

**ZOiS**

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# ZOIS REPORT

**YOUNG POLES IN TIMES OF  
DRAMATIC CHANGE:  
REFUGEES, IDENTITY  
AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT**

Félix Krawatzek and Piotr Goldstein



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## Summary

Young people have experienced profound changes in the way Polish national identity is expressed in public since the conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) gained far-reaching control of Polish politics in 2015. This report examines young people's political attitudes in conjunction with their views on the arrival of over two million refugees from Ukraine in 2022, and their views on those refugees who have been trying to get into the EU through the Polish-Belarusian border since 2021. Views on both events allow us to better understand young people's sense of Polishness. Moreover, opinions on national history are central to understandings of identity, as are young people's perceptions of Poland's place in Europe.

The fears and uncertainties young Poles express are analysed in an original online survey conducted in March 2022 among 2 002 respondents aged 16–34, combined with insights from focus group discussions conducted in May 2022 among a set of young participants and participants aged 65 and older in the cities of Gdańsk and Lublin. Such a combination of methodologies allows unique insights into the reasoning behind the patterns that a survey can identify.

The key findings are as follows:

- Nearly half of young people state that Poland should let in as many refugees from Ukraine as necessary. The presence of Ukrainians in Poland since the start of the war in Ukraine in 2014 and the resulting personal contacts are an important factor in the welcoming attitude to and support for the Ukrainian refugees who have arrived since February 2022.
- There is also overall approval for the political support for Ukraine, in particular when it comes to supplying humanitarian assistance. In addition, nearly 15% of respondents support the deployment of Polish soldiers to Ukraine.
- The welcoming attitude vis-à-vis Ukrainian refugees stands in stark contrast to the support for the pushbacks of the mostly Muslim refugees who have tried to enter Poland via Belarus since 2021. The relative ethnic and religious homogeneity of Poland that resulted from World War II feeds into fear of others, particularly Muslims. There is, moreover, rather low support for granting those refugees the right to apply for asylum, with only 9% of young people stating that these people should definitely have the right to apply.
- Gender is crucial when it comes to understanding the different views on the refugees coming from Ukraine and the Middle East. Women are more likely to want to see refugees from Ukraine return as soon as it becomes possible to Ukraine, whereas men are more likely to support a hard line on refugees at the border with Belarus.
- Despite the current government's involvement in memory politics, the common Polish-Ukrainian history is practically unknown to young Poles, and even when it is known it is considered largely irrelevant. Ukraine and Belarus are for young Poles a different 'Eastern Europe' than the Central Europe they feel part of.
- The informal help that Polish people, including the younger generation, have offered to refugees from Ukraine is hard to quantify. Many offered accommodation in their own homes, transportation, or help in settling in, but few would consider this 'humanitarian aid' in the early phase of the war.
- Resentment and fear are among the key emotions driving the opinions and sentiments of many young people when they talk about their attitudes towards refugees and related changes in Polish society and politics. Young Poles, and particularly young women, are significantly more concerned about welfare issues such as access to childcare, healthcare, and the situation on the job market than people of their grandparents' generation. These fears and uncertainties underpin assessments of politics and attitudes towards ethnic and social diversity in Poland.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Location of focus groups and number of survey participants in voivodeship**



Source: ZOiS

## Introduction

Since the start of Russia's large-scale invasion into Ukraine in February 2022 an unprecedented number of people from Ukraine has arrived in Poland. Polish society and the government have been at the forefront of providing assistance to them.<sup>1</sup> This response to the consequences of war in Ukraine is key to understanding what Poland stands for in the early 21st century and how young Poles think about their own national identity at a moment when conflicting ideas about what it means to be Polish are being promoted by different political and cultural actors while the country is undergoing profound economic and social change.

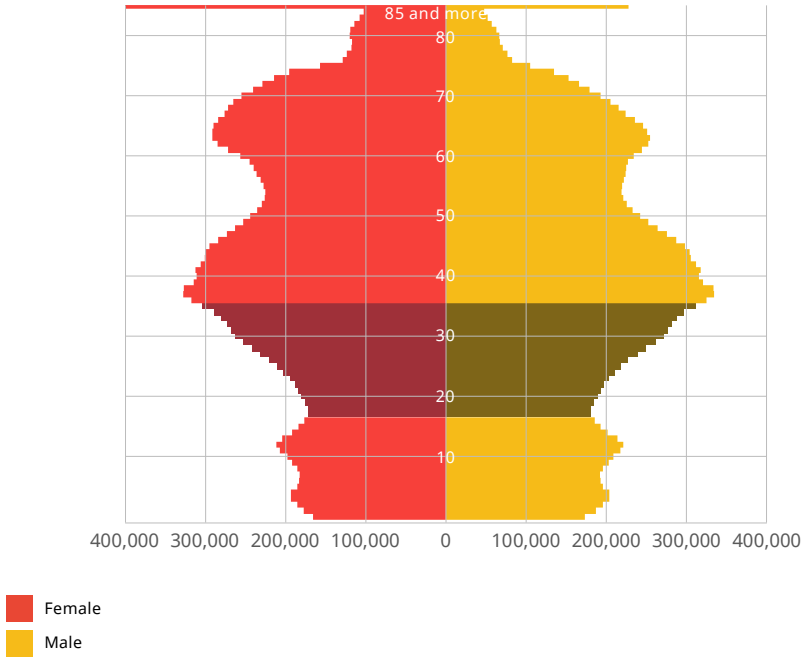
Over the last years, young Poles have been exposed to a concerted effort by the conservative Polish government headed by Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) to articulate a new vision of Polish identity. Since about 2015, the politics of national identity have increasingly centred on the Catholic Church and been informed by an essentialised and teleological vision of Polish history. At their core, the historical narratives propagated by PiS stress the country's enduring heroism but also the suffering and victimhood

<sup>1</sup> 'Ukraine Refugee Situation', Operational Data Portal, UNHCR, 23 August 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

FIGURE 2

**Population by sex and age in 2021**

Size and structure and vital statistics in Poland by territorial division. As of June 30, 2021



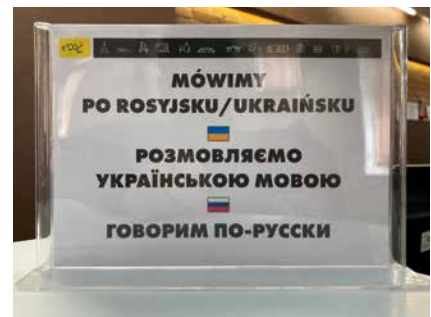
Source: Statistics Poland, <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/population/population/population-size-and-structure-and-vital-statistics-in-poland-by-territorial-division-as-of-june-30-2021,3,30.html>

that can be projected onto World War II in particular. On the other hand, young people have been part of the broader social and demographic change the country has undergone, reflected, among other things, in the laicisation of society, the increased international mobility of young Poles, as well as more visible ethnic differences in the population. Ukrainians in particular have been a significant part of the public space since 2014 and many companies, in addition to several municipal governments, catered for their new customers by providing Ukrainian (and sometimes Russian) versions of websites, hiring Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking staff, or adding Ukrainian as an interface language of different machines.

The arrival of large numbers of Ukrainians in the spring of 2022, one consequence of Russia’s war against Ukraine, further altered Poland’s social and linguistic make-up at a moment when the government had been engaged in concerted nation-building efforts for nearly a decade. At the same time, Poland briefly took centre stage in European politics as the country led calls for strong support for Ukraine. It remains uncertain, however, whether the new political weight which Poland and some other former Eastern bloc countries have gained, will persist.

