. As is the case with many other countries, there is a segment of society that expresses solidarity and the basic humanitarian desire to help, but these efforts are often overshadowed by the anti-immigration discourse. Some activists, a part of civil society and academia have attempted to influence the debate through positive messages. It is worth mentioning the example of the Polish Day of Solidarity with Refugees, which took place on October 15, 2015, and involved 130 institutions (NGOs, theatres, museums, etc.), or the grassroots “Chlebem i solą” initiative and its activities to improve the refugee situation in Poland and Europe. What’s more, more than 40 Polish newspapers initiated the campaign “more knowledge—less fear—refugees in Poland” to fairly characterize the refugee problem and bring it to the attention of Poles.<sup>12</sup> Another initiative is Refugees Welcome Poland (RWP), which is the Polish wing of a German project that started in November 2014 and is now active in 12 countries.<sup>13</sup>

### Perspectives

Political parties are successfully exploiting anti-immigration fears and sentiments. As the example of Poland shows, the government’s strategy is to perpetually exploit the topic. This is done, for example, via the constant securitization of the migration issue or changes in the asylum and migration legislation in Poland. The question is, of course, how long will politicians be able to keep migration at the top of the agenda, especially since such rhetoric may be counterproductive—for example, when the Polish government combines xenophobic rhetoric with plans to further open up the labour market to Ukrainians.<sup>14</sup>

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11 Ł. Bertram & M. Jędrzejek. *Analiza Specjalna Obserwatorium Debaty Publicznej: Islamskie hordy, azjatycki najazd, socjalny dżihad. Jak polskie media piszą o uchodźcach*. „Kultura Liberalna”, 14 October 2015.

12 M. Czarnecki, M. Jałoszewski, T. Kwaśniewski. *Uchodźcy w Polsce. Więcej wiedzy, mniej strachu*. „Gazeta Wyborcza”, 18 September 2015.

13 J. Segeš-Frelak. *Migration climate, discourse and policies in Poland*. In: *Migration politics and policies in Central Europe*, Bratislava: GLOBSEC Policy Institute 2017, p. 22-23.

14 J. Segeš-Frelak. *Solidarity in European Migration Policy: The Perspective of the Visegrád States*. In: Grimmel A., Giang S. (eds.) *Solidarity in the European Union*. Springer: Cham 2017.

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## **Attitudes towards refugees and migrants in Poland – findings from the focus group interviews**

### **Methodology**

Focus group interviews were conducted in Poland between July and August 2017 in three locations. They were selected because they currently host refugee centres or had hosted them in the past. In Białystok, a city in the north-east of Poland with a population of about 300,000, four people participated in the study (three men and one woman). In Lublin, located in the south-east with a population of about 330,000, six people took part (three women and three men). Interviews were also conducted in one of the Warsaw boroughs – in Targówek, Praga Północ – where six people were interviewed (four women and two men). All of the interviewees were within the age group spanning from the end of secondary school to a little over 30 years of age.

### **Experience with refugees and other immigrants**

The personal experience of the focus group participants varied depending on their background. The only ones who have had contact with refugees were the focus group participants from Białystok. Out of the four interviewees, three have had or still have direct personal relations with refugees from Chechnya or from Ukraine, these usually included multiple acquaintances. The residents from Warsaw's neighbourhood on the right bank of the Vistula River have noticed mainly Ukrainians and sometimes people from India in their city. As regards the Ukrainians, there were suggestions that they might also be war refugees, but these opinions cannot be verified because no one from the focus group actually knew any of the Ukrainians in person, and only two out of the six interviewees have had any personal contacts with immigrants. The interviewees from Lublin usually have had rather limited contact with immigrants (mainly people from Ukraine) and slightly more frequently mentioned relations with foreigners temporarily in Poland who study in Lublin (mainly Ukrainians and Asians, without identifying any specific country) or who come to the city as part of some university programme or as tourists (mainly from western Europe). Nobody from this focus group had ever been in contact with a refugee.

The majority in all the focus groups are people who have had no personal contact with refugees, let alone any close relationship. The three people who have met refugees from Chechnya or Ukraine spoke about them in positive terms, although their remarks suggested that their contact was rather a casual acquaintance or some incidental meetings and they did not form a permanent relationship with those people. Apart from their positive opinions about the refugees they knew, some statements suggested cultural differences, particularly with regards to the Chechens, who were claimed to demonstrate a strong sense of internal solidarity and react aggressively to unfriendly behaviour towards their compatriots. The interviewees also mentioned inappropriate behaviour on the part of Chechen refugees who would accost women or commit theft. The other interviewees reported their contacts with foreigners. Almost all of them described their experience positively but were also eager to relate some opinions they had heard from others or negative incidents involving foreigners or refugees reported by their relatives or friends. In Lublin, the reports concerned mainly foreign students, who were seen as having priority in getting student accommodations, making excessive demands and being treated better than others by teachers at the university. In Warsaw and Białystok, despite declarations of the positive opinions about Ukrainians, the Ukrainians were accused of seeking to preserve their distinctness and national identity and not caring for the common good.

