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A Stranger in My Village: Ukrainian Refugees in Poland's Rural Areas

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The attitude of inhabitants and representatives of local institutions towards refugees from Ukraine – and the possibility to include the latter in local social and economic life – plays a crucial role in a successful process of integration. A year after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the authors carried out a quantitative survey among the inhabitants of one rural community in western Poland, investigating whether refugees were perceived as a potential factor of community development. This paper reveals the attitude of residents of that municipality towards war refugees from Ukraine. The predominant attitude is acceptance of the presence of Ukrainian refugees but there is also an element of opposition, albeit much weaker. Although there is demand for migrant labour in the municipality, and, without that labour, many farms and businesses would have to pare back their operations, at the same time the respondents do not fully see migrants as equal fellow residents, agreeing only reluctantly to the financial transfers involved.

Keywords: Ukrainian refugees, Polish rural inhabitants, attitudes towards the Ukrainians

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Introduction

For almost 10 years, the issue of migrants in Poland, including political and war refugees, has been complicated and politically problematic. Despite the growing number of refugees arriving in the country, especially in 2022 following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, it was not until October 2024 that the government adopted the Migration Strategy for the years 2025–2030 (Chancellery of the Prime Minister 2024). This means, among other things, that no active measures have been undertaken thus far to include the new arrivals in the life of the country and local communities (Łodziński and Szonert 2023). This is also connected with the lack of a communication strategy presenting the potential benefits for Poland's development that taking in refugees might involve. People forget about the advantages which arrival could bring, especially when Poland is seeing a shortage of labour and admitting new residents would be in the interests of its current citizens. According to research (OECD 2017; Wysieńska and Karpiński 2011), in the longer term migrants contribute more to the budget in taxes than the costs of helping them, granting them health insurance, etc. There is also a positive impact on the economy due to the progressive specialisation and increased effectiveness of employees, both those from among the people coming into the country and native local residents.

Refugees could help to solve the problem of Poland's depopulation and ageing society, which obviously has economic, social and environmental implications. Poland is going through a process of internal migration that is geographically highly disproportionate: people are migrating from the peripheries to conurbation areas (Stanny, Komorowski, Rosner and Mróz 2023). In the years 2018–2020 the overall domestic migratory balance for rural areas in Poland was positive, in that 60 per cent of municipalities had a negative migratory balance while 40 per cent had a positive one. Many arrivals from Ukraine and other countries have a higher level of education (cf. Zymnin *et al.* 2022), so their relocation to peripheral areas could help to halt migration flows to conurbations.[1] Well-educated migrants could improve access to public services (e.g. healthcare) in peripheral locations. Many factors affect a migrant's decision to settle in a given place. Alongside economic factors, there is the subjective sense of security in a friendly environment where the native residents accept the new arrivals. As shown by research (Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019), it is not migration policies alone that influence the decision to go to and stay in a given place (country) but, rather, their interpretation and perception. This indicates the importance of the atmosphere surrounding immigrants that is created in a given community (Heath and Richards 2019; Phillimore 2021; Shaterian 2020). Hence it is important to explore how migrants feel in a given place and how local residents treat the new arrivals.

This article examines the social climate in a Polish urban-rural[2] municipality following the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, with a focus on patterns of reception, shifts in local residents' attitudes and the key factors shaping the refugees' prospects for integration. The analysis is grounded in the NIEM (National Integration Evaluation Mechanism) framework, which provides a structured approach to assessing integration outcomes. As we were investigating the phenomenon of mass migration to areas outside metropolises on a scale as yet unheard of in this part of Europe, we decided to use the case-study method, as this enables a given phenomenon to be explored 'in the context of reality, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not completely obvious' (Yin 2015: 66).

The attention of decision-makers and researchers of migration processes is the most often concentrated on big cities (e.g. Bukowski and Duszczyk 2022; Luczaj 2023), ignoring areas outside conurbations; our paper intends to fill that gap. At the same time, after almost 2 years of the full-scale war in Ukraine, Poland is in second place after Germany in the number of refugees from Ukraine

admitted into the country and taking advantage of temporary protection (data as of November 2023),[3] which makes it a major player in Europe's migration processes.

In this text we present a set of general conditions that are very probably already history. The new conflicts that erupted at the beginning of 2024 in connection with foodstuffs, largely directed against Ukrainian produce, will probably have changed the perception of refugees and the general conditions, particularly among small-town and rural residents who are more closely tied to the situation in agriculture.

The context of Ukrainian migration

The movement of peoples – economic migrants as well as political and war refugees – is a pressing problem in today's world. This became evident in the second decade of the 21st century, when a wave of refugees from the Middle East and Africa reached not just developed Western Europe but Central-Eastern Europe as well. Having always been a 'country of emigration', Poland – due to the draft refugee relocation programme drawn up by the European Union – had to face up to the new problem and declare its acceptance or refusal of the proposed quota of refugees. This was during the election campaign of 2015. The issue dominated the campaign and became a hot topic for the conservative right, who did not hesitate to use racist arguments. This influenced the right's election victory and their 'nurturing' of the issue over the next 8 years, a time that offered many opportunities for this (Hargrave, Homel and Dražanová 2023).

It would be wrong to think that Poland did not have any economic migrants (from Ukraine or Belarus) or political migrants (e.g. from the Caucasus) before then; it did – but they had blended into Polish society. One indicator might be the topics of surveys regularly conducted by the CBOS Foundation. The great majority of Poles were favourably disposed towards migrants' working in Poland and felt especially friendly towards Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians.[4] This attitude was affected by personal contacts with working foreigners. Nevertheless, according to a study from 2016, Ukrainians themselves felt 'neither strangers nor the same' in Poland (Hargrave *et al.* 2023), which might mean that Polish people perceived Ukrainians in terms of a workforce rather than as fellow citizens.

A change in attitude occurred in 2015, when a wave of refugees from Muslim countries came into Europe and the European Commission discussed their relocation to countries that refugees had, until then, bypassed. Previously more favourably disposed towards taking in refugees, the Poles' attitude changed: whereas 21 per cent of those polled had been against admitting war refugees in May, this group grew to 53 per cent in December (CBOS 2014). The refugee situation was then exacerbated in summer 2021 when groups of refugees from the Middle East, Africa and Asian countries appeared on the Polish–Belarusian border, lured there by the Lukashenko regime. This hybrid war – which continues to this day – and the anti-refugee narrative built upon it serve to revive the negative stereotypes of these refugees.

