

# Post-2022 Migration of Russians to Poland in a Broader Context

by **Tomasz Rawski**

Over the last decade, and particularly after 2020, Poland has received a large number of economic or political migrants from Belarus, a very large number of economic migrants or war refugees from Ukraine, and only a very modest number of migrants from Russia. Of at least one million people who left Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine started in late February 2022, very few chose Poland as their destination country despite the fact that Poland is the largest of Russia's direct EU neighbors. This report<sup>1</sup> explains the latter phenomenon in a broader legal context. It also illuminates the socio-economic situation of, and Polish public attitudes towards, those post-2022 Russian migrants who nevertheless came to Poland: a country that turned out to be less welcoming

to them than to Ukrainian war refugees or Belarusian political migrants.

## Legal Dynamics: Russians (Un)welcome

The tightening of the entry regime for Russians to Poland began in July 2016, after the four-year period of partial liberalization under the Polish-Russian Local Border Traffic agreement. This local traffic was suspended by the Polish side due to security reasons related to the organization of the World Youth Day in Cracow as well as the NATO summit in Warsaw. This decision quickly turned out to be permanent, since the real reason for it was the cooling of EU–Russia relations in connection with the Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the military conflict in Donbas. At that

### Abstract

This report discusses the dynamics of migration of Russian citizens to Poland over the past decade (2014–2024), with a particular focus on the situation of post-2022 Russian migrants: people who moved to Poland after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These dynamics are presented against the background of the analogous dynamics of the migration of Belarusians and Ukrainians from their countries of residence. The report reveals the legal dynamics of these three migrations, discusses the socio-economic situation of post-2022 Russian migrants, and shows the dynamics of public attitudes in Poland towards Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians.

**Keywords:** Migration, Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Belarus.

point, the right-wing Polish government started sealing the Polish-Russian and Polish-Belarusian state border, justifying it with the need to protect national security. Thus, the suspension of Local Border Traffic reinstated the previous visa regime, regulated by the 2001 Regulation of the Council of Europe,<sup>2</sup> as mandatory for all Russians. At the same time, migration policy towards Ukraine was liberalized. Local Border Traffic with Ukraine, in effect since July 2009 and suspended at the same time as traffic with Russia, was unblocked after just one month. Then, from June 2017, full EU-Ukraine visa-free travel was introduced, making it even easier for Ukrainian citizens to enter Poland. This move was intended to provide additional relief to the growing number of Ukrainian migrants and asylum seekers looking to leave their increasingly poor, war-torn country.

The subsequent entry restrictions for Russians were introduced at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. These consisted of the complete closure of some land border crossings with Russia (as well as Belarus and Ukraine), and the restriction of traffic and tightening of controls at all other (air and sea) crossings.<sup>3</sup> Table 1 shows how the restrictions affected traffic from all three countries: it reduced the inflow of Russians to the greatest extent, i.e. more than four times, while the inflow of Belarusians and Ukrainians was reduced by just three times each.

The Polish government did not change the entry criteria for Russians immediately after the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on

February 24, 2022. Nevertheless, few Russians in the first large wave of war-induced migration from Russia chose Poland as their destination country. This wave started with the beginning of the invasion, lasted for several weeks, and involved low hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens. Instead, in the first months of the war, the Polish government placed priority on immediately opening the borders to millions of fleeing Ukrainians and introducing very liberal regulations for their continued stay in Poland.<sup>4</sup>

Further entry restrictions for Russians were introduced in late September 2022, a few days before the announcement of partial military mobilization in Russia. These followed an earlier decision by the European Council to fully suspend the visa facilitation agreement between the European Union and Russia.<sup>5</sup> The new regulation<sup>6</sup> extended pandemic-time entry restrictions also to air and sea crossings. Thus, after September 26, 2022, Russian citizens completely lost the possibility to enter Poland from non-Schengen countries for economic, sports, tourist, and cultural purposes except in extraordinary cases. This legislation was introduced in consultation with the governments of the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. With the announcement of partial military mobilization in Russia, the second wave of war-induced migration from that country started. This wave continued for several weeks after the mobilization announcement and involved several hundred thousand more citizens.<sup>7</sup> Table 2 presents a marked decline in number of entry visas issued by Poland to Russians in 2022–2024.

Table 1. The number of crossings of the Polish border from non-Schengen countries (2017–2023)\*

Citizenship / Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Russian	1 578 732	1 436 146	1 472 292	344 386	169 074	137 264	116 758
Belarusian	3 632 580	3 480 408	3 364 638	1 110 042	865 950	1 438 623	1 272 637
Ukrainian	10 328 654	9 963 604	10 416 844	3 769 682	4 296 074	9 592 444	9 517 772

Source: Compiled by Rafał Marchwacki based on data by Straż Graniczna.\*\*

\* These figures show the number of border crossings and not the number of people crossing the border; this means that one person could have crossed the border multiple times and be counted each time.