In all three cities, the interviewees agreed that the prevailing attitude towards immigrants and refugees in their community is negative. Immigrants are often perceived as culturally and religiously different, a feature mentioned even in reference to Ukrainians. In Lublin and Białystok, the interviewees cited opinions present in their community that immigrants take jobs away from Poles and agree to work for lower wages. In Warsaw, it was suggested that attitudes towards Ukrainians have recently become more positive in contrast to the idea of hosting potential refugees from the Middle East. One of the focus group participants expressly stated that Ukrainians are now treated as a lesser evil, and the other group members agreed.

### **Arguments against the admission of refugees**

Although the participants of the focus group interviews understood the difference between the terms “refugee” and “immigrant”, they often treated them as the same in their discussions. One might get the impression that from

their perspective, it is not important if someone is a refugee or an immigrant, but what matters is rather the cultural closeness of those who come to Poland and their willingness to assimilate. Their statements revealed lack of awareness about the forms and scope of assistance offered to refugees in Poland, and questions about refugees were primarily understood in terms of the current immigration crisis.

All the focus group interviewees had no problem coming up with arguments against Poland's taking in refugees. While the interviewees presented these arguments as the views circulating in their communities in discussions concerning this topic, they themselves agreed with them. In Warsaw and in Białystok, some individuals demonstrated more ambivalent or less categorical attitudes and challenged the reasons for the lack of approval for accepting refugees. The most clearly negative attitudes were expressed by the interviewees in Lublin; they had the greatest concerns and provided a variety of arguments against the admission of refugees.

*Fear as an argument against accepting refugees*

An argument against the admission of refugees to Poland that was raised in all three cities was the fear of terrorist attacks. Some focus group participants (in Warsaw and in Białystok) shared the reflection that these fears are somewhat irrational – that we are constantly exposed to other threats which do not have such a radical impact on our attitudes and that not every refugee is a terrorist. But even they were quick to find counter-arguments – such as, that the perpetrators of terrorist attacks in recent years have always been Muslims and that in Poland, where there are no such refugees, such attacks have not taken place. The sense of a threat from Islamic terrorism was evident in nearly all responses. In some of the interviews (especially in Lublin), it was additionally emphasised that Islam, in general, is a hostile religion, in conflict with other religions, and therefore, accepting refugees from Arab and predominantly Muslim countries poses a threat to our security.

An issue frequently raised by the interviewees was also the problem of the refugees from the Middle East being culturally alien. What were described as different cultural norms concerning marriage and family were emphasised, as were differences originating from religion and the opinion that the refugees are not willing to assimilate with the receiving societies but rather want to impose their own rules, and that they expect their rights to be respected and want to be able to practice their religion freely. This issue was stressed



particularly strongly in Lublin, where the interviewees explicitly said that they were against the Islamization of Poland and Europe, and that they did, indeed, see such a risk. Here are some examples of statements demonstrating such concerns and emphasising the cultural and religious otherness of the refugees: “As a believing Christian, I would like to live in a country where most people are Christians. [...] Accepting people of a different religion, because the majority of them are of a different religion, may lead to the excessive spreading of that other religion. [...] One must remember that Muslim leaders have also talked about the Islamization of Europe. I am against it as a defender of the European, Christian-European, European, Latin civilisation. [...] In my view, certain cultural barriers are impossible to overcome.” (M-3, L); “[...] Why am I against it? [...] I did not have an opinion about it at the time, so I decided that since every religion has its source, I should read the Koran and the hadiths. Having read them, I know what is inside the Koran, I know what things are in there and I would say I cannot agree, either with the brutality or with the way women are treated according to the Koran, or with what should be done with atheists. [...] After reading the Koran and the hadiths, I cannot support such a group [...]. In the Koran, there is a specific description of what to do and how to fight all those who do not share the same religion [...] For me, this is also the basis for my views opposing this religion, for being against the people of this religion entering our Europe [...]. Wherever [it] stands, the land belongs to Islam.” (M-2, L).

Cultural otherness was also mentioned in other cities, together with the perceived reluctance of refugees to respect the social rules. Examples of negative experiences in Western Europe and Scandinavia have been pointed out. The interviewees claimed that after the number of refugees grew in those countries, the crime rate and ethnic conflicts also increased, whereas the refugees and immigrants failed to assimilate, forming ghettos dangerous for the native population of a given country. The participants of the focus group interviews were eager to refer to the experiences of their acquaintances, friends and relatives who work and live abroad and have extremely negative opinions about immigrants from the Middle East. The participants from Białystok also drew attention to the fact of the poor assimilation of Chechens in Poland.

Most participants, when responding to moderators’ suggestions or questions of whether they would be willing to take in non-Muslim refugees,

also were doubtful. Participants argued that it is difficult to be certain what religion people confess, that the cultural differences are too big, and even that refugees may feel worse in our relatively homogenous society than in the multicultural western societies.

#### *Arguments against relocation*

Almost all participants of the focus group interviews who voiced their opinion about the relocation of refugees were against it, viewing it as an attempt by the European Union to encroach on our sovereignty. The thought that the EU also means us and that being part of the EU implies certain obligations never came up. The relocation of refugees was treated as an attempt to impose something on Polish society against its will; it was suggested that a referendum should be held concerning the issue.