FIGURE 3

**Information at the City Council of Łódź Citizen Service Point stating: “We speak Ukrainian”, “We speak Russian” – July 2021**



Source: photographed by Piotr Goldstein

## Methodology and key social indicators about young Poles

We conducted an online survey investigating the political and social attitudes of young people aged 16–34 living across Poland. The survey was fielded in early March 2022, right after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, allowing us to include questions on how young people assess the situation in Ukraine and the arrival of refugees from Ukraine to Poland. To generate the sample, we set quotas for gender, age, the region of residence, as well as the size of the settlement in which respondents lived. A total of 2002 respondents participated in the survey, which was conducted by ARC Rynek i Opinia, a company with one of the largest online panels in the country.<sup>2</sup>

Interlinked with the survey, we conducted a series of focus group discussions in the first half of May 2022 in Lublin and Gdańsk, two cities that differ considerably in terms of their economic conditions, political culture and geographic location. With a population of 338,000 and situated near the border with Belarus and Ukraine, Lublin is a conservative stronghold with a highly visible Catholic Church—the Catholic University of Lublin is the country’s most important Catholic university. Gdańsk, with population of more than 480,000, is one of Poland’s economic centres and situated on the Baltic Sea with a diverse cultural life and a much more progressive political outlook.

**TABLE 1**  
**Research Design for Focus Group Discussions**

	Multiculturalist	Anti-multiculturalist	Mixed
18 – 34	Lublin / Gdańsk	Lublin / Gdańsk	Lublin / Gdańsk
65+	Lublin / Gdańsk	Lublin / Gdańsk	Lublin / Gdańsk

In each city we organised six focus groups—three with young people aged 18–34 and three with people aged 65 and over (► TABLE 1). Participants were recruited by ARC Rynek i Opinia with a view to including distinct attitudes to Poland becoming more multicultural. In particular, we pre-screened respondents’ attitudes to the importance of Catholicism for belonging to the Polish nation, the increased ethnic diversity of Poland, and their views on the arrival of refugees via Belarus and from Ukraine. There was a gender balance in each group and a total of eight participants took part in each of them.

Among the young people who participated in our survey, 70% continue to state that they are affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. This compares

<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Katalin Bayer for her excellent research assistance on this project.



with roughly 90% of the general population according to official governmental data.<sup>3</sup> Another 12% indicate that they are atheist, while 6% say they do not belong to any denomination. In Poland there is no Church tax and there is therefore little incentive for individuals, often baptised in infancy, to disenroll from the church register, a process that is, moreover, discouraged and often made difficult by local clergy. As a result, people may state their religious affiliation even if they do not practise or believe.

Figures for attendance at religious services are consistent with the gap between self-declared religiosity and religious practice. In our sample, the latter is heavily polarised. Roughly 40% of respondents mention that before the pandemic they participated in services on a regular basis, at least once a month, whereas another 52% hardly ever attended church. For the entire population it is now estimated that only around 37% attend Sunday mass regularly.<sup>4</sup> It is worth mentioning that the online services offered at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic did not catch on, with a majority of respondents (62%) mentioning that they practically never participated in them and only 14% participating once a month or more frequently.

During the pandemic, antagonisms deepened between the Church and young people and especially women, when the former supported culturally conservative legislation aimed at tightening the already very restrictive abortion law. Young people were more likely to hold church hierarchies responsible for this development and distanced themselves from the institution. An online protest encouraging apostasy (formal exit from the Roman Catholic Church) formed part of the protests after 22 October 2020, when the law regulating access to legal abortion was further limited.

The hashtag #apostazja spread on social media alongside detailed instructions on how to leave the institution. Some church buildings were sprayed by pro-choice activists and services were interrupted in parishes across the country.<sup>5</sup> Slogans calling for limits to the involvement of the church in national politics were widespread and, remarkably, some young people tried to re-define what being religious means for them and propose versions of religiosity distanced from the clergy. In our survey, around 250 people who self-identify as Catholic say that they agree with protest slogans 'Separation of Church and state!' and 'Jesus would march with us'.

The family has turned into a zone of political conflict which young people may choose to avoid consciously (► FIGURE 5). In fact, the extent to which politics are discussed with family members differs hugely among the respondents, and just over one quarter of them indicate a high level of agreement on political matters within the family. This is significant for intergenerational transmission and continuity. It is the more urban and educated members of the young generation in particular that tend to disagree with their

FIGURE 4

**"Jesus would walk with us"**

Slogan on a protest against tightening of the abortion law, October 2021



Source: photographed by Piotr Goldstein

## Antagonisms deepened between the Church and young people.

3 'Religious denominations in Poland 2015-2018', Statistics Poland, 28 February 2020, <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/other-studies/religious-denominations/religious-denominations-in-poland-2015-2018,1,2.html>

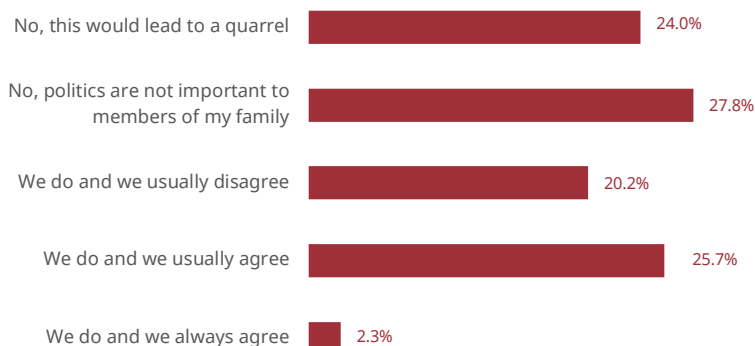
4 Arkadiusz Gruszczyński, 'Kościół traci wiernych w rekordowym tempie', wyborcza.pl, 1 July 2022, <https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,28638870,37-polakow-chodzi-w-niedziele-do-kościola-to-o-wiele-mniej.html>

5 Marianna Szczygielska and Piotr Goldstein, 'Three keywords to better understand the Polish abortion protests', ZOiS Spotlight 41 / 2020, 7 November 2020, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/three-keywords-to-better-understand-the-polish-abortion-protests>

FIGURE 5

**Do you discuss politics with your family at larger family events?**

*Czy rozmawia Pan / Pani z rodziną o polityce przy większych spotkaniach rodzinnych?*



Source: Data from ZOIS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

families on politics. Tellingly, those respondents living in cities with more than 500 000 inhabitants mention that they avoid political discussions at home due to the potential for friction, whereas people living in smaller settlements (with up to 19,000 residents) indicate that politics is not important to their family.

## Political attitudes, electoral choice and political mobilisation

The political climate in Poland has become increasingly polarised over the last few years, a tendency that accelerated dramatically with the restrictions introduced in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Where do young people in Poland stand politically and how do they engage in their country’s politics?

Asked about whether they participated in the most recent presidential election in Poland in 2020, which took place after controversial debates about whether it should be postponed due to the pandemic, 68% stated that they did vote, similar to the national average.<sup>6</sup> It is also noteworthy that only 90 out of 2,002 respondents indicated that they were not interested in the presidential election or that none of the candidates represented their political beliefs.

Living in a bigger city—particularly one with more than 500 000 inhabitants—and having children are the main factors explaining a higher electoral

6 Félix Krawatzek, ‘Poland’s viral election’, ZOIS Spotlight 18 / 2020, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/polands-viral-election>

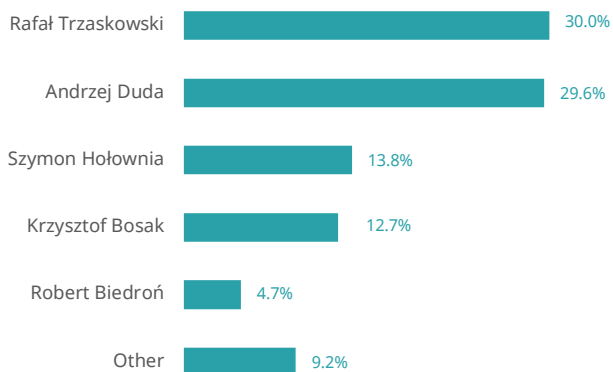
turnout among young people. The slightly older young people among the respondents are also more likely to have voted, speaking to concerns about young people not being represented in the political process due to abstention. Older individuals with children were more likely to vote, suggesting that these individuals feel more inclined to voice an opinion on the direction the country should take, since that has direct implications for their offspring.