Such stereotypes are not applied to Ukrainians, relations with whom – historically speaking – have had many dramatic turns. The histories of Poland and Ukraine were intertwined up to the mid-20th century. Until the end of the 18th century, a large part of today's Ukraine was part of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (*aka* the First Polish Republic). Between 1795 and 1918 the whole of Ukraine and a large part of Poland were under Russian administration (the Partitions). After World War I and the Polish–Bolshevik War of 1920, a large part of today's Ukraine lay within the borders of Poland, whose government pursued a policy of Polonisation of the Ukrainian population. During World War II, when these territories were occupied by the Germans, the 'massacres in Volhynia' took place: in July 1943 Ukrainians killed approximately 100,000 Poles – peasants and other rural residents. These events, never worked through by either society (censorship until 1989), are still vivid in Polish memories and are recalled not only in connection with anniversaries. Following the refugee influx, they have increasingly

been a subject of online hate speech. A sense of being threatened by Russia has been increasing among Poles since spring 2014, with the annexation of Crimea and the fighting with separatists in the Donbas (CBOS 2014). Migrants from areas affected by the war as well as other Ukrainians seeking safety – including economic security – outside their own country began to appear. The war had a powerful impact on migration processes in Ukraine after 2014 (Libanowa and Pozniak 2020). Most of these migrants remained in Europe and demographers estimate that, before the February 2022 attack, the Ukrainian diaspora was the most numerous there. In Poland, it numbered between 1 and 1.3 million people (Bukowski and Duszczyk 2022). A major wave of displacement – consisting primarily of women and children – crossed the Ukrainian border after 24 February 2022 and was subsequently resettled across various parts of Europe.[5] Many headed for Poland and remained there: the statistics record the largest group (1.35 million) on the 200th day of the war – i.e. 10 September 2022. For a year after that, their number was stable at around 1 million. The refugees aimed mainly for the biggest cities and their environs.

This was the estimated number of Ukrainian forced migrants in Poland, pushed out of their country by full-scale Russian aggression. These people were directly affected by it – reactive motivations – or fearful of other repercussions, such as proactive motivations (Pachocka and Sobczak-Szelc 2018; Slany 1995).[6]

On that 200th day of the war, on average some 1,500 people each found shelter in suburban municipalities (counted as Urban Metropolitan Areas) and around 300 each in other municipalities. The latter were often chosen deliberately by the refugees as places they knew directly (from current or past jobs) or indirectly (through family or friends). Orlin,[7] an urban-rural municipality in the Wielkopolska region, is one such peripheral municipality. A project entitled 'The Absorptive Capacity of Rural and Small-Town Local Communities to Receive Refugees'[8] was carried out there between September 2022 and October 2023. One of the problems analysed was the attitudes of this community's members towards refugees – attitudes influenced by a great many factors.

The pace and degree of 'saturation' with refugees across various regions and communities varied: the presence of refugees in small towns and rural areas indicated that their burden on these spatial structures was less than on large cities and metropolitan areas. On the 200th day of the war, metropolitan areas housed 805,000 war refugees (58.5 per cent), with an average of 1,543 per municipality, while other areas housed 571,000 (41.5 per cent), with an average of 293 per municipality. By the 500th day, metropolitan municipalities housed 596,000 individuals (61.7 per cent), corresponding to an average of 1,142 refugees per municipality, while other municipalities housed 371,000 refugees (38.3 per cent), with an average of 190 per municipality. The influx process also exhibited different rationalities: the influx to metropolitan centres was *en masse* and spontaneous, whereas a significant portion of refugees chose provincial centres. The primary criteria for their choice were familiarity with the place (e.g., due to previous work there) or knowledge of people living there (family members currently working there, former employers, etc.). The evolution of the number of refugees over time (from the 100th to the 500th day of the war) was primarily influenced by economic factors (an absorbent labour market), which is evidenced by the shrinking proportion of refugees in local areas of Poland and migration from economically under-developed areas to those with better economic conditions. The attention of decision-makers and migration-process researchers is the most often concentrated on big cities, ignoring areas outside conurbations; again, our paper intends to fill that gap. Here, we focus on the absorption capacities existing in non-metropolitan, peripheral communities.

Undertaking our study on the absorption potential of rural communities towards Ukrainian refugees, we assumed that each such community had certain resources, actual or potential, physical and intangible – social and psychological. The latter are very important because they often determine the activation (or even new discovery) of physical resources (Parysek 2001).[9] We assumed that the

attitudes of local residents – accepting refugees and the help given to them – were a major intangible resource, alongside knowledge, skills and social capital, the latter of which was conducive to their inclusion in local community life. On the other hand, disapproval of their presence and the help they received either limited or even prevented such a possibility.

Research methodology

The case study was conducted in the Orlin municipality. We had already conducted a study (on a different subject, see Halamska, Burdyka, Kaliowski, Kubicki, Michalska, Ptak, Sadłoń and Zwęglińska-Gałecka 2021) in the municipality in question from 2019 to 2022, which made it much easier for us to 'enter' this local environment and access various kinds of information. The choice of Orlin was also influenced by the fact that a larger number of refugees reside in the western part of the country; in this regard, the location was more representative of the process we were analysing.

The urban-rural municipality lies in western Poland, i.e. far from the border with Ukraine. It is a depopulating municipality and this process will probably intensify.[10] It has a population of just under 30,000 at present. The number of newly registered businesses is double that of deregistered businesses and suggests that the local economy is dynamic. The greatest percentage of the population is employed in agriculture, followed by industry and construction. The local labour market is receptive: the number of people commuting to work from outside the municipality was about 500 more than the number of those commuting away from it – and there is also a sizable demand for seasonal workers. Demand for labour is reported in transport (drivers), production, simple jobs (horticulture) and construction work. According to the staff of the County Labour Office, if it were not for Ukrainians going to work there before the war, the municipality would not have had anyone to do those jobs. Poles are not willing to do such work. Before the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine, the number of Ukrainians in the Orlin municipality was estimated at around 600. The local authorities and entrepreneurs aimed, in 2019, to stabilise the group of Ukrainian workers by organising a forum for systematic contacts between Ukrainian workers and employers – which, however, was not successful. Nevertheless, due to the existence of such a large group of workers, the presence of foreigners was not new to this community and could become very useful in the initial humanitarian phase of the crisis.

The influx of war refugees began on 26 February. They arrived in different waves – initially a few people per day and, later, up to 30, which required significant mobilisation from the hosts. In total, approximately 800 people passed through the municipality and 750 PESEL UKR[11] documents were issued. After 100 days, 424 refugees resided there and, after 500 days, 447 refugees remained.

As we were investigating the phenomenon of mass migration to peripheral areas, we decided on the case-study method, as this enables a given phenomenon to be explored 'in the context of reality, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not completely obvious' (Yin 2015: 66). Case studies enable an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena within their real-life settings, which is especially valuable when studying dynamic and context-sensitive processes such as local responses to forced migration.

We were guided by the principles of grounded theory, which is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. This means that it is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and through the analysis of data related to that phenomenon (Burawoy 1998).