A recurring argument against relocation was a belief that the refugees do not want to settle here at all, and that such a situation of double compulsion could only lead to conflicts. Moreover, opposition is justified by the fact that it is not Poland but other European countries that should have a moral obligation, since they had formed colonies in the past and brought immigrants from Africa and the Middle East to their shores in order to address their own labour deficits. Sporadic statements also suggested that the current migration crisis is a result of the policies of the Western superpowers, which, by interfering in the internal affairs of developing countries, have led to wars and conflicts.

One might think that some participants found the rhetoric of the government, whose representatives often emphasize that we do not want to accept the mandatory refugee quota because we have already accepted a million of refugees from Ukraine, appealing (although none of them openly suggested it). Even though our interviewees realized the difference between refugees and immigrants, they frequently, when justifying their reluctance to refugee relocation, invoked the example the Ukrainians whom we have accepted, to whom we are not hostile and to whom we have offered a chance to assimilate with our society. An isolated opinion even appeared that Poland should demand that the European Union accept the relocation of the refugees from Ukraine, whose number has recently increased so significantly that one sees them everywhere. Our interviewee stated, "I believe that this is in fact a logical error, as there are a million Ukrainians already here and there is war in Ukraine. [...] Other countries should really follow our example. The Crimea has been separated from Ukraine, and indeed, it is true that some are

migrants-refugees, and a big part of them are economic migrants. I do not know the proportions regarding [people] from Syria, Eritrea, Tunisia, Egypt, other regions from which they come to Europe because the European Union's external borders are unguarded. But it seems to me that here, as regards the number of Ukrainians and immigrants, in absolute numbers, there are more of them than of the people from war affected areas in Africa or in the Middle East. [...] Why are they talking about moving 7,000 migrants from Germany to Poland? Because, allegedly, there are 300,000 or 500,000 migrants. And we do not say, 'We have a million Ukrainians. Take 10,000 of them to your country.' Well, in my view, this is a sign of racism. That a Ukrainian is in fact a citizen of a different category than a person from Syria? [...] We should really balance these arguments, and we certainly cannot say that Poland is not taking in immigrants. Because we turn a blind eye to the facts. If someone says that they are not refugees because they have arrived here for economic reasons – well haven't a lot of people come in boats for economic reasons? I am doubtful, maybe out of ten people, perhaps one or two lived there in Aleppo, because I find it hard to imagine that all those who have arrived used to live in Aleppo.” (M-2, W)

This statement is also an example of another argument that frequently appears in discussions – that we do not have an obligation to take them in, because they are not refugees, but rather, economic immigrants, people seeking a better, easier life. This is a recurring opinion in all the focus group interviews, additionally reinforced with arguments that the process of getting into Europe is organised by traffickers and involves expenses, and therefore the immigrants are not fleeing war or persecution, but are trying to buy themselves a better future. The majority of interviewees claimed that distinguishing refugees from economic immigrants was impossible, and thus in their view, the moral obligation to offer help to people in need, to provide protection when their life is in danger, is somehow “diluted”. The logic of this argument is the following: since we are not able to establish who is a real refugee, we should treat everyone as economic immigrants, and then we are not obliged to take them in or provide any special assistance. All the more so, as the participants of the focus group interviews clearly articulated their strong belief that immigrants from Africa and the Middle East are counting on receiving European welfare benefits and that they are not interested in working and assimilating into our society.

In addition, they considered Poland's offering such assistance highly unfair, because many of our own citizens are in a difficult life situation and cannot count on satisfactory help from the state. Many of those who cannot cope in Poland decide to emigrate for economic reasons and cannot count on any special treatment in the receiving country, they must learn the language and respect the legal and social norms of the country in which they live. The interviewees willingly declared their readiness to help the residents of areas affected by armed conflicts, but on site in their home countries.

In several comments, some clearly critical opinions appeared about the behaviour of people who escape from war-torn regions, who they felt should be fighting for their country and after victory, should raise it from ruins. This is very well illustrated by the following statements: "Healthy young people, who rather than fight for their country as Poles did, simply run away, well, this is not understandable and meets with a lot of opposition." (F-4, W); "Why are 70% of those who escape from there men of my age who could well be defending their country? You don't run from the war; you don't leave women and children behind in the midst of war and just run away yourself." (M-2, L); "By helping them here, encouraging immigrants to come, we cause a situation where the economies of those countries will not have a chance to recover and drive the economic development of their country, because those who are running away are young people, people of working age, strong and hardworking, that is, people who can work [...] so who is going to rebuild those countries, such as Senegal or Afghanistan, Iraq or even Syria, when the situation calms down?" (M-1, B)

To sum up, it can be said that the majority of the interviewees are more or less strongly against Poland taking in refugees. This attitude is, in our opinion, the result of a combination of their anxieties and carefully constructed rationalizations. The anxiety is raised by terrorist attacks in Europe which they associate with the presence of refugees from Muslim countries and the cultural and religious distinctness of Muslims. Negative attitudes reinforce the specific rationalizations explaining the refusal to help. One of them is "sepization",<sup>15</sup> that is, making the problem unimportant, treating

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15 Sepization – using the invalidating practice in the discourse of considering something to be SEP (somebody else's problem). An analysis of the Polish political discourse from the point of view of problems that are thus made unimportant has become the subject of a study edited by Marek Czyżewski, Kinga Dunin and Andrzej Piotrowski *Cudze problemy. O ważności tego, co nieważne. [Somebody Else's Problems. About the importance of the unimportant]*, Warsaw 1991.