We also asked respondents who they would vote for today in light of the current situation (► FIGURE 6). The polarisation of Polish society becomes particularly clear when looking at these results. We provided a list of the candidates who stood for election in the 2020 presidential election, consisting of the current president Andrzej Duda, presidential candidate for the governing Law and Justice Party; Rafał Trzaskowski, mayor of Warsaw and candidate for the oppositional Civic Platform; Robert Biedroń, member of the European Parliament since 2019, openly gay and an LGBT activist; far-right candidate Krzysztof Bosak running for Confederation; and TV personality Szymon Hołownia, seen by many as a progressive Catholic, who ran as an independent candidate.

Young Poles would vote overwhelmingly for either the incumbent or the main challenger, Trzaskowski. Moreover, the fringe politicians Bosak and Hołownia each managed to attract a remarkable share of the young respondents: support for Bosak and Biedroń was twice that of the general population, while for Hołownia it mirrored the level in the general population. The older respondents in our survey were significantly less likely to vote for Duda, and men were three times more likely to vote for Bosak. Religious people—and women—were significantly more likely to vote for Duda than non-religious people. Duda seemingly absorbs some of the female vote that Bosak fails to attract.

Support for Bosak and Biedroń was twice that of the general population.

**FIGURE 6**  
**In light of the current situation, which candidate would you vote for?**  
*W świetle aktualnej sytuacji, na którego kandydata by Pan głosował / Pani głosowała?*



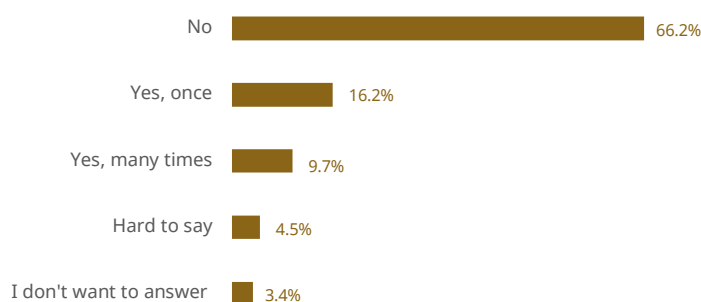
Source: Data from ZOiS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

Beyond electoral participation, young Poles have been active in protests, notably in response to PiS-initiated tightening of the abortion law, which resulted in a ban on abortions even in cases of serious foetal abnormalities, but also related to the country's problems with the rule of law and media freedom. Of the young respondents, more than one quarter state that they have participated in protests (► FIGURE 7). A key factor for understanding protest involvement is city size and the presidential vote choice young people indicated. Those living in any settlement larger than a village were more likely to have participated in protests, and protest participation increased further with the number of inhabitants in the place of residence, consistent with the importance of Warsaw and other large cities in the recent protests. Regarding presidential vote choice, all those who indicated that they would not vote for Duda were more likely to participate in protests, with the strongest effect found for those supporting Biedroń.

FIGURE 7

**Have you ever participated in a protest?**

*Czy kiedykolwiek brał Pan / brała Pani udział w proteście?*



*Source: Data from ZOiS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022*

Young people also get involved in public affairs through engagement in political and civic activities. In the survey, people were asked to indicate which type of engagement they undertook over a period of two years, illustrating a high degree of social activism among young Poles (► FIGURE 8). Strikingly, more than 40% of respondents mentioned that they gave or collected money for a charity, 35% signed online petitions, and another 13% participated in voluntary activities. This testifies to the vibrant civic sphere among the young in Poland, challenging assumptions about the weakness of Eastern Europe's civil society.

**The survey reveals a high degree of social activism among young Poles.**

One of the most visible protests that occurred around the time of the survey was the All-Poland Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet). The movement first appeared in 2016, when its protests stopped attempts by PiS to change the abortion law. Young people mostly supported the movement and around one-fifth participated in the protests (► FIGURE 9). In general, the younger people in our sample, women, and those not living in a voivodship on Poland's eastern border are more likely to have participated in protests supporting the movement. Being religious, but also being male, are the most significant factors for explaining who took to the streets against Strajk Kobiet in order to 'protect' churches from feminist activists intending to interrupt services.

FIGURE 8

**Have you participated in any of the following in the last two years?**

*Czy w ciągu ostatnich dwóch lat brał Pan / brała Pani udział w którymś z następujących wydarzeń?*

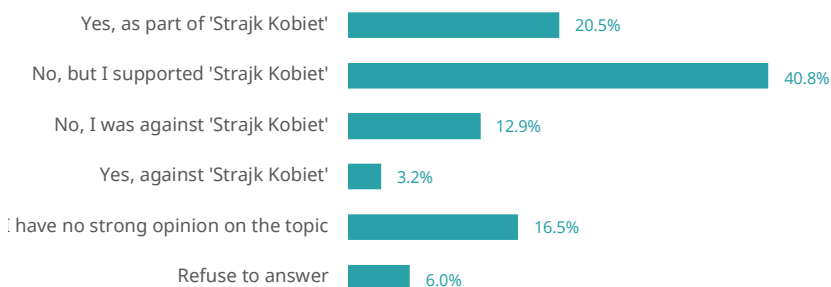


Source: Data from ZOiS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

FIGURE 9

**Have you participated in the 'Strajk Kobiet' protests that took place between October 2020 and January 2021?**

*Między październikiem 2020 r., a styczniem 2021 r. przez Polskę przetoczyła się fala protestów nazywanych „Strajk Kobiet”. Czy brał Pan/brała Pani udział w protestach, które odbyły się w tym okresie?*



Source: Data from ZOiS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

The survey respondents mention that they keep themselves politically informed on a very regular basis. More than two-thirds of them look for information on current affairs at least once a day, another 16% at least once a month—a high level of interest in politics is more common among the older young people in our sample. The most popular newspaper is the

independent and anti-government *Gazeta Wyborcza*, but state-controlled TV is also consumed by nearly half of young Poles. Nevertheless, the most popular source for information on current affairs is social media, in particular Facebook.

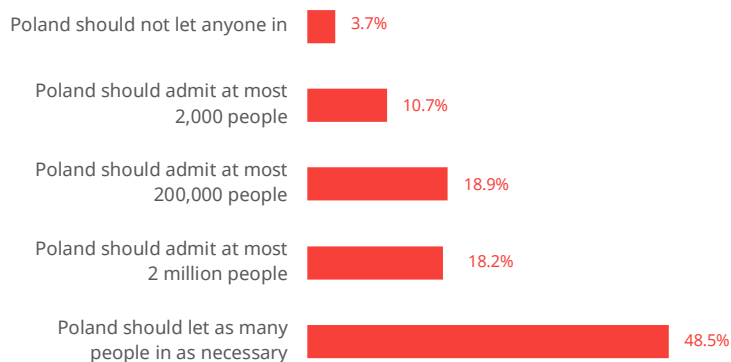
## Attitudes towards people fleeing from Ukraine

Polish society and politicians have largely welcomed those fleeing Ukraine after 24 February 2022. Alongside public assistance—free public transport, Polish ID numbers, and help for families that host Ukrainians—there has been a wave of support from society in the form of everyday activism. The survey shows a broad social base for this welcoming attitude among young people, with solidarity for Ukrainian refugees cutting across different groups of young people. Nearly half of our respondents believe that Poland should let as many Ukrainians as necessary into the country (► FIGURE 10).

FIGURE 10

### What do you think Poland should do with the up to 6 million refugees from Ukraine that might seek refuge?

*Według niektórych szacunków obecna wojna na Ukrainie może spowodować ruch uchodźców nawet do 6 mln osób. Co według Pana / Pani Polska powinna zrobić z ludźmi, którzy szukają schronienia w naszym kraju?*



Source: Data from ZOiS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 - 34, Poland, March 2022

Women are on average slightly more likely to state that as many people as necessary should be allowed to enter Poland, but the gender difference is irrelevant once we start considering other factors. Religiosity drives the results, with those individuals who self-identify as Catholic being significantly less likely to accept higher numbers of refugees. A respondent's socio-economic position is also significant for views on that question: individuals from less well-off households are significantly less likely to accept higher numbers of Ukrainian refugees. This reflects people's concerns about refugees entering the job market, doubts in the capacity of the welfare system to absorb them, and difficulties in imagining the best way forward. As one participant in Lublin explained:

‘[...] women should find work in order to pay for kindergartens and nurseries, not like now, where they have been given places in private kindergartens and nurseries for free, for which we are paying hard-earned money. Let them find a job [...]. On the other hand, they will start to spoil the market for us, because they will work, they will accept lower wages than us. They certainly can’t sit on welfare.’