A project was carried out there between March 2022 and October 2023. This was an in-depth case study based on many sources and a variety of methods: analysis of existing sources – e.g. local statistics and Statistics Poland, *Polska w Liczbach 2021* and the *Local Data Bank*); national statistics on the

changing number of Ukrainian refugees (PESEL UKR); local statistics compiled by the Orlin City and Municipality Office and institutions subordinate to the local government (such as the District Labour Office, Municipal Social Welfare Centre, schools and others). Four focus-group interviews (3 with individuals involved in the refugee reception process at the very beginning – teachers, local activists and entrepreneurs – and one with Ukrainian refugees), 20 individual interviews with people the most involved in the integration of refugees and key stakeholders of local development and an online survey on crisis management. The qualitative analysis was conducted in line with the principles of grounded theory, with inductive coding used to derive analytical categories emerging directly from the data. The resulting codes were then aggregated and organised around core thematic areas relevant to our research focus: cooperation, adaptation, integration and local attitudes toward refugees. This approach allowed us to capture the complexity of community dynamics and the multidimensional nature of refugee inclusion processes.

The opinion surveys, which form the basis of the analysis of attitudes, were conducted twice. In April 2022, as part of the study 'Opinions on Quality of Life and Development Directions in the Municipality in 2022', 3 questions (see Table 1) regarding attitudes towards refugees were asked. The surveys were carried out on a representative sample of residents (N=840). They were conducted again in March 2023 on a stratified random sample of 206 people. The strata were constituencies, an equal number of constituencies being chosen from the rural part and from towns, the proportion between the urban and rural populations being preserved. The same questions from 2022 were repeated (to illustrate the dynamics of change in some attitudes) but the questionnaire was exclusively dedicated to various aspects of attitudes towards refugees. For this study, the 5-element Likert scale was used. The results are presented in the form of 3 acceptance/opposition indices: individual, local and generalised. For a more complete picture, a questionnaire (in Ukrainian) was carried out among the refugees from Ukraine in November 2022 – i.e. 9 months after the war broke out and the first refugees had arrived in the municipality. The survey was carried out using the auditory method. The respondents were chosen through snowball sampling by the municipality's officials, which ensured differentiation of the migrant community by place of residence: collective and individual accommodation. This survey involved 79 respondents with just 13 per cent of them male.[12] Information about the refugees' problems was supplemented through individual interviews. It is important that both surveys were carried out after the 2 communities had been living side by side for several months and had been able to experience what it meant to 'be taken in as refugees' and to 'take in refugees' (literally or otherwise).

This dynamic – of the influx and outflow of refugees – also indicates the absorption capacities of different communities, both metropolitan and peripheral. It is influenced by various factors. In our research, we focused primarily on the possibility of the sustainable integration of refugees in rural and small-town local communities and the favourable conditions for them. In assessing the possibility of absorption (Halamska 2023a), we referred to research on NIEM[13] (Dolinska, Górska, Homel and Kucharczyk 2022), specifically those from the 'General Conditions' dimension, which includes community attitudes, access to information and the participation of refugees in local decision-making processes. While NIEM was originally designed for the macro-level, comparative analysis of integration policies, we adapted its categories to assess micro-level processes in a rural municipality, focusing on how informal institutions, civic networks and public perceptions shape local integration outcomes. These dimensions directly informed the structure of our questionnaire and guided the coding of qualitative interviews with both institutional actors and residents. In analysing local integration capacity, we applied Parysek's (2001) distinction between tangible (e.g., housing, employment opportunities, public infrastructure) and intangible resources (e.g., trust, social capital, local identity).

This distinction was particularly useful in interpreting the role of informal cooperation networks (e.g., volunteer-driven crisis teams) and attitudes toward refugees as non-material assets that either facilitated or hindered inclusion. Finally, to complement the analysis of policy-related drivers, we incorporated the concept of chain migration, understood here as the tendency of migrants to settle in locations where they already have personal or work-related connections (Libanova and Pozniak 2020). This mechanism proved to be particularly relevant in the Orlin municipality, where previous seasonal or permanent labour migration from Ukraine had established informal pathways that strongly influenced refugees' choice of destination.

The analysis of the former element – how the refugees were received – was based on the structure and activities of the Crisis Team (ZK); the relevant information was gathered with the help of focus interviews with ZK members and individual ones with the ZK coordinator, ZK members responsible for different forms of assistance (education, health, welfare, social media and others) and the mayor, who headed the ZK *ex officio*. The attitudes of this community's members towards refugees were shaped by numerous factors. Undertaking our study on the absorption potential of rural and small-town local communities towards Ukrainian refugees, we assumed that each such community had certain resources, actual or potential, physical and intangible – social and psychological. The latter are very important because they often decide on the activation (or even new discovery) of physical resources (Parysek 2001). We assumed that the attitudes of local residents – accepting refugees and the help they are given – were a major intangible resource, alongside the knowledge, skills and social capital that were conducive to their inclusion in local community life. On the other hand, disapproval of their presence and the help they received limited or even prevented such a possibility.

Research outcomes

The reception and initial adaptation of refugees

The first 100–120 days (from 24 February to the middle/end of June) represented the period of reception and initial adaptation of refugees. During this time the main problem was the organisation and self-organisation of the local community in the crisis created by the unexpected influx of war refugees from Ukraine. Key problems included the character and rhythm of the refugee influx, the organisation of assistance, the composition and functioning of the crisis team, the scale of mobilisation of the local community in the assistance operation and the type of humanitarian aid provided.

A 'refugee' Crisis Team of 58 people was promptly appointed in Orlin; the team defined how tasks and competences would be divided, set up a system of internal communication and decided how information would be exchanged within the team and diffused in the local community. The influx of refugees thus did not take residents by surprise. On the contrary, the diffusion of information resulted in the community's mobilisation, as evidenced in the interest shown in various forms of assistance. In this mobilisation, a very important role was played by the Internet and electronic means of communication (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp). The Crisis Team comprised various specialist staff as well as invited volunteers, almost all of whom had connections with the local power system. These were relatively young people – 30- and 40-year-olds. Everyone in this 'local government' group already knew one another; a few people said that they had come to know one another even better during the course of their work.[14] To use a colloquialism, they were thus 'in their own bubble', which was made up of many other 'bubbles' that each of the team members had and, when needed, took advantage of such an

individual database of contacts. The Crisis Team's 'bubble structure' had a fundamental impact on its effectiveness. Moving in their respective 'bubbles', the team members were able to quickly solve many tough ('insoluble') problems because they could count on loyalty and mutual trust[15] – i.e. intangible resources or social capital. The existence of a formal crisis team is mandatory in every municipality in Poland. Thanks to the experience of the COVID-19 crisis, in Orlin this team was transformed into a real structure that operated efficiently, taking advantage of the few existing legislative solutions. The main difficulty lay in the operationalisation of such legislation – i.e. its application in actual, often complicated cases. A sense of getting no help from the national government was combined with fears as to how these solutions' implementation might be assessed in the future, which was understandable in view of the then-central government's aversion to local governments' independence. It was similar later on, when various technical guidelines on the special law on helping Ukrainian refugees did not fit specific situations. In such cases, the only option was to 'pull no punches', following the widespread belief that you could get around every regulation – or you should at least try. The interviewees themselves admitted that, in 'law-abiding societies', i.e. those that follow the letter of the law, such an aid campaign would not have been possible. The efficiency and effectiveness of admitting refugees in Orlin was based on the unique 'bubble structure' in which the glue was direct acquaintance, mutual trust and belief in mutual loyalty. This kind of functioning is only possible in relatively small local communities.