the refugee crisis as something that does not concern us. Another form of rationalization is shifting the blame: it is the refugees themselves who are to blame because they are running away from war rather than fighting; they practise an aggressive religion; they treat women badly; they are seeking an easy life; they are lazy, demanding, unwilling to assimilate. Another form of rationalization is explaining negative attitudes with the defence of higher values: the safety of our citizens, the defence of independence and the right to self-determination. In the opinions of our interlocutors: we are trying to be open; we take in Ukrainians; and we also want to help others but in a better way than Europe is doing it, that is, in the immigrants' countries of origin. It is difficult to determine, whether the attitudes of Poles are reinforced by the public statements made by politicians about the refugee crisis, or whether the politicians, realising what the public mood is, skilfully appeal to people's anti-immigrant sentiments. Perhaps we are dealing here with a feedback loop.

### Sources of information

The media certainly play an important role in shaping attitudes about immigrants and refugees. Regardless of the critical opinions about the media presented by the interviewees, most of them admitted that they were drawing their knowledge about refugees and immigrants mainly from the media, especially television and the Internet. In fact, daily newspapers or weeklies were mentioned only in Warsaw. The interviewees agreed that the media do not provide reliable information or facilitate understanding of the conflicts and the reasons for the refugee crisis. Most also emphasized the lack of objectivity of the media, describing them as right-wing or left-wing, conservative or liberal. Therefore, the image of refugees presented in the media, in the opinions of the interviewees, reflects the political and ideological outlook represented by a given TV station or a web portal. Some of the discussion participants emphasized that when they try to acquire more objective knowledge, they look for information in all sorts of mass media, which sometimes present, as they claimed, completely different pictures and assessments of the same phenomena or events. In our study, we did not ask interviewees about their ideological outlook, political sympathies or views on issues other than those concerning refugees and immigrants. Only some individuals mentioned their political views or their attitude to religion in their statements. It is therefore hard to draw any conclusions as to whether the respondents represent left-wing, right-wing, conservative or liberal views. The majority of participants

drew attention to the fact that the media, on the one hand, represent different political and ideological options, while on the other, they report mainly events that are sensational or spectacular, evoking emotions. This results in a rather negative picture of refugees in the media, who are being featured mainly when there is a terrorist attack, hooliganism or some delinquent behaviour such as theft, robbery, rape. Refugees are generally presented as an urgent social problem. Depictions of refugees in overcrowded boats on the coasts of southern Europe or reports about the deaths during such journeys or the dramatic fate of the residents of war-affected areas are a little less common. Both types of reports are intended to provoke strong emotions, and this in fact happens. The interviewees claimed that the negative image of refugees prevails in public television and in the right-wing media, whereas other images of refugees appear in the liberal media. The interviewees (two people from Lublin) who explicitly declared conservative right-wing sympathies saw the reports in the liberal media as attempts to soften the image of refugees and immigrants. They claimed that refugees and immigrants are portrayed as citizens who for years have been doing very well in our society and who came to Poland from different parts of the world to find a better life or protect themselves from war or persecution. The interviewees were critical about such media reports and viewed them as elements of pro-refugee propaganda.

The vast majority of respondents claimed that they try to consult different media sources representing different political and ideological options in order to be able to form their own opinion. They also unanimously emphasized that the media focus on sensation, make comments and judgements, and only to a limited extent deliver objective and reliable knowledge about the armed conflicts, the reasons for migration, the situation of immigrants in individual countries, the assistance granted to them, the scope of their assimilation, etc.

In all the focus groups, there were also statements suggesting that the issue of refugees and immigrants is a topic of discussions with acquaintances or friends or on Internet forums, providing additional sources of information for them. In Lublin and Białystok, the interviewees often referred to the opinions of their acquaintances or relatives working abroad who have contact with representatives of different nations, including refugees from the Middle East, and emphasized their negative attitude to accepting such refugees in Poland or, generally speaking, in Europe.

In their opinions, the interviewees referred to media and other people's reports much more often than to their own experience. It is worth recalling

that only few of the participants of the focus group interviews have had any personal contact with refugees or immigrants.

### **Attitudes towards hate speech and violence against refugees**

The participants of all the focus groups had heard about cases of hostility and verbal or physical abuse directed at persons of nationalities other than Polish. Only a few of the incidents described by the respondents from Białystok involved refugees; they usually involved other foreigners, particularly those who looked different from the average Pole. In the Warsaw group, nobody had directly witnessed such a situation, rather stories were recalled that were known from the media, often from outside Warsaw. The interviewees emphasized that immigrants who work and assimilate in Poland do not arouse negative feelings. They gave numerous examples of positive relations or the lack of discriminatory treatment on account of their nationality with regard to the Vietnamese immigrants working in retail or in the catering business, or Ukrainians employed at construction sites or in restaurant chains or supermarkets. A majority of the focus group participants from Lublin and Białystok described overt manifestations of hostile behaviour that they knew from their own cities – ranging from verbal abuse to physical attacks with serious injuries. They talked about insults sometimes hurled at dark-skinned foreigners or at people with slightly darker complexions; they said that even Poles or people with Polish roots with swarthy complexions can be taken for foreigners and subject to abuse. The interviewees from Białystok mentioned incidents of conflicts between Poles and Chechens at school and on a housing estate, but they also added that sometimes it was possible to resolve those conflicts peacefully. In fact, all the interviewed persons from Białystok and Lublin were critical about such behaviour, suggesting that the residents of their cities were not used to people who are different; they also mentioned that ethnic or national prejudice could be formed on the basis of a single bad experience or information acquired from the media. There were also some scattered statements looking for an explanation for such behaviour in the growing nationalist sentiments in Poland and in Europe. Nevertheless, criticism of such behaviour does not translate into more favourable attitudes towards refugees.