(Participant #4, female, Lublin, Young – Mix).

The presence of Ukrainian refugees in Poland will impact Poland and how young people think about their own sense of being Polish, adding to the dramatic change in Poland’s ethnic landscape in recent years, in particular since people from Ukraine started coming in 2014. At the time of writing, in most major Polish cities, which had been practically mono-ethnic since the end of the Second World War, 25 % or more of the population is now not ethnically Polish (mostly Ukrainian). In public discourse, a sense of the challenge this is going to represent for the Polish welfare system and society overall is being voiced, often accompanied by references to the perceived failure of Germany to deal with the inflow of Syrian refugees.<sup>7</sup>

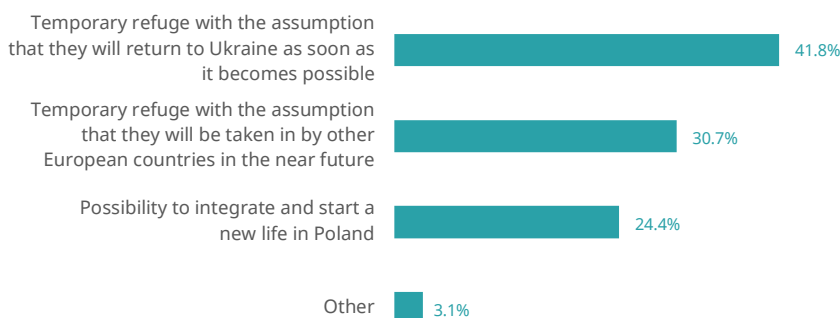
The most popular option is that refugees should be offered temporary support

We also enquired into what survey respondents think should be offered to the Ukrainians, where a more mixed picture emerges (► FIGURE 11). The most popular option is the idea that refugees should be offered temporary support on the assumption that they will return to Ukraine as soon as possible or continue their journey to another European country. Already in March 2022 the remarkable solidarity that characterised the early days of the war against Ukraine had its limitations, with only a quarter of the young respondents stating that they would support the refugees’ integration into Polish society. Compared to the general population, young Poles are also among the groups most likely to mention that Ukrainian refugees are already offered too much help.<sup>8</sup>

FIGURE 11

### What should Poland offer to refugees from Ukraine?

Co Polska powinna zaferować uchodźcom z Ukrainy?



Source: Data from ZOIS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

7 Ewa Wanat, 'Jak przyjąć uchodźców? Uczmy się na błędach Niemiec', Polityka, 12 June 2022, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/2168249,1,jak-przyjac-uchodzcow-uczmy-sie-na-bledach-niemiec.read>

8 'Opinions about the war in Ukraine', CBOS Public Opinion Research Center, May 2022, [https://cbos.pl/EN/publications/reports/2022/073\\_22.pdf](https://cbos.pl/EN/publications/reports/2022/073_22.pdf)

Differences by gender are particularly telling here. Women are significantly more likely to indicate that Ukrainian refugees should be accepted on the assumption that they will return to Ukraine as soon as possible, whereas men are significantly more likely to indicate that the refugees should have the opportunity to remain in Poland. Religious people are significantly less likely to want Ukrainian refugees to have the opportunity to integrate into Poland in the longer term.

The focus groups shed further light on this matter: questions about specific aspects of integration made many of the participants uncomfortable. While discussing a vision of several millions of Ukrainians still living in Poland in two years, we asked whether in such a situation (1) Ukrainian young people should be allowed to write their Matura (final high-school exams) in Ukrainian or Russian and (2) whether Ukrainians living in Poland should be allowed to establish their own political parties. While many participants believed it would be better for Ukrainian young people to write their final exams in their own languages, there was strong opposition to the idea that Ukrainians could have their own political parties in Poland.

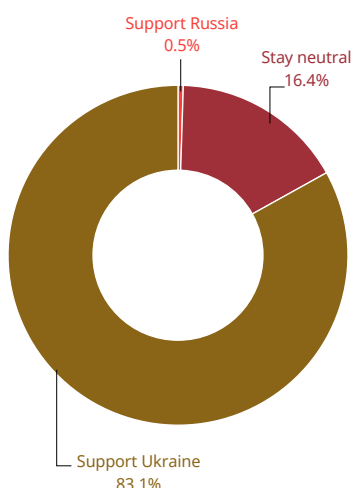
The Polish government was one of the most outspoken supporters of a firm response to the Russian assault on Ukraine right from the earliest days of the war. Initially, the Central and Eastern European countries that, alongside the Baltic states, called for decisive action against Russia moved into Europe’s political centre and successfully shaped the agenda for European politics. In a symbolically important move, President Andrzej Duda was the first European leader to address the wartime Ukrainian Parliament in person during a surprise visit in May 2022, when he emphasised that the concession of Ukrainian territory would be a blow to the West, also implying that Poland is a critical entity in that ‘global West’.

The official political line overlaps with the attitudes of large sections of the population, and of young people in particular. Irrespective of gender, income or place of residence, young people unequivocally expect their country’s leadership to support Ukraine (► FIGURE 12).

Beyond the early consensus on support for Ukraine, the survey also investigates how respondents think Poland should support Ukraine (► FIGURE 13).

**FIGURE 12**  
**How should Poland behave in view of the current war between Russia and Ukraine?**

*Jak Pana / Pani zdaniem Polska powinna zachować się w sytuacji obecnej konfrontacji militarnej między Rosją a Ukrainą?*



Source: Data from ZOIS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

**FIGURE 13**  
**How should Poland support Ukraine?**

*W jaki sposób Polska powinna poprzeć Ukrainę?*



Source: Data from ZOIS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022



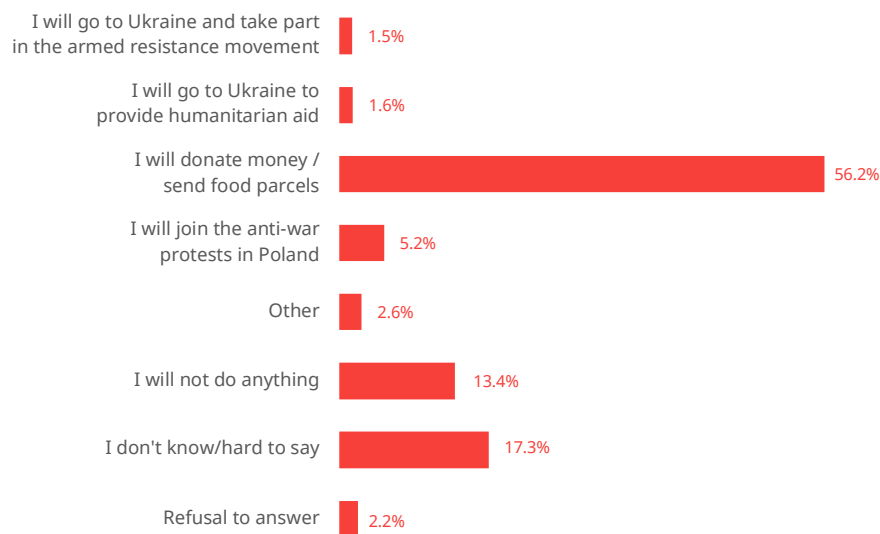
Support for humanitarian aid is unanimous, while more than half of respondents are in favour of supplying military aid. However, more direct involvement in the form of sending Polish soldiers to Ukraine is supported by just 300 people in a sample of 2,002.