The reception and initial adaptation stage was a period of strong feelings of temporariness. This was noticeable on both sides, among both the refugees and their hosts. The refugees intended to 'go back soon', while the hosts assumed that the guests 'would leave soon'. Coming out of this transience was a time of initial dual adaptation: by the refugees who had to revise their plans in view of the course the war was taking and the hosts who realised that the date of their guests' return to their own country was undefined. At that time no one realised that the assistance might be long-term.

According to one questionnaire survey (with Orlin's citizens, N=206), in the period from February 2022 to February 2023, 70 per cent of those polled declared that they had provided some form of assistance to refugees. Those who had not helped in any way were mainly people with no more than secondary education,[16] male and slightly more often rural rather than urban residents. The assistance mainly involved taking part in collections of goods and money for the refugees. Less often, this was aid that required more time and commitment, such as organising a collection (16 per cent) or helping with transport (14 per cent). As for overnight accommodation, more was provided in the initial period, including to 'transit' refugees. Diverse aid was also needed after the period of humanitarian reception; it was provided by private individuals and the various types of institution which – according to the respondents – were supposed to handle this. However, people most often pointed out that the greatest effort to organise a life for themselves in Poland rested with the arriving refugees. This might be explained in 2 ways: either as a limited readiness to offer systemic aid to others or as an expression of the internalised declarative value of self-reliance. The second most frequently mentioned entity providing aid was the municipality government, mentioned even when such aid was not among its responsibilities. This may be interpreted as people's attachment to the principle of subsidiarity or a lack of trust in national-level institutions. Grouped under the umbrella term 'the government', these were perceived as entities ensuring systemic solutions related to specialist healthcare, support for people with disabilities and chronic illnesses and additional cash benefits for the refugees. Though another national institution (the Catholic Church) has local agencies (parishes), respondents absolved it of any obligations towards the refugees (apart from helping the sick and people with disabilities – 13 per cent).

Did this aid meet the expectations of the refugees? As a survey conducted among the refugees showed, in the first days after arrival they received help from Poles, private individuals (38 per cent)

and Municipality Office employees (32 per cent) or another person from Ukraine (9 per cent). This does not change the fact that respondents who said they had someone to turn to for help (63 per cent of those polled) mentioned in the first place that it was someone from Ukraine (38 per cent) and only in second place someone from Poland whom they had only just met. The Ukrainian respondents said they had no contact with the pre-war Ukrainian diaspora in Orlin. One may therefore assume that the people who might have helped them were the most probably those who had found themselves in the same difficult circumstances. From their arrival, they felt taken care of by residents, officials and local-government institutions.[17]

The municipality's residents are pleased with themselves and think (78 per cent of respondents) that they coped well in a situation involving the influx of such a large number of new inhabitants. Considering that 70 per cent of respondents declared have given some form of aid to refugees in 2022,[18] one may assume that the respondents were speaking about themselves, appreciating their own efforts in this area. They also expressed appreciation for the efforts of the local government in providing aid to the refugees: 62 per cent of respondents said it was sufficient, while nearly 14 per cent thought it was excessive.

Dynamics of attitudes

Polish people's attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees has evolved over time. Polish society now broadly agrees that refugees from areas affected by the war should be taken in but this consensus has been slowly deteriorating: in an April 2022 study by the CBOS public-opinion research centre, 90 per cent of respondents agreed, while the figure in February 2023 was 80 per cent. It may also be important to recognise that the proportion between 'definitely yes' and 'probably yes' has changed: the former response decreased, while the latter increased; the percentage of negative answers also grew. Further decreases were reported in the CBOS survey from April 2023: support dropped to 73 per cent while opposition grew to 20 per cent. In the structure of responses related to the extent of Polish assistance, the changes are small and involve an increase from 18 to 26 per cent in those who believe that Polish assistance is excessive (CBOS 2022, 2023).[19] The results of the opinion poll in the municipality of Orlin are less optimistic, as documented in Table 1.

Table 1. Dynamics of opinions on help for Ukrainians (in %)

Do you think Poland should take in Ukrainian refugees from areas affected by the conflict?						
	Definitely yes	Probably yes	Hard to say	Probably no	Definitely no	Time of survey
Orlin I	5.3	42.8	31.9	10.3	9.7	April 2022
Orlin II	11.7	43.7	27.7	11.7	5.3	March 2023
Do you think the assistance our country is offering refugees from Ukraine is:						
	Sufficient	Too big	Too small	Hard to say	Time of survey	
Orlin I	43.6	26.2	1.5	28.7	April 2022	
Orlin II	54.9	21.8	4.4	18.9	March 2023	
If some of the refugees want to stay in Orlin, after the Ukraine war is over, do you think:						
	It is very good that they will stay	They should leave	I do not care either way	Hard to say	Time of survey	
Orlin I	13.4	36.3	21.1	29.2	April 2022	
Orlin II	19.6	32.5	35.0	13.1	March 2023	

Source: own work based on: I *Opinie mieszkańców MiG Orlin o jakości życia i kierunkach rozwoju gminy w 2022 r.* N=840 and II *Opinie mieszkańców gminy Orlin w rok po wybuchu wojny na Ukrainie*, IRWiR PAN N=206.

This is the background to our analysis of the attitudes of the community in question, composed of the residents of towns and the surrounding villages. Compared to nationwide data, acceptance for assistance provided to Ukrainian war refugees is much smaller (48–55 per cent) and opposition is expressed by a fifth of the population under consideration. The lack of an opinion among a third of the population is intriguing; this group may also include people who did not have the courage to negate the appropriateness of accepting refugees from war-torn areas. On the other hand, compared with nationwide tendencies, the evolution of opinions has taken a different direction: the acceptance of assistance is growing at the cost of the undecided ('hard to say'). Residents of the municipality of Orlin also seem to be much more cautious in their positive judgment of Polish assistance, again hiding behind the safe 'hard to say' response. The same is also true for the question of refugees settling in their municipality: indifference to this or the lack of a stance accounts for about half the population. Among the respondents expressing a clear opinion, the dominant view is that 'They should leave', while the minority view that 'It's very good that they will stay' represented a slightly larger group in March 2023 than in April 2022.