In the statements of the interviewees, there is no link between the condemnation of aggression directed towards foreigners and approval for accepting them in Poland. In spite of their reluctance to accept refugees in

Poland, their critical opinions of their culture and religion and stereotypical ideas about the terrorist tendencies of the followers of Islam, the majority of participants do not consider themselves as racists or xenophobes. This is evident from their casual statements that there are, sometimes, intolerant people in Polish society, but “we”, the young, are more open. Therefore, they do not have a problem with criticising racially-based aggression while believing that their dislike of refugees is justified. Additionally, the respondents found various mitigating circumstances for the perpetrators of racist aggression. This was particularly visible in Lublin, where although all the participants knew of at least a few examples of hostile reactions towards people of a different skin colour or of physical violence carried out against foreigners, the significance of the ethnic or nationality factor was downplayed. Such behaviour was described as hooliganism or the practice of subcultures (townies). At the same time, they were critical of the fact that every attack on a foreigner is treated as a manifestation of ethnicity-based aggression and publicised in the media.

#### **Response to pro-refugee arguments**

The vast majority of the interviewees rejected the very notion that since refugees are in a difficult situation, we should help them. They denied any sense of duty on our part, as well as rejected any appeals to Christian values or European solidarity. Quite the opposite, some claimed that our duty is empathy towards our own citizens, as is concern for their safety and not taking upon ourselves further complications and burdens. In the participants’ statements, there never appeared any appeal to Polish Catholicism or the stance of Pope Francis. On the other hand, historical issues were invoked several times, that is, the fact that Poles were also refugees during the Second World War, but this was usually followed by remarking that most people did not escape but fought against the invader.

The interviewees explained that we do not have any obligations towards inhabitants of remote, culturally alien countries in a situation where many Polish citizens cannot cope with their own various problems and cannot count on any effective help from the state. They described it in the following way: “In Poland, too, OK there is no war, but there are different difficult situations, natural disasters. For instance, there was flood somewhere not long ago. Recently, well, on a much smaller scale, but there was a hurricane and there are people in need there, too. And I believe that it should be fair [...]. It seems to me that this aversion, to some extent, stems from the fact that if a Pole has a



problem then [the reaction is] ‘you have a problem’ and when a refugee has a problem, we are told that we must take care of him.” (M-2, W)

Moreover, the lack of a sense of obligation was explained by the fact that Poland was not responsible for the existing situation – that is, the conflicts, the poverty or the war. They talked about it in the following manner: “We rather do not have the sense that we have a duty to help. I do not feel that it has been our fault, that we have to take them in and play host to them.” (M-1, W); “These consequences are the responsibility of those countries that are directly taking part in those conflicts. You can’t make a war somewhere far away and here pretend that nothing is happening and life is wonderful.” (F-2, L); “Obviously they are running away from difficult conditions, but one must remember who has brought those conditions onto them. They have been brought on by the interests of politicians and big business. [...] Poland or, in fact, no other country of Central and Eastern Europe had anything to do with it. Those who did include the US, Russia, France and Germany. There are, of course, different sides of the conflict. Turkey, as well, because they too probably have some interests there.” (M-3, L)

In the view of some of the focus interview participants, the refugees do need help, their situation is very difficult and without external support they will not cope. They should be helped for humanitarian reasons, but at the same time, nearly all the participants agreed that this does not have to mean taking the refugees in. The vast majority suggested helping them in their place of residence, at best, in cooperation with other countries. That could mean providing food and financial and logistic assistance, and in Lublin, there was even the suggestion for the need of military help, also from Poland, in the comments of two interviewees. Above all, however, the majority accepted the idea of support in the construction and reconstruction of infrastructure that would enable the country to recover and develop. The interviewees emphasized that such aid would be more effective, and would have the potential for producing positive effects in the long term, and besides, it would not expose the residents to the additionally traumatic experience of abandoning their own country and adapting to a culturally alien society. Moreover, the focus group participants (especially in Warsaw and Białystok) emphasized that it is not a problem to take in refugees in general, because procedures for that have long been in place in Poland, and people escaping war or persecution can apply for refugee status in Poland. In their opinion, the