The spontaneous mobilisation in support of those fleeing the war was a particularly noteworthy feature of the Polish response to the arrival of refugees. According to data from CBOS, around two-thirds of Poles mentioned that they helped Ukrainians.<sup>9</sup> When we asked respondents what they personally would be prepared to do in the current situation in March 2022, more than half stated that they would be prepared to send money or hand over food parcels. Other forms of support we listed were hardly ever chosen, including participation in anti-war protests in Poland (► FIGURE 14). Asked about anti-war protests in the focus groups, participants critically remarked that such protests would in no way help those fleeing the war and would be a waste of energy. Meanwhile, people across Poland engaged in helping Ukrainians directly, by hosting them in private homes, bringing prams to train stations, and arranging supplies of food and basic necessities for those who had just arrived or were passing through Poland.

FIGURE 14

#### What are you personally likely to do for the defence of Ukraine?

*Co najprawdopodobniej Pan / Pani osobiście zrobi dla obrony Ukrainy?*



Source: Data from ZOiS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

Religiosity is a major factor in predicting lower levels of support for state-organised humanitarian aid. Wealth or poverty are also important predictors here: those respondents with the lowest disposable income and those who are the best off are also less likely to support sending humanitarian aid. Support for military aid is explained by two factors in particular: it

9 'Opinions about the Russian invasion of Ukraine', CBOS Public Opinion Research Center, March 2022, [https://www.cbos.pl/EN/publications/reports/2022/038\\_22.pdf](https://www.cbos.pl/EN/publications/reports/2022/038_22.pdf)

is highest among respondents who do not have children and lowest among those who indicated they would vote for far-right politician Krzysztof Bosak.

What's more, respondents living in the eastern part of Poland are less likely to approve of military aid. This could be linked to the fear that Poland itself could get drawn into the conflict or to a preference for keeping weapons for the defence of Poland, rather than giving them away. Indeed, opposition to sending Polish soldiers is particularly pronounced among supporters of Bosak, a politician who has been emphasising the need to focus on Poland's own preparedness for war instead of supporting Ukraine. Focus groups have further confirmed that both young and old Poles are opposed to direct military involvement, mostly because of concerns for the people who would be sent to fight. The only participant of our focus groups who said that the answer to this question was not obvious, was himself a professional soldier.

Resentment and fear are two strikingly conspicuous emotions in opinions voiced by focus group participants and help to understand the survey results. The observation that some of the recently arrived Ukrainians are actually well off was made several times. Indeed, some participants were uncomfortable with the fact that the refugees from Ukraine unsettle their own conceptions of a refugee—a person who is poor and ready to live or work under any conditions. The arrival of wealthy Ukrainians played into existing class tensions and resentments. A statement by an older participant in Lublin illustrates this view:

‘Rich people fled here—the poor, the true patriots, stayed there, they fight and die. And those [who came] do not need to take any money from the Polish government, because they are rich.’

*(Participant #8, male, Lublin, Seniors – Anti)*

Younger participants are concerned about anticipated competition on the job market and the access to welfare and services, particularly childcare and healthcare, afforded to Ukrainians. In the words of one participant:

‘They have better access to the health service than we do and that's not cool’

*(Participant #5, female, Lublin, Young – Mix).*

## The arrival of wealthy Ukrainians played into existing class tensions and resentments.

## Refugees at the border with Belarus: A different other

In stark opposition to the welcoming attitude of Polish society towards people fleeing from Ukraine, those refugees that have tried to enter Poland via the border with Belarus have been met with significant hostility. The Polish government has been criticised by oppositional activists and international politicians for its violent pushbacks at the border, whereas the government itself has claimed it is defending Europe by not letting Muslim refugees enter the European Union. This rhetoric was reflected in a short English-language clip made by the Office of the Prime Minister showing refugees throwing stones at Polish border guards alongside blurred images of people in uniforms standing behind the refugees on the Belarusian side of the border. The film suggested that the refugees are dangerous and that their

appearance has more to do with Belarusian/Russian provocations than with the refugees' need for asylum.<sup>10</sup> The clip was shown—with Polish subtitles—at the beginning of our focus groups, and whereas the multiculturalist groups identified it as a piece of propaganda, the anti-multiculturalists and mixed groups took the clip at face value, reflecting both the participants' views and their uncritical approach to state-produced media.

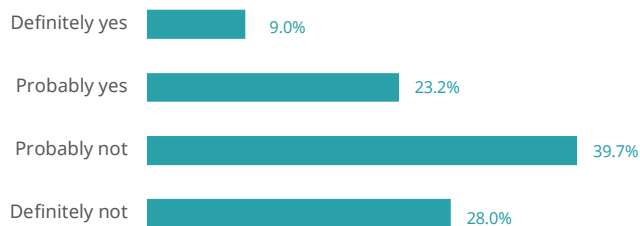
Among the young respondents there is a clear view that those non-European refugees should not be allowed to apply for asylum (► FIGURE 15). Roughly in line with views in the general population,<sup>11</sup> only 9% say that these refugees should definitely have the right to apply, which is also what they are entitled to under the Geneva Convention.

There is a clear view that those non-European refugees should not be allowed to apply for asylum.

FIGURE 15

**[...] Should the Polish authorities allow migrants (e. g. from Afghanistan, some Middle East countries and Africa) stranded on the Polish-Belarusian border to apply for asylum or not?**

*Polska, Litwa, Łotwa i Estonia oskarżają Białoruś o zorganizowanie przerzutu na ich terytoria uchodźców – m. in. z Afganistanu, niektórych krajów Bliskiego Wschodu oraz Afryki. Czy polskie władze powinny pozwolić migrantom pozostającym na granicy polsko-białoruskiej wystąpić o azyl w Polsce, czy nie?*



Source: Data from ZOiS survey of 2,002 people aged 16–34, Poland, March 2022

Further analysis of these views illustrates that supporters of Warsaw mayor and Civic Platform presidential candidate Rafał Trzaskowski, as well as supporters of MEP Robert Biedroń, who also ran in the last presidential race, are significantly more likely to grant refugees the right to apply for asylum—as are respondents with lower levels of education.

However, at the focus groups, particularly those with a mix of multiculturalists and anti-multiculturalists, participants argued that the refugees should have been allowed to apply for asylum had they intended to cross the border in the right place, that is at the formal border crossing, just like

10 Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland [@PremierRP\_en], 'We must stand together to defend Europe against Lukashenko's hybrid war ...' [Tweet], Twitter, 21 November 2021, [https://twitter.com/premierrp\\_en/status/1462330955851603969?lang=en](https://twitter.com/premierrp_en/status/1462330955851603969?lang=en)

11 'Public opinion on the crisis on the border with Belarus', CBOS Public Opinion Research Center, December 2021, [https://cbos.pl/EN/publications/reports/2021/160\\_21.pdf](https://cbos.pl/EN/publications/reports/2021/160_21.pdf)

the Ukrainians. Moreover, some argued that Poland would need the right system to check who the refugees were and whether it was safe to let them in. Given their assumption that Poland lacked such a system, and that it was unlikely to exist in the foreseeable future for technological reasons, this was an argument of convenience. The view must nevertheless be widespread because a participant from a focus group where this view was not voiced rejected this line of argumentation:

‘It was a mistake, arguments were put forward that these people are not checked, that they are not fleeing from war. Now, when the conflict in Ukraine broke out these people were not checked either, even immigrants from Belarus got through the same border. I don’t think that a Muslim immigrant is worse than a Ukrainian one.’