Acceptance vs opposition

As the questionnaire surveys from 2022 and 2023 show, the residents of the municipality of Orlin were very reserved in their attitude towards assistance for war refugees from Ukraine. The presence of Ukrainians was nothing new to them, since they had already been present on the local labour market for several years, both as permanent and as seasonal workers – mainly in agriculture and horticulture. The distribution of opinions (see Table 1) shows that, between 2022 and 2023, the acceptance of refugees increased rather than decreased (which differs from the nationwide trend).

Of course, the presence of refugees influences certain aspects of this community's functioning and the respondents notice this. How this influence is perceived and judged affects people's attitudes, tipping the balance towards acceptance or opposition regarding the presence of Ukrainians in the municipality residents' personal lives, their local life and life in Poland in general.

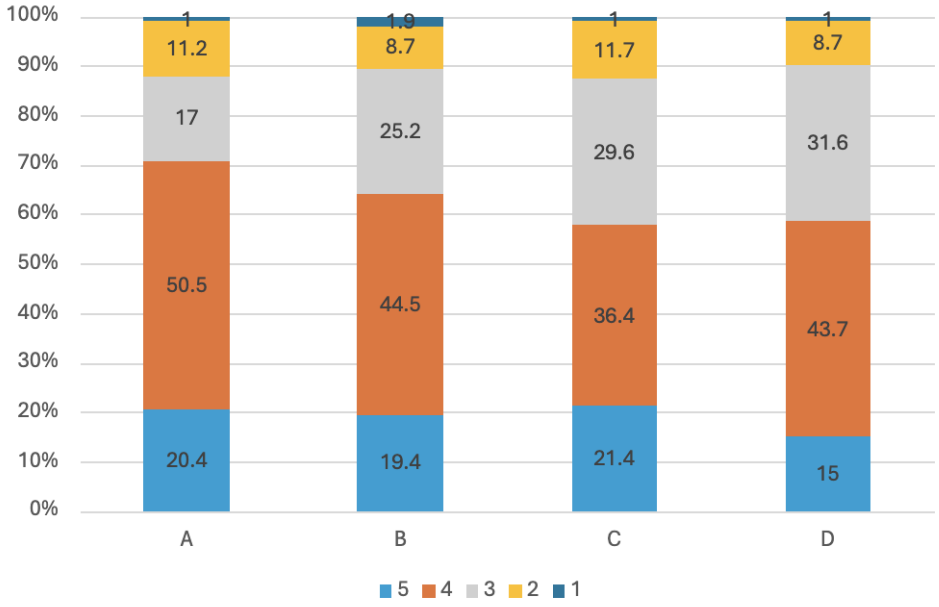
Approval – on a verbal level – concerning personal or even intimate relations with Ukrainians, is presented in the personal index, developed on the basis of the distribution of replies to 4 questions (Table 2).

The average of the 4 responses (the index value, Figure 1) is 3.69 (where the minimum is 1.50 and the maximum 5.00) and the responses indicate that acceptance predominates over opposition.

Table 2. Individual index

Would you have anything against: (no = 5 points, probably no = 4, hard to say = 3, probably yes = 2, definitely yes = 1)	**Average**
A – getting medical treatment from a person from Ukraine	3.78
B – your boss at work being a person from Ukraine	3.71
C – a person from Ukraine becoming your life partner	3.66
D – your child being in a relationship with a person from Ukraine	3.63

Figure 1. Individual acceptance index



Source: the survey *Opinie mieszkańców gminy Pleszew w rok po wybuchu wojny na Ukrainie*.

Note: created based on the distribution of responses to the question: Would you have anything against:

A – getting medical treatment from a person from Ukraine

B – your boss at work being a person from Ukraine

C – a person from Ukraine becoming your life partner

D – your child being in a relationship with a person from Ukraine?

(no = 5 points, probably no = 4, hard to say = 3, probably yes - 2, definitely yes = 1).

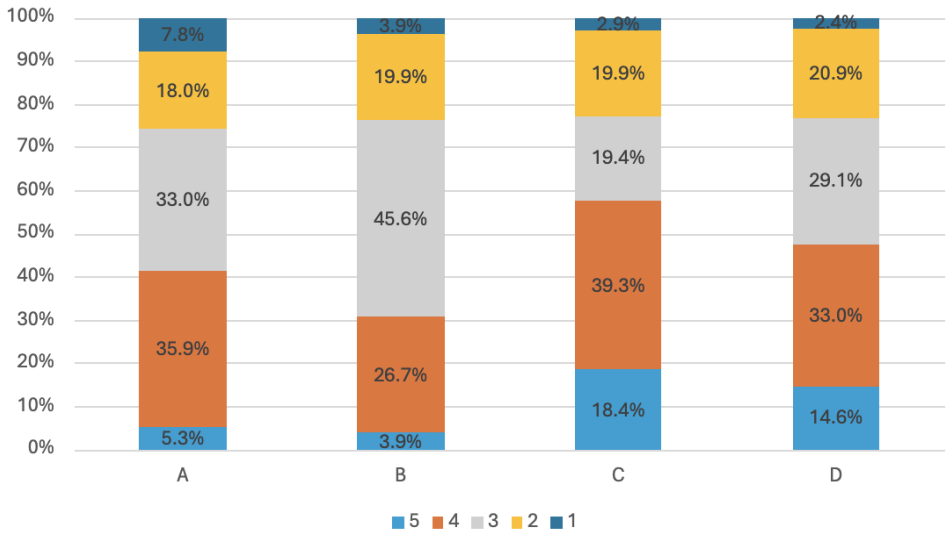
The local index was constructed in the same way: here, the 4 questions were about the presence of Ukrainians and their participation in local life (Table 3).

The local average (the index value) is 3.27 and, as the graph in Figure 2 shows, is quite diverse: there is a greater acceptance of issues with an individual aspect (having a Ukrainian neighbour, letting Ukrainians have a say in local affairs), while scepticism (or just reserve) appears when estimating future benefits for the community (Figure 2).

Table 3. Local index

Do you agree that: (yes = 5 points, probably yes = 4, hard to say = 3, probably no = 2, definitely no = 1)	**Average**
A – war refugees from Ukraine should continue coming to the municipality	3.13
B – the municipality's development can benefit from Ukrainians settling here	3.07
C – a person from Ukraine could live in your immediate neighbourhood	3.38
D – a person born in Ukraine could be a municipal councillor	3.50

Figure 2. Local acceptance index



Source: the survey *Opinie mieszkańców gminy Pleszew w rok po wybuchu wojny na Ukrainie*.