problem with the current situation is that there are attempts to impose a pre-determined number of immigrants on Poland, and that they are from specific countries that are culturally and religiously alien. There was a strong belief that the cultural barriers are so great that they make assimilation in Poland impossible. Some respondents also argued that, as European experience shows, being uprooted from one's own culture and not assimilating into a new one leads to frustration and aggression, and immigrants become susceptible to the manipulations of radical Islamic groupings. Only two female interviewees (out of the 16 participants in all the focus groups) saw a current need to take in refugees as the most effective form of temporary help to war victims, although both of them expressed certain doubts. The ambivalence of one of them was related to the fact that most of the terrorist attacks in Europe have been carried out by the descendants of immigrants or refugees, so therefore taking them in may have dramatic consequences for Poland in the future, whereas the other woman suggested accepting refugees as a sort of voluntary and individual act. She thought it was a mistake to impose quotas on countries, forcing them to take in refugees, making it a duty of the state and burdening all citizens with it. At the same time, however, she did not accept the outright refusal to accept refugees into Poland. The quota set by the European Union could be, however, in her view, the upper limit of the number of refugees that could be invited to Poland by charities, individuals or willing families who would undertake the obligation to provide for them and later support their assimilation.

One of interviewees in Lublin, rejecting the possibility of taking in refugees, suggested a radical solution to the refugee problem. As he stated: "I believe that this issue should be solved completely differently. But this is probably impossible in today's world. All members of ISIS should be killed off, because I think that these are not people to whom you can talk in a normal manner. They are religious fanatics. For me, it is like a sect. Special groups should be sent out there to do away with those people. Then the refugees would not have to come here because it would be safe there." (M-1, L) It is worth noting that the focus group from Lublin was generally the most radical in its attitudes. Half of the interviewees categorically rejected the possibility of Poland accepting even a single refugee. The others also had doubts and tended to make any approval dependent on a number of conditions, such as taking in only a small number of verified and thoroughly vetted refugees, making sure that they

never had contacts with radical followers of Islam and obtaining from them a commitment to assimilate into our society. At the same time, the interviewees were well aware that meeting these conditions was impossible. So, this was, in fact, a rather specific example of rationalization and “saving face” – it is not that we are not capable of empathy and help, we are ready to help but only under certain conditions, and it is not our fault that in the current situation, these conditions cannot be fulfilled.

Most of the focus group interview participants see no positive aspects of cultural contacts with immigrants or refugees arriving and settling in Poland. The proposition that the newcomers can enrich the culture of the country receiving them is received with a great dose of scepticism or even distaste. Only a few of those interviewed stated that it is possible that contacts with other cultures can be interesting; as an example they mentioned learning about the culinary culture of other nations, but they often added that in the situation of the current refugee crisis, it is difficult to see a possibility of enriching our culture by taking in refugees. A few issues were emphasized which in their view make it difficult or even impossible. The first is their cultural dissimilarity. The interviewees invoked what they saw as the completely different religious rules which govern family relations and the treatment of women or animals. They emphasized that this would not only not enrich our culture, but it would provoke aversion, criticism, rejection. The second reason is the immigrants’ lack of assimilation in the receiving countries. In the opinion of the respondents, any dialogue, familiarization or cultural exchange is impossible, because immigrants do not learn the language and form ghettos, and therefore, their contacts with the culture of the receiving society are very limited and it is therefore hard to talk about its enrichment. The unfriendly attitude of Poles themselves, which also makes the possibility of cultural exchange difficult, was mentioned less often. Moreover, the interviewees claimed that Poles are attached to their culture and tradition. In the interviews, the following comments were made: “I do not know whether it is possible here at all [for the culture to be enriched by the immigrants]. Because we are so sensitive about our culture.” (F-3, W); “I believe that in the country of Poland, it is the Poles who should mostly decide about the country’s culture.” (M-3, L) At the same time, however, they emphasized that Poland’s culture, like the cultures of other European countries, is evolving, changing and developing, whereas the traditionalism of the Muslims hampers development. In these

statements, a sense of superiority could clearly be discerned, the conviction that our culture, belonging to the family of European cultures, cannot be enriched through contacts with cultures of the nations which we perceive as backward. The majority of the interviewees stated plainly that the potential refugees cannot enrich our culture, because they have nothing attractive to offer in the realm of culture, since it is hard to consider religious fanaticism, the low and completely dependent position of women in the family and society or the cruelty of the punishments for departure from the rules in this category. And these were the most basic associations with the culture of the refugees. Therefore, the very expression “enriching the culture of the country accepting the foreigners” evoked great aversion. Some of the interviewees explained that while the word “enrich” has positive semantic connotations, they could not see any positive aspects in contacts with foreigners. The most radical focus interview participants in Lublin argued that there is no such thing as enriching the culture; national cultures are rooted in the tradition of a given community and contacts with cultures of other nations can lead only to getting to know these cultures, to tolerating them, but not to their interpermeation or mixing. Opinions such as this are not merely evidence of gaps in the respondents’ education or a simple lack of perceptiveness in observing the social reality, they are also surprising in a city whose residents are not ethnically or religiously homogeneous, even though, admittedly, there are no refugees. One could therefore think that cultural diffusion is a fact there, but a fact that is repressed and denied by some.