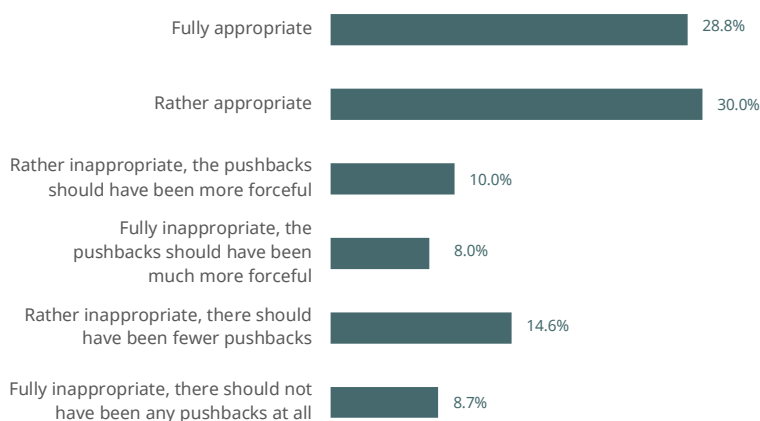
(Participant #7, male, Lublin, Young – Pro)

The controversial pushbacks are largely supported by the young people, with only around one-quarter opposing them and another 18% of the view that they should have been even more severe (► FIGURE 16). It is in particular those young people who live in the country’s eastern voivodships who agree with pushbacks, but also men, the older people in our sample, and those who voted for Bosak or Duda. Remarkably, women were more likely to express a desire for even stronger pushbacks.

The Catholic Church in Poland got involved in various ways, and some priests and Catholic activists (e.g. members of KIK-Club of Catholic Intelligentsia) tried to alleviate the suffering at the Polish-Belarusian border. For instance, one independent Catholic foundation paid for posters at bus stops with the following quote by a priest which referenced the Polish tradition of leaving

**FIGURE 16**  
**How do you evaluate the government’s actions pushing back migrants to Belarus, which critics say is illegal and a violation of human rights?**

*Polski rząd zareagował stosując wobec migrantów procedurę pushbacku na Białoruś, co zdaniem krytyków jest niezgodne z prawem i stanowi naruszenie praw człowieka. Jak Pan / Pani ocenia takie działania rządu?*



Source: Data from ZOIS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

a plate for an unexpected guest at dinner on Christmas Eve: ‘If we don’t start being open to others, we can throw that empty plate prepared for the Christmas table out the window.’ However, there was no official line in support of refugees and it was down to individual priests and other church members to decide on their stance. When we asked young Poles in the survey whether they would have wanted the church to be involved, the most common view is that there should be no engagement on the border. One can imagine that pro-refugee engagement by the Church would be difficult to accept for that part of society which fears Muslims and looks for ways to legitimise rather than confront these views.

Our focus groups with anti-multiculturalists and to a large extent also those with ‘mixed’ participants confirmed the anti-refugee sentiments. Participants would typically justify their opposition to welcoming the refugees from the Belarusian border by claiming that it was dangerous and bringing their reasoning in line with the arguments that have been used by anti-migrant and anti-refugee movements in Western Europe. For instance, participants of our focus group with anti-multiculturalist youth in Gdańsk argued:

‘I don’t want to come off as a racist, but yes, that is a real threat.’

‘No one has made this up, they have earned themselves the reputation they have.’

‘They do not care about integration, they want to build their enclaves, their laws, their faith, their ideas, and this is dangerous.’

*(Participants in Gdańsk, Young – Anti)*

On the other hand, in the multiculturalist groups we heard opposing opinions. On some occasions, the perceived threat of a ‘Muslim invasion’ was juxtaposed with the threat of local radicalisation:

‘Every religion and every religious fanaticism is harmful. When I hear that we All-Polish People [Wszechpolacy—also the name of a far-right movement] are going to defend our traditional values against Muslim refugees, I am more afraid of these Catholic Poles than of Islamists. For me, every religion in its fanatic version is a threat, but I do not think that Islam is worse than Catholicism. I treat it the same, because if we can live among radical Catholics, we can live among Muslims.’

*(Participant #2, female, Lublin, Young – Pro)*

Asked directly about differences in the approach to Ukrainian refugees and those trying to enter through the Polish-Belarusian border, participants would mostly put forward two arguments: the perceived cultural distance and the closeness of the war in Ukraine that has brought about the refugee movement. The fact that many already knew some Ukrainians evidently also played an important role in accepting refugees from that country.

‘We were afraid mainly of the cultural difference and here the cultural difference is very small [...] We can see with our own eyes what is happening there, many Ukrainians have already come to us and settled down, so we know these people, in my work there are many people from Ukraine.’

*(Participant #4, female, Gdańsk, Young – Mix)*

‘In [the case of the situation at the border with] Belarus, the message was not that there is a war, that people are dying, that something terrible is happening to them. Here we have a completely different message, that of war...’

(Participant #6, male, Gdańsk, Young – Pro)

## Poland’s place in Europe

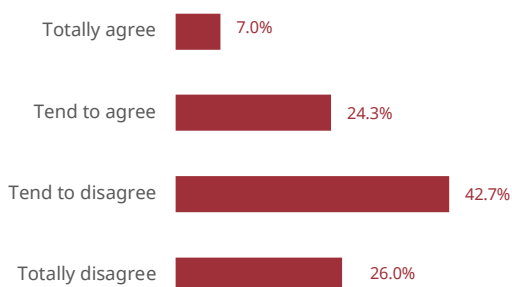
The discourse of the conservative Polish government posits a fundamental opposition between Poland’s national identity and the European Union. It is common, not only among members of the governing PiS, to claim that Poland preserves a true sense of Europeanness and that the EU’s political institutions are a threat to Poland’s culture. When young people are asked whether they think that Polish national identity is threatened by European integration, however, they tend to not think that this is the case (► FIGURE 17). There is no clear-cut picture, with nearly one-third agreeing with the idea that European integration constitutes a threat to Polish identity.

Unpacking those views further, it emerges that men and religious people in particular feel that Polish identity is under threat in the context of EU’s integration. Given the controversy in European politics that led to the removal of references to Christianity from EU treaties, this is not surprising. Supporters of Trzaskowski feel the least threatened in their identity, whereas Bosak supporters feel particularly under threat.

In light of the complicated precedent set by the UK in leaving the European Union, support for a Polish exit from the EU is relatively low, even if it is a

**FIGURE 17**  
**In the context of European integration, do you think that your Polish identity is currently under threat?**

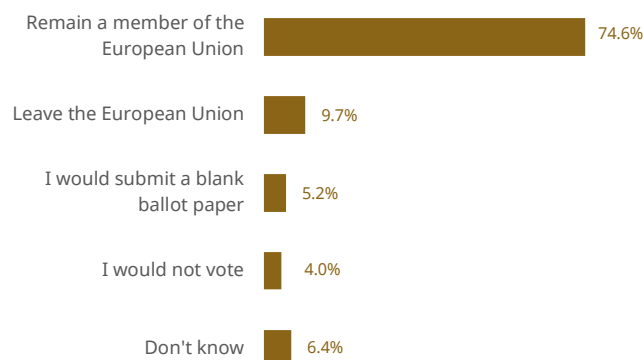
*W kontekście procesu integracji europejskiej, czy uważa Pan / Pani, że Pana/Pani polska tożsamość jest obecnie zagrożona?*



Source: Data from ZOIS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

**FIGURE 18**  
**Imagine there was a referendum in Poland tomorrow about membership of the European Union. How would you vote?**

*Proszę sobie wyobrazić, że jutro miałoby się odbyć referendum dotyczące członkostwa Polski w Unii Europejskiej. Czy głosowałby / głosowałaby Pan / Pani za tym, by Polska pozostała w Unii Europejskiej, czy za tym, by z niej wystąpiła?*