Note: based on the distribution of responses to the question: Do you agree that:

A – war refugees from Ukraine should continue coming to the municipality

B – the municipality's development can benefit from Ukrainians settling here

C – a person from Ukraine could live in your immediate neighbourhood

D – a person born in Ukraine could be a municipal councillor?

(yes = 5 points, probably yes = 4, hard to say = 3, probably no = 2, definitely no = 1)

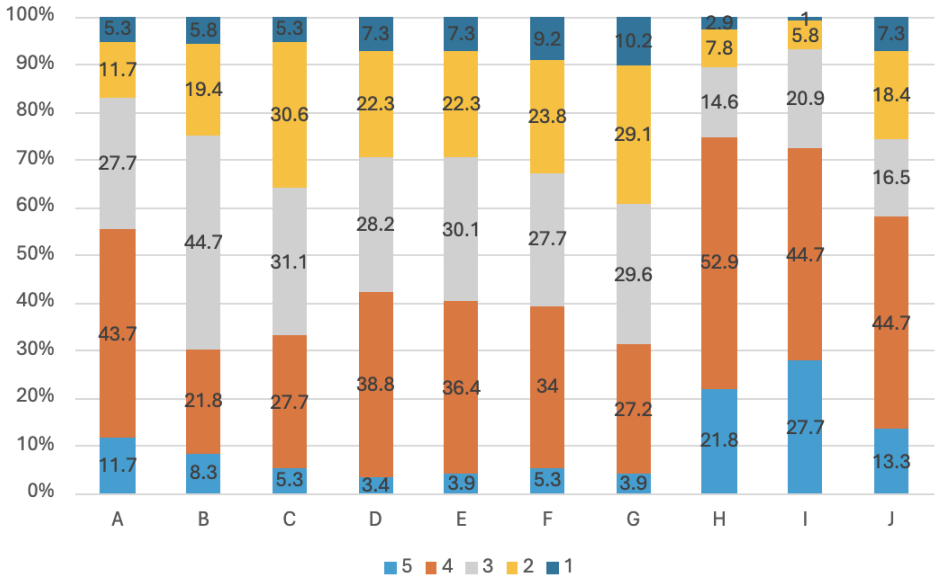
The generalised (general) index, which looked at these issues at the national level, was constructed in a similar way to the 2 previous indicators: the respondents judged the predicted impact of the presence (temporary or permanent) of Ukrainians on affairs in Poland (Table 4). As many as 10 elements were considered here; the first 2 concerned the acceptance of continuing to take in war refugees and the possible economic benefits involved, 7 involved the approval of various financial benefits to which the law entitles the refugees and the final one was the approval of their possible application for Polish citizenship.

The general acceptance index's average value was 3.27, with somewhat diverse values in the individual items (Figure 3). The greatest acceptance was shown for access to public healthcare and free public education; the lowest for the set of statutory public benefits ranging from the unemployment benefit to the 500+ child benefit. Here the municipality's residents did poorly in the test of interpersonal solidarity, which may indicate a 'nationalist appropriation' of welfare benefits.

Table 4. General index

Do you agree with the following statement: (yes = 5 points, probably yes = 4, hard to say = 3, probably no = 2, definitely no = 1)	**Average**
A – Poland should continue to take in war refugees	3.45
B – this will bring Poland economic benefits in future	3.07
C – **people from Ukraine have a right to receive the 500+ child benefit**	**2.97**
D – people from Ukraine have a right to receive family benefits for children	3.09
E – people from Ukraine have a right to receive care benefits	3.07
F – people from Ukraine have a right to receive the benefit for the birth of a child	3.02
G – **people from Ukraine have a right to unemployment benefit**	**2.85**
H – people from Ukraine have a right to free healthcare	3.83
I – people from Ukraine have a right to free public education	3.92
J – people from Ukraine may effectively apply for Polish citizenship	3.38

Figure 3. General acceptance index



Source: the survey *Opinie mieszkańców gminy Pleszew w rok po wybuchu wojny na Ukrainie*.

Note: based on the distribution of the answers, do you agree with the following statement:

A – Poland should continue to take in war refugees

B – this will bring Poland economic benefits in future

C – people from Ukraine have a right to receive the 500+ child benefit

D – people from Ukraine have a right to receive the family benefit for children

E – people from Ukraine have a right to receive the care benefit

F – people from Ukraine have a right to receive the benefit for the birth of a child

G – people from Ukraine have a right to the unemployment benefit

H – people from Ukraine have a right to free healthcare

I – people from Ukraine have a right to free public education

J – people from Ukraine may effectively apply for Polish citizenship?

(yes = 5 points, probably yes = 4, hard to say = 3, probably no = 2, definitely no = 1)

All the indicators (individual, local and general) suggest acceptance rather than opposition. The respondents expressed the fewest objections on matters that might affect them personally and the most on benefits payments. Granting refugees the right to unemployment benefit and child benefits caused the most negative emotions. Does this mean that they are considered solely as 'Polish benefits for Polish people'?

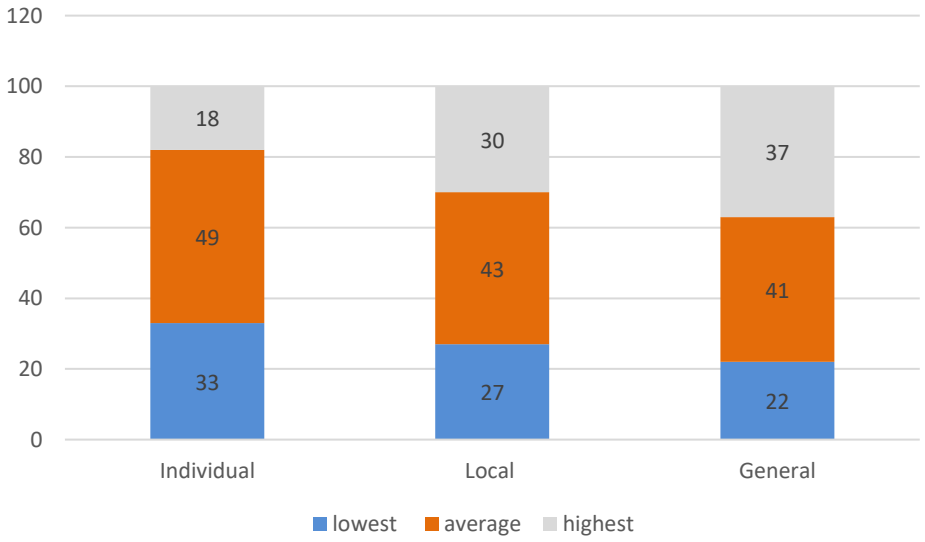
Each index value is the average of the personal index values of the 206 respondents which, in each case, might range from 1.50 to 5.00. Among the respondents, we were particularly interested in those with low values of the acceptance index (opposition) and those at the other end of the scale, i.e. those with the highest values (acceptance). For each index, we divided the respondents (206 people) into 3 groups using the natural-breaks method.[20] The share of the groups thus distinguished, i.e. lowest, average and highest support, is different for each index. For the individual index, only fewer than a fifth (18 per cent) of the respondents showed the highest (and very high – 4.25, 5.00) acceptance index and as much as a third the lowest.