Opinions about the influence of immigrants on the economic development of the receiving country are more diverse. About a half of the interviewees believed that economic immigrants trying to take up work in the professions in which we do not have enough manpower often contribute to economic development. Moreover, if these people are working legally, they pay taxes in Poland, which is good for the economy. The respondents cited examples of occupations which do not require very high skills where we currently have deficits on the labour market and where it is possible that the problem will be aggravated due to demographic decline. The interviewees from Białystok drew attention to the fact that immigrants are often people who remain in Poland after completing their studies here, so they are well educated, and their work improves our economic potential. They also agreed with the statement that the next generation of immigrants will even further economically strengthen

the country to which their parents had arrived. Immigrants' children assimilate more easily than their parents and get educated. As an example of immigrants strengthening the Polish economy, Ukrainians were mentioned and their employment in various branches of the economy. The interviewees often described refugees as not strengthening the receiving country economically (as opposed to economic immigrants), but only burdening it with additional welfare benefit payments. In addition, they believed that a large number of those seeking the refugee status are in fact economic immigrants who are trying to use the receiving state and, while not working, take advantage of "refugee privileges", as it was put. Another common opinion was that the next generation would not change this situation, because it will be socially conditioned to be helpless and to expect state support. Thus, in the views of the interviewees, refugees would be a financial burden for the state and increase poverty levels. Some of the respondents did not see any positive economic benefits of economic immigration. They drew attention to the fact that economic growth in our times takes place thanks to the development of technologies that require innovation, knowledge and highly specialist skills, whereas immigrants are predominantly people who are poorly educated, perform simple work that does not require qualifications and often work illegally (and therefore do not pay taxes). Moreover, as evidence of further negative economic effects of immigrants' work, it was mentioned that they accept lower wages, which disturbs the market, increases unemployment among Poles or forces them to emigrate in search of higher earnings. In the Lublin focus group, two participants supported eliminating immigrants from the labour market, because even if they do solve some temporary problems on the labour market, they generate a number of other problems (cultural differences, conflicts, increase in crime). One of the interviewees presented his concept for a complete re-polonization of the labour market. He suggested that Poland should somehow survive these few years without introducing immigrants onto the labour market despite the labour deficits. He suggested wage increases in some unpopular occupations, financial incentives to stay in employment longer and quality vocational education, so that in the future Poles find it financially attractive to work in the country, even in positions which are now occupied by immigrants.

Considering the options of integration activities addressed to refugees or immigrants settling in Poland, almost all the focus interview participants

agreed that the process takes time and can be faced with many obstacles and problems.<sup>16</sup> According to the interviewees, an important issue is the joint education of the youngest, because children are usually not yet prejudiced and can establish friendly relations, while personal contacts and familiarity further increase the chances for harmonious coexistence. At this point, some respondents mentioned the problem of parents passing their dislike of foreigners on to their children, and their negative responses both to conflicts and to friendships between their children and immigrants. The interviewees from Warsaw suggested that the school attended by refugee children in Targówek does not have a good reputation, and that that is the reason why parents are not willing to register their children in that particular school. Participants from Białystok drew attention to the bias in the way schools teach tolerance. According to them, the curricula are addressed mainly to Polish children and are supposed to encourage them to be friendly with their schoolmates of different skin colour or coming from another country. According to the interviewees, only a two-way teaching of mutual tolerance and respect – not only on the part of the receiving society, but also on the part of the newcomers – can be effective. One of the interviewed women from Białystok talked about the educational-integration activities conducted by university students and the University Foundation in Białystok, which organises workshops for children, theatre performances and publishes fairy tales and books to help overcome stereotypes about others/foreigners. The focus group participants also emphasized the need for change in social attitudes. They drew attention to the deeply-rooted aversion to people of a different skin colour or different customs. In their opinion, it is important to educate society, to show that we do not, in fact, differ so much in spite of the fact that we may look different. In this regard, a special role was attributed to direct contacts, which let people get accustomed to otherness, and to the media. According to the respondents, the media can bring different nationalities and cultures closer, mainly through reliable information, and not through comments that are usually perceived as biased or imposing certain views. They can also present positive examples of integration, of the harmonious co-existence of people of all sorts of nationalities and cultures. Reliable information and specific data, without manipulation or any attempt to influence the opinion of the audience, can also be important for better understanding the current situation of refugees.

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16 The issue of integration activities was not raised at all in the focus group in Lublin.

The focus group members in Białystok drew attention to the important role of the church, which for the older generation is an opinion-forming centre and could do more to encourage attitudes of openness towards foreigners. In their view, mass events attended by foreigners with a friendly message could play an important role in getting people accustomed to “otherness”. As an example, the interviewees mentioned the Catholic World Youth Days, emphasizing that those events were not accompanied by any signs of racism or xenophobia.

### **Other issues specific for particular countries**

Apart from intense concerns about terrorism, the discussions also revealed equally strong xenophobia, peculiarly justified by the fact that Poland is relatively homogeneous ethnically and nationally. This homogeneity was also considered a good justification for the Polish policy towards refugees. From the analysis of the focus interviews, this justification can be explained as follows: we do not have experience in coexisting with representatives of other nations who may stand out in our homogeneous society; therefore, both for them and for us, the compulsory settling of refugees would be very difficult and would lead to conflict. The interviewees were critical about manifestations of aggression against foreigners, but they treated xenophobia a bit like something socially obvious that is hard to change, and perhaps one should ask whether they indeed would like to change it. In spite of their declared belief that aggression against foreigners should be treated as a marginal phenomenon, and that xenophobia is rather a characteristic of the older generation, the poorly educated or residents of provincial areas, it was our interviewees themselves, representing well-educated young people living in big cities, who often presented views and attitudes that pointed to stereotypical perceptions of foreigners, full of prejudice and aversion towards them.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Participants of the focus group interviews could very clearly distinguish between foreigners temporarily or permanently living in Poland and refugees, whose reception into Poland could take place as a result of the European Union relocation scheme. Very similar stances were presented by the participants from the cities that potentially have experience with refugees (Białystok, Warsaw) and those from the city that did not have such experience. The residents of Białystok referred to their