Source: Data from ZOIS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

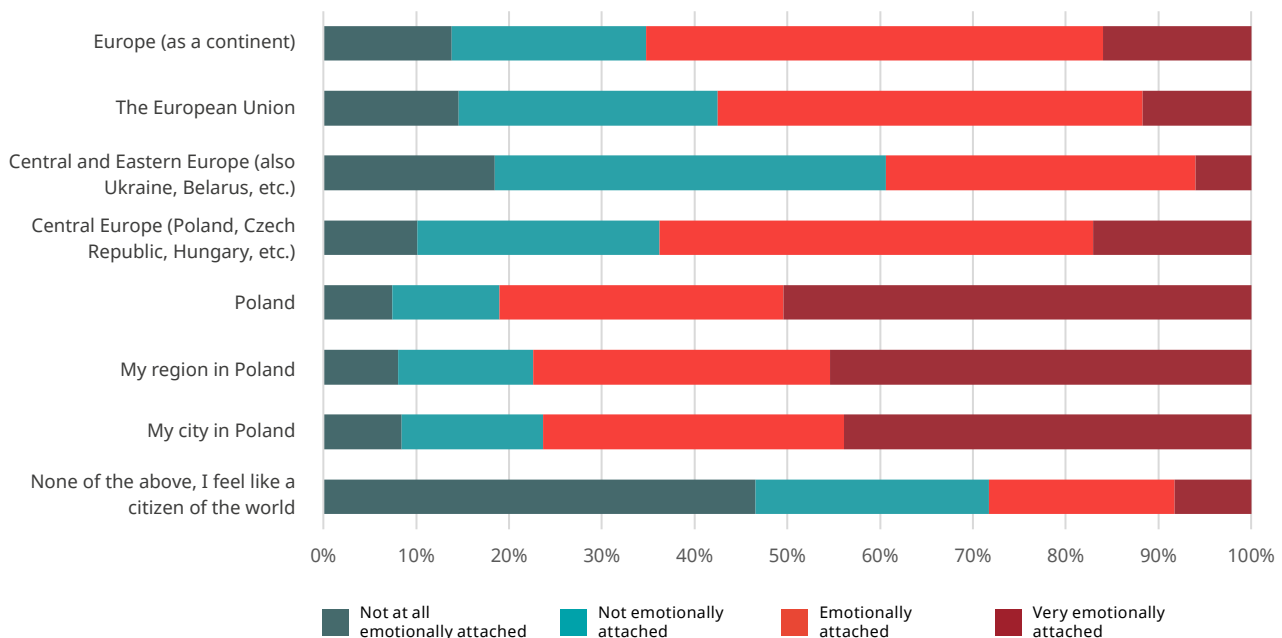
regular topic of debate, in particular when questions of human rights and the rule of law in Poland surface. Nevertheless, young Poles have a clear view on that question and only around 10% would vote to leave the EU (► FIGURE 18). This figure is well below the national average of around 17% in August 2021.<sup>12</sup> Men are more likely to vote leave than women, and even if the financial position of a respondent’s household has no statistically significant effect, it is the worse off who would vote leave in the hypothetical scenario. Opposition to the EU is particularly strong among respondents living in the country’s eastern voivodships, whereas supporters of Trzaskowski and Hołownia are significantly more supportive of EU membership. Unsurprisingly, those who vote for Bosak are most likely to vote for a Polesxit.

Young Poles express a very strong emotional attachment to Poland, their local regions and cities (► FIGURE 19). They also claim an emotional attachment to the European Union and Europe in general, as well as to Central Europe. What is remarkable in the context of the solidarity with Ukraine, however, is the much weaker emotional attachment they profess to have for East Central Europe—understood to include Belarus and Ukraine. At a similarly low level to the rather abstract self-identification as a cosmopolitan citizen of the world, this value is potentially important for understanding the long-term potential for solidarity within Eastern Europe.

FIGURE 19

**How emotionally attached are you to ...**

*Ludzie mogą odczuwać różny stopień przywiązania do kraju, w którym mieszkają, do swojego regionu i do Europy. Na ile jest Pan / Pani emocjonalnie związany / związana z:*



Source: Data from ZOIS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

12 Maria Wilczek, ‘Support in Poland for leaving EU highest in over a decade, finds poll’, Notes from Poland, 3 August 2021, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/08/03/support-in-poland-for-leaving-eu-highest-in-over-a-decade-finds-poll/>

FIGURE 20

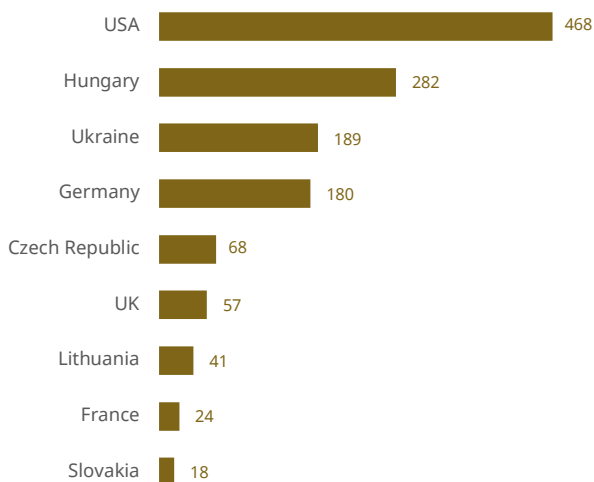
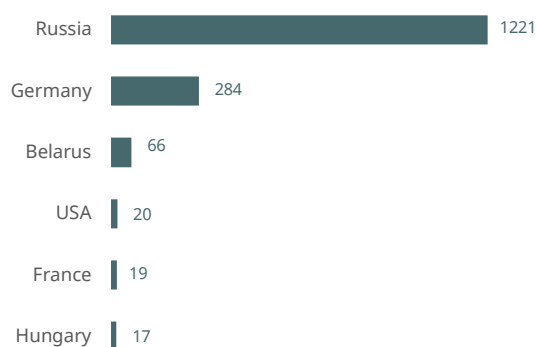
**In your opinion, which ONE country is Poland's closest friend in international politics?***Pana / Pani zdaniem, który – JEDEN – kraj jest najlepszym przyjacielem Polski w polityce międzynarodowej?**Source: Data from ZOiS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022*

FIGURE 21

**In your opinion, which ONE country is Poland's biggest enemy in international politics?***Pana / Pani zdaniem, który – JEDEN – kraj jest największym wrogiem Polski w polityce międzynarodowej?**Source: Data from ZOiS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022*

Poland's geopolitical position significantly developed at the beginning of 2022 when the country's politicians took centre stage in European politics as actors in the war in Ukraine. It is therefore no surprise that young Poles too consider Russia to be Poland's biggest enemy by a sizeable margin (► FIGURE 20 + FIGURE 21). Another 14% consider Germany to be Poland's biggest enemy in international politics, probably also reflecting the oftentimes polemical discourse about Germany, linked to references to Polish-German history.

On the other hand, the transatlantic orientation of young Poles at this moment of confrontation with Russia is pronounced. Nearly a quarter of the sample considers the US to be Poland's closest ally, followed by Hungary, Ukraine and Germany. The high ranking of Ukraine is remarkable when compared to an earlier survey which found that only 0.7% of young people thought that Poland should develop closer relations with Ukraine.<sup>13</sup>

## Views on Polish history and national identity

The historical events that young people considered particularly important for today's Poland provide insights into how young people understand their national identity, as well as illustrating the reach of the historical programme the PiS government has developed over the last several years.

<sup>13</sup> Félix Krawatzek, 'Youth in Poland: Outlook on Life and Political Attitudes', ZOiS Report 4 / 2019, <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/youth-in-poland-outlook-on-life-and-political-attitudes>



As part of the focus group discussions, we gave participants cards with eight historical events which we pre-identified as particularly significant for Polish history in addition to one blank card. Participants were put in pairs and asked to order the events by the importance they attribute to them for understanding what Poland is today. The eight events noted on the cards were: the Baptism of Poland dated to 966; the 1410 Battle of Grunwald, which ended in the Polish-Lithuanian victory over the Teutonic Order; the 1638 Battle of Vienna, in which Polish forces played a key role in defeating the Ottoman army; the 18th-century partitions of Poland, which lasted until 1918; Poland's regained independence in the wake of World War I; World War II; the Solidarność strikes in the 1980s; and the country's accession to the EU in 2004. All these events are—to varying degrees—central in the country's historical discourse and prominent in the teaching of history at school.

This approach allowed us to understand the salience attributed to historical events by Poles with diverging world views, assess whether there are clear differences in this regard between the cities of Gdańsk and Lublin, and see how the choices of the young differed from those of their grandparents' generation.