Table 5. The acceptance index

	Natural breaks classes by level of acceptance		
	Lowest	**Average**	**Highest**
Individual index			
Jenks classes – intervals	1.5, 3.25	3.25, 4.25	4.25, 5.00
Participation N=206	33%	49%	18%
	Local index		
Jenks classes – intervals	1.50, 2.75	2.75, 3.50	3.50, 5.00
Participation N=206	27%	43%	30%
	General index		
Jenks classes – intervals	1.50, 2.70	2.70, 3.50	3.50, 5.00
Participation N=206	22%	41%	37%

Source: the survey *Opinie mieszkańców gminy Pleszew w rok po wybuchu wojny na Ukrainie. Index.*

Figure 4. Structure of the three types of acceptance indices



Source: The survey *Opinie mieszkańców gminy Pleszew w rok po wybuchu wojny na Ukrainie*.

In the case of the local index, almost a third of the respondents fell within the highest acceptance interval (with a much lower threshold – 3.50), while a quarter were in the lowest interval. The general index turned out to be the most liberal (threshold of 3.50): almost two-fifths of the respondents fell within the highest acceptance interval, while a fifth were in the lowest interval. This means that (high) acceptance of very personal relations was the most difficult for the respondents, while local and general social relations were much easier. These attitudes appear to be cohesive: there is a correlation between the 3 indices. The correlation between the local and general indices is quite strong (Cramér's V 0.46, contingency coefficient 0.86), while that between the individual and general indices is similarly strong (0.45, 0.86). The correlation between the general and local indices is slightly weaker (Cramér's V 0.29, contingency coefficient 0.73). Is it therefore possible to identify the characteristics of the 'accepting' and 'opposing' groups with considerable probability? The set of characteristics of the extreme groups – accepting and opposing – according to the individual and general indices does not provide unequivocal answers (Table 5). In the case of the individual index, there are clear regularities. Acceptance of personal contacts with Ukrainians is higher among females, middle-aged people and those with a higher level of education. This combination of features suggests that the middle class[21] which, by definition, has higher social and cultural capital, is more liberal and cosmopolitic. However, as other research shows, it could also be more a question of political correctness (Wyciechowski *et al.* 2016). On the other hand, respondents with the lowest individual index values (opposing refugees in individual relations) mainly come from the urban population, are male, from the older age groups and have a poorer (secondary) or the poorest (vocational and elementary) level of education. There are no such clear correlations in the distribution of the characteristics of the general index's extreme groups and this was already noticeable in the structure of the items it covered and the surprising diversity of their perception. In the accepting group, there is only a clear predominance of women. Some regularities may be noticed in the opposing group, partly the same as in the 'individual opposing' group. These are more often rural rather than urban female residents, from the middle-age group and quite well educated. Is this the new rural middle class?

Summary

A large wave of refugees arrived in the urban-rural municipality under consideration in the first months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For the residents of this community, just as for most Polish people, this was not their first contact with Ukrainians: they had been coming to the municipality and its environs for many years as permanent and seasonal workers. Their reception was efficient and well organised, something of which the community was proud a year later. However, compared to nationwide surveys, the opinions expressed by residents were very cautious and reserved from the start – and remained so a year after the war broke out. Acceptance of Ukrainians in the municipality is more frequent among women with a higher level of education, which is also little different from the nationwide results (cf. CBOS 2023).[22] The arrival and year-long stay of refugees was observed by the municipality's residents; opinions about the refugees appeared and attitudes towards them developed. In the year since the refugees arrived in the municipality of Orlin, the residents' overall lives changed: living conditions deteriorated due to high inflation and fears connected with the escalation of the conflict intensified. Hate speech towards Ukrainians and the rehashing of historical conflicts appeared in the media, especially the digital media. The fact that Poles' attitudes toward migrants are not constant over time is also highlighted in other research (Kubiciel-Lodzinska and Solga 2023).

Generally speaking, the predominant attitude is acceptance of the presence of Ukrainian refugees but there is also an element of opposition, albeit much weaker. The average number of accepting responses

('Definitely yes', 'Probably yes') is twice as high as opposing responses ('Definitely no', 'Probably no') in the local and general index; it is 6 times as high in the individual index. However, it is worth noting the sizable share of responses avoiding any clear position, expressed in responses like 'I don't know', 'I have no opinion' or 'I don't care'. One may suspect that this stems from the fear of adopting a definite stance – accepting or opposing. The respondents were the most unequivocal when speaking about private, intimate relations. The 'accepting group' itself is relatively small here but the acceptance indicators are high; the 'opposing group' is twice as large but not radical (see Figures 1 and 4). Acceptance of the Ukrainians' presence is much more widespread – but not stronger – in the public sphere, i.e. local and national. However, again, the group of those unwilling to reveal their attitude is quite substantial, whether they are pretending or really do not have an opinion on a given issue (cf. Figures 2, 3 and 4). Our research reveals a process of polarisation of opinion which is also observed in other surveys from this period (Halamska 2023a). The increase in acceptance of refugees in Orlin after one year – contrary to national trends – may be attributed to the community's gradual adaptation to the presence of Ukrainian refugees in their immediate surroundings. This may also stem from the research methods employed, which further underscores the value of conducting follow-up studies in the future.

Although there is a demand for migrant labour in the community and although, without this labour, many farms and businesses would have to pare back their operations, at the same time the respondents do not fully see migrants as equal fellow residents, only reluctantly agreeing to the financial transfers that are available to anyone with a PESEL number.

It seems that in the case of this community, too, one would have to agree with the Swiss author Max Frisch's words: 'We asked for workers; we got people instead',[23] which is how he commented on Germany's migration policy. Since Poland, like all the EU countries, is a country with an ageing society, it needs new inhabitants, who often come here prepared to work but at the same time want to be treated the same as everyone else living there. There is some fear that the longer the war lasts, the further people's patience and openness towards refugees will decrease. The lack of migration policies, including poor communication of the importance of immigrants for the Polish as well as the local economy, is not helping to build good general conditions for Ukrainians, not to mention people coming from other socio-cultural contexts.