contacts with refugees from Chechnya, but one gets the impression that this has not had any considerable impact on their attitudes towards the refugees in question. It is puzzling that even positive reports do not reduce the anxiety and aversion to the possibility of Poland taking in refugees. Regardless of their political or ideological views (a matter which was not raised but was sometimes revealed in participants' remarks), the main narrative is the same as the one presented by the PiS government and the government-controlled public media. The current refugees are perceived as culturally and religiously alien, as potential terrorists, and the refusal to accept them is regarded as the best way to ensure the safety of our citizens.

### **Conclusions**

- A negative narrative about refugees is prevalent in the public discourse, which leads to a systematic growth of the negative attitudes towards taking them in.
- The respondents draw their knowledge about the refugee crisis from the media, mainly the Internet, but also from television and the press; although they are critical about the objectivity of the media, they nevertheless invoke media reports when justifying their opinions.
- In the views of the respondents, the media-formed negative image of refugees prevails.
- There is a polarization of the media image of the current refugee crisis – a prevalence of two symbolic, simplified portrayals: 1) young men in refugee camps, information about their attacks or acts of terror; 2) children wounded in the war, the dead bodies of children on the coast of Italy or Greece.
- There is clear opposition to the European Union's imposition of quotas and the obligation to relocate refugees – emotional outrage at the EU's interference running counter to social expectations (there is a lack of the sense that the European Union also means us).
- There is a complete lack of references to the need for European solidarity. If anything at all, there is a belief that there is a moral or humanitarian obligation to help people in need.
- Refugees are associated with a strong sense of fear of terrorist attacks.
- There is a strong sense of alienation and aversion towards Islam as a religion that is hostile to Christianity and to Western civilization and



- its cultural norms in general.
- There is a lack of knowledge about refugees, their situation and reasons for fleeing their country, and a prevalence of stereotypical and propagandistic opinions according to which, the war is used by those who escape as an excuse to get into Europe.
  - The lack of knowledge about the assistance offered to refugees in Poland reinforces stereotypical ideas about welfare support accompanied with the complete passivity and demanding nature of the refugees.
  - There is a belief that instead of taking in refugees, it is possible to apply some more effective (and safer for Europe) forms of assistance in their countries of origin (suggestions ranging from military support in order to defeat the Islamic State to reconstruction, development, financial, medical and food aid, etc.).
  - The government narrative about Poland accepting refugees from Ukraine instead of Africa or the Middle East appears to have been effective. In spite of the fact that the majority of Ukrainians in Poland are migrants with the right of temporary residence and temporary work permits who do not receive any support from Poland, it is a fairly common belief that Poland helps war refugees from Ukraine.
  - An opposition, apparent in some statements, has been drawn between the active, hardworking, culturally close and willingly integrating immigrants from Ukraine (whom the Polish people accept) and the culturally and religiously alien immigrants from Africa or the Middle East who are unwilling to integrate (and whom Polish society does not want to have within the borders of its country).
  - There is an alarming tendency to ignore the signs of xenophobia or racism, coupled with attempts to explain them with the homogeneous character of Polish society, suggesting the incidental nature of such events.

### **Recommendations**

- It is very important to change the narrative in the public debate, which at this time seems rather unlikely.
- School could play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards “others”, as well as in building a sense of European or supranational solidarity, with an appropriate curriculum including content

concerning the place of Poland in Europe, cultural diversity, European and non-European cultures.

- References to a sense of moral obligation or empathy as a reason for accepting refugees that have appeared in media reports and commentary seem to have been completely ineffective. What is needed is, rather, reliable information and education.
- Regarding the declared criticism of the media and the simultaneous search for different sources of information, including those that represent opinions different from one's own, it seems important to reduce judgement and commentary in the media and replace them with facts and concrete data that show both the positive and the negative effects of migration.
- It is necessary to disseminate the knowledge about who refugees are and how they are different from migrants, as well as how often and to whom Poland grants refugee status and what consequences that entails.
- Within the framework of public campaigns, especially those in the Internet (because the Internet seems to be the most universal and the least biased medium), it is worth focusing on the Polish experience so far with accepting refugees during the wars in the Balkans and in Chechnya (with hard figures and the results of these actions).
- The Roman Catholic Church could play a significant role in counteracting xenophobia and racism by appealing to the Christian values of mercy, love for our fellow human beings, and ecumenism as the evangelical foundation for relating to all other people, not only those of one's own faith. This should be a part of both religious instruction in the schools as well as in Sunday homilies. The respondents drew attention to the positive effect of the contacts with representatives of other cultures during the 2016 World Youth Days and to the greater openness of the Church during that time.

## Authors' bios

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