Location and local history matter in participants' assessments. In Gdańsk, the Solidarność strikes, which mainly happened in that city, and also the Second World War, which started with an attack on Westerplatte, part of Gdańsk, figured much more prominently than in Lublin. In the more conservative Catholic stronghold, participants chose the Baptism of Poland most frequently. While some would see the Baptism as the very first step linking Poland to Western civilisation and say that it was 'a little bit like joining the EU in today's times' because 'some countries were already Christian', many others were convinced that 'if it weren't for the Baptism, this country would not exist.'

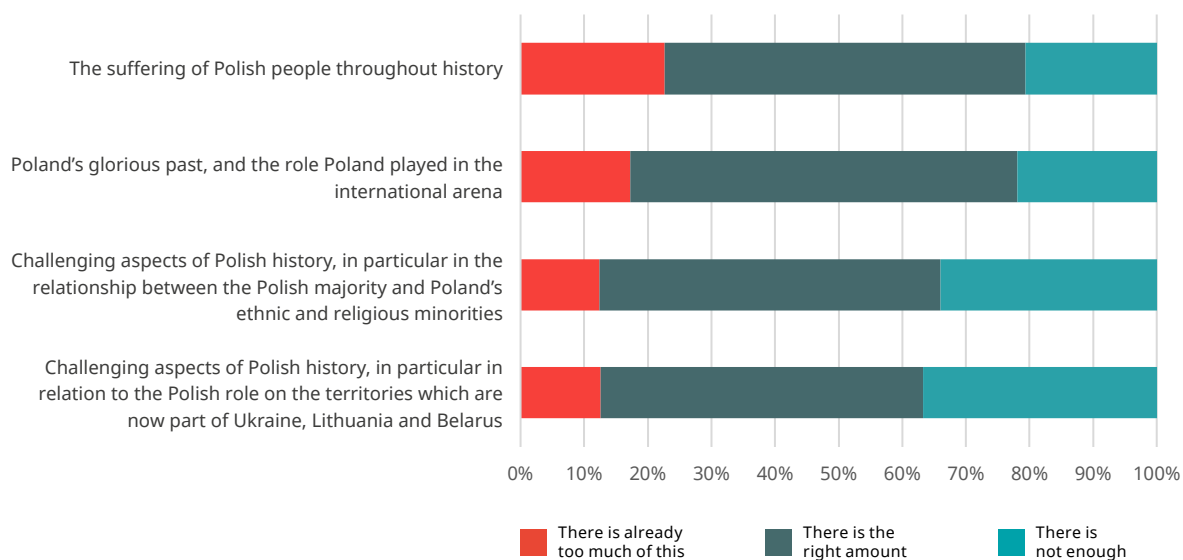
The older generation was more likely to consider joining the EU a turning point in Polish history.

The older generation was more likely to consider joining the EU a turning point in Polish history than the younger generation, particularly in Gdańsk. One reason for this could be that the young, who have lived for most of their lives in a Poland that has been part of the EU, take membership for granted, while older generations can compare life in the EU with their experience of communist times. Some even consider it to be 'the biggest civilisational jump', which allowed Poland to overcome being 'in the tail of Europe' (Participants 7 & 8, Gdańsk Seniors + Mix).

Regaining Polish independence in 1918 was ranked high across all groups. Participants linked this event to 'freedom' and the historical trauma of the partitions. It is also an event that has gained in public visibility in Poland in recent years, with Independence Marches being organised in particular by far-right groups on the anniversary. The importance attributed to the event by our focus groups is not surprising in light of its strong promotion in recent years, seen, for instance, in the creation of a special logo to celebrate it or the erecting of 'independence benches'<sup>14</sup> across Poland. The historical symbol of independence is probably receiving greater attention given a perceived threat to Polish freedom and independence in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine.

14 'Ławka Niepodległości [Independence Bench Programme]', Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/awka-niepodleglosci>

FIGURE 22

**How do you assess the teaching of the following aspects of Polish history at school?***Jak Pan / Pani ocenia nauczanie następujących elementów polskiej historii w szkole?*

Source: Data from ZOiS survey of 2,002 people aged 16 – 34, Poland, March 2022

Most participants were comfortable working with the set of events that we proposed. However, several pairs in different groups used the blank card and two pairs in different groups with young people in Lublin linked Poland's accession to the EU with its joining of NATO, an evaluation that speaks to the current war and the feeling of relative security that NATO membership gives to Polish people. Other events added by the participants relate to John Paul II—his election to the papacy and his first pilgrimage to Poland as a pope—and historical events related to struggles with the Soviet Union—the 1920 Battle of Warsaw and the exit of Soviet troops from Poland after 1989. The last two also relate to current events.

Participants in the focus groups also discussed what they knew about the difficult parts of Polish-Ukrainian history. A clear majority of our young participants knew very little or nothing, or had very limited and imprecise knowledge, which was rarely based on education received in school. As one participant explained:

*‘I know there was a Euro [Football Championship] Poland-Ukraine. I heard something about Ukrainians attacking [sic]. I heard something on the internet that we are now welcoming them and the history is not so rose-tinted.’*

*(Participant #3, female, Gdańsk, Young – Anti)*

However, many young people are hungry for this knowledge—30% of survey respondents who indicated that they would like to know more about challenging aspects of Polish history, notably the relationship with neighbouring Belarus and Ukraine, but also Poland's ethnic and religious minorities (► FIGURE 22). Some young people also criticise the emphasis in the teaching of Polish history on the suffering of the nation.

The lack of knowledge exhibited by the young is in stark contrast to the older generation of participants, who were much more aware of Polish-Ukrainian history and would not hesitate, at least in some cases, to bring up the suffering of Ukrainians under Polish rule over what is now western Ukraine. They believed this history should also be remembered and taught:

‘We [...] have this tendency: we only helped the Jews, we only suffered at the hands of the Ukrainians. If we teach history as a whole [we should admit]: we drowned Ukraine in blood for several centuries. In the inter-war periods, Ukrainians were treated as subhumans.’

*(Participant #7, male, Lublin, Seniors – Pro).*

## Conclusion

The arrival of refugees from the Middle East on the border with Belarus and the crossing of Ukrainian refugees into Poland are two events that have profoundly changed Poland over the last twelve months. These changes have come on top of long-standing efforts by the conservative government to impose unambiguous notions of what it means to be Polish, based on a centrally dictated view of traditional moral values, an uncritical historical narrative, and the conviction that Poland has a special role to play in Europe. What the combined analysis of focus group discussions and survey data reveal is the extent to which fear and uncertainty characterise the young generation of Poles who are facing both immediate challenges and an unpredictable future for which the parental generation can provide only little guidance.

This moment of uncertainty also opens up difficult questions about Poland's own past and the historical relationship it has had with neighbouring countries such as Belarus, Ukraine, and Lithuania. Aware of their extremely limited historical knowledge, young people are looking for answers to these questions. Their desire to know more about this contested and practically untaught history shows that the narratives emitted by the government do not translate seamlessly into the minds of young people. For all its complications, it seems that Polish youth would welcome opportunities for self-critical historical exchange.

By and large, young people approve of the diametrically opposed government responses to the two types of refugees that have tried to enter Poland over the last 12 months. The illegal pushbacks at the Belarusian border are overwhelmingly supported, and even if a welcoming attitude prevails towards Ukrainian refugees, they are often expected to return to Ukraine as soon as this becomes possible. Many young Poles fear cultural difference and other perceived threats from people they do not know. Only a few assert that they dread radical Catholics and nationalists even more than Islam. At the same time, Poland has changed dramatically since 2014 and Ukrainians in particular are no longer a distant ‘other’. Personal contacts and friendships are one of the reasons behind the enormous and often spontaneous wave of help offered to those fleeing Ukraine since the beginning of the war. They also have implications for broader social change and feelings of identity: young Poles still share little sense of belonging with their Eastern neighbours but increasingly see them as important allies and oftentimes, as friends.

## Imprint

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