With the lengthening of the war, uncertainty and growing inflation, as well as the government switching to a narrative that is more unfriendly towards Ukrainians, it is important to continue this research, exploring the attitudes of the municipality's residents as well as those of the migrants in order to find out whether living next to each other helps in accepting each other more easily or leads to greater dislike.

The case study employed in this research offers numerous advantages, including the ability to examine a complex phenomenon – namely, the process of migrants' adaptation to a local community – within its contextual setting. The authors are, however, aware of the limited generalisability of the findings. To mitigate this limitation, national-level data (e.g., from CBOS) were also consulted. Nonetheless, such data did not capture the evolution of attitudes with the same degree of detail as the present study. It would undoubtedly be valuable to replicate this research in the near future within the same community, in order to trace the ongoing evolution of residents' attitudes towards migrants, as well as the behavioural responses of the migrants themselves.

Notes

1. The problem has been noticed by the national authorities, who have developed the *Wzajemnie Potrzebni* [Mutually Needed] public task (https://wzajemniepotrzebni.pl/o-projekcie/), its aim being to improve the housing infrastructure in rural and small-town areas so that accommodation can be offered to people from Ukraine.
2. An urban-rural municipality is one of 3 administrative types of municipality in Poland.
3. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/ukraine-refugees-eu/.
4. The acceptance of foreigners' work has grown noticeably in the course of 20 years. In 1992, (emerging unemployment) the employment of foreigners was approved by two-fifths of Poles while, in 2010 (labour shortages), the figure was four-fifths (CBOS 2010).
5. According to UNHCR data (https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine), as of 12 September 2023 the estimated number of refugees having fled Ukraine since 24 February and applied for asylum, temporary protection or other similar national protection programmes in European countries, was the greatest in Russia (1.3 million), followed by Poland (1 million), Germany (1 million) and Czechia (370,000). Between 150,000 and 200,000 refugees from Ukraine were also reported in countries with a large Ukrainian diaspora: Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. Eastern European countries such as Romania, Slovakia and Moldova, which were included in the UNHCR regional refugee response plan for Ukraine, took in about 100,000 refugees. Canada, the United States and Israel, which have the largest Ukrainian migrant communities outside Europe, also took in some 100,000 refugees.
6. Many of them could be categorised as proactive forced migrants who, however, did not seek international protection but themselves undertook ways to remain in Poland. 'Forced migrants is a very capacious category, encompassing different groups of people; the reasons for migration often co-occur in various combinations, which makes it impossible at times to pinpoint their precise nature' (Pachocka and Sobczak-Szelc 2018: 336).
7. The name of the municipality has been changed for anonymisation purposes.
8. The project was carried out under the NAWA Intervention Grants programme, based on agreement no. BPN/GIN/2022/1/00021/U/00001.
9. One might invoke Jerzy Parysek here, who claims that there is no universal classification of development factors and therefore also local resources. He underlines (2001: 120) that, regardless of the classification one adopts, it remains certain that an actual, effective and significant development or success of an undertaking is determined by a set of factors that are in dynamic interaction with one another.
10. Urban-rural municipalities with a negative migration balance amount to almost 60 per cent in Poland.
11. PESEL UKR – Identification number (PESEL) with special status for Ukrainian citizens who arrived in Poland after 24 February 2022, due to the armed conflict.
12. The Appendix contains Table A1, which presents the basic social characteristics of respondents in both studies.
13. NIEM (National Integration Evaluation Mechanism) – criteria for evaluating the progress of migrant/refugee integration – a project co-funded by the EU, was conducted between 2016 and 2022 in 14 European countries. About 150 indicators were created, divided into 4 groups: general conditions, legal integration, socio-economic integration and socio-cultural integration (Wolfhardt, Conte and Yilmaz 2022). From the point of view of this research, the key indicators

are general conditions, which include the course of reception, the creation of a migrant-friendly environment and the inclusion of migrants in the co-management of the integration process.

14. The online survey *Crisis Situation Management* conducted among members of Orlin's Crisis Team in May 2023.
15. A similar way of functioning in the COVID-19 crisis invoked the 'clique' system; here, it should be noted that, in this approach, 'clique' is not a pejorative term but means an exclusive 'pure community' (cf. Halamska, Kurczewski and Ptak 2020).
16. In the context of the Polish education system, secondary education refers to upper-secondary schooling, typically completed between the ages of 18 and 20.
17. One woman said in her interview that, if such a catastrophe had happened to the Polish people, they – the Ukrainians – would not have been able to help in this way.
18. Providing various forms of assistance was more likely among people with a higher level of education who were aged between 35 and 64 and living in towns.
19. Cf. *Polacy wobec uchodźców z Ukrainy* [Poles' Attitudes Towards Refugees from Ukraine], CBOS (2022) and *Polacy o wojnie w Ukrainie w rok po jej wybuchu* [Poles on the War in Ukraine One Year After It Broke Out], CBOS (2023).
20. Natural Breaks (Jenks) – a method of dividing a variable into classes in such a way as to minimise the variance within them and maximise the variance between them.
21. The middle class is defined here as a social stratum engaged in non-manual forms of labour that require formal qualifications and domain-specific competencies, which constitute the basis for occupational identity and status differentiation (Halamska 2023b).
22. This is the effect of the set of multiple-choice questions in the CBOS survey and in our survey in the municipality of Orlin. Conforming to the principles of the Likert scale, we place the 'hard to say' response in the middle of the set, while CBOS placed it at the end, in a way forcing respondents to make a directional choice – acceptance or opposition.
23. https://quotefancy.com/quote/1196607/Max-Frisch-We-asked-for-workers-We-got-people-instead.

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Conflict of interest statement

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Appendix

Table A1. Basic social characteristics of survey respondents[1]: Municipality residents' opinions 1 year after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (N=206)

Category	Subcategory	Per cent
Age in years	18–24	9.2
	25–34	13.6
	35–44	20.9
	45–54	17.5
	55–64	14.6
	65 and over	24.3
Gender[2]	Women	53.9
	Men	46.1
Education[3]	Higher education	25.0
	Secondary education	36.0
	Vocational education	34.0
	Primary education	4.9
Main source of income[4]	Retirement pension/benefit	27.7
	Public-sector employment	18.9
	Self-employment	8.7
	Farm income	2.9
	Private-sector employment	33.0
	Other	8.7

Source: the survey *Opinie mieszkańców gminy Pleszew w rok po wybuchu wojny na Ukrainie*.

Notes: [1] Respondents of the survey conducted with refuges from Ukraine in the Orlin Municipality (November 2022); [2] 77 per cent women (women make up 73 per cent of the refugee population); [3] 40 per cent of respondents have higher education, 33 per cent have secondary education (general and vocational); [4] 45 per cent came from medium-sized towns and 12 per cent from rural areas; [5] 80 per cent of respondents do not have a driving licence.

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