\*\*Straż Graniczna [Border Guard], *Informacja statystyczna za rok 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023* [Statistical information for 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023]. Available at: <https://www.strazgraniczna.pl/pl/granica/statystyki-sg/2206,Statystyki-SG.html>

Table 2. The number of visas (national+Schengen) issued by Poland to Russians (2021–2024)

Citizenship / Year	2018–2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Russian	~310 853	31 297	10 974	4 294	1 821

Source: Author’s own elaboration based on: Oświadczenie MSZ\*, Kmieciak\*\*, NIK Report\*\*\*.

\* *Oświadczenie MSZ w sprawie nieprawdziwych informacji dotyczących procesu wizowego* [Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding false information regarding the visa process], September 15, 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/oswiadczenie-msz-w-sprawie-nieprawdziwych-informacji-dotyczacych-procesu-wizowego>

\*\* P. Kmieciak, „Ile polskich wiz wydano Rosjanom? MSZ podało liczby” [How many Polish visas were issued to Russians? MFA provides figures], *RMF24.pl*, October 11, 2024. Available at: [https://www.rmf24.pl/fakty/polska/news-ile-polskich-wiz-wydano-rosjanom-msz-podalo-liczby,nld,7834597#crp\\_state=1](https://www.rmf24.pl/fakty/polska/news-ile-polskich-wiz-wydano-rosjanom-msz-podalo-liczby,nld,7834597#crp_state=1)

\*\*\* *Nadzór Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych nad działalnością konsularną* (zapis konferencji prasowej) [Supervision of the Minister of Foreign Affairs over consular activities (press conference transcript)], October 10, 2024. Available at: <https://www.nik.gov.pl/aktualnosci/nadzor-msz-nad-dzialalnoscia-konsularna.html>

Furthermore, since late October 2022, Russian citizens were stripped of the facilitation of access to the Polish labor market, which they had enjoyed since 2018 together with Belarusians and Ukrainians.<sup>8</sup> These facilitations allowed them to visit Poland to perform seasonal work without the need to obtain a special work permit. Thus, in practice, after the new regulations of September and October 2022, Russians could enter Poland on the basis of one of only two options: the Pole’s Card or a humanitarian visa, each held either by the person directly concerned or a member of their immediate family.

The Pole’s Card is the document offering the widest possibilities, but it is available only to a relatively small group of Russians. It confirms the Polish nationality of a person who, while not having Polish citizenship, can prove legally documented close kinship with ancestors of Polish nationality or citizenship and knowledge of the Polish culture, including the basics of the national language. The Pole’s Card provides the holder, among other things, with expanded rights to use public and educational services and the right to work in Poland without any special permit, even after October 2022.

A humanitarian visa is a special temporary residence permit issued in Poland in cases of political persecution threatening the right to life, liberty, and personal security. It was relatively more accessible for post-2022 Russian migrants than the Pole’s Card. At the same time, it was still out of reach for many ordinary citizens, as the Polish authorities did not consider

the mere threat of mobilization as a sufficient reason for granting this visa. The main criterion for receiving it was proof of one’s previous activist or opposition activity in Russia. This meant that the humanitarian visa was still only an option for a relatively narrow group of people, usually those who had been publicly active in Russia before migration.

To sum up, in the last decade, and especially after 2020, the Polish authorities gradually narrowed opportunities for Russians to enter Poland to a very large extent, while opening the borders much more broadly to Ukrainians and Belarusians. Especially in the last few years, both trends have been reinforced due to the turbulent geopolitical dynamics in the region. On the one hand, the Polish state in 2020–2021 eagerly welcomed Belarusians fleeing from political persecution by Alexander Lukashenko’s regime in Belarus. Then in 2022–2023, Poland even more eagerly welcomed Ukrainians fleeing from Vladimir Putin’s Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, Russians migrating from Russia have been increasingly seen by Poland as rather undesirable citizens of the neighboring aggressor country.

### Social Situation: Difficulties with Life Stability

The numbers of the Russian minority in Poland have been very low since the 1990s, and this has not changed noticeably to this day. However, over the last decade the ratio of numbers between Russians and the Ukrainian and Belarusian communities changed signif-

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Table 3. The number of persons having valid documents confirming the right of residence in Poland, by citizenship (2015–2023, data as of January 1 of the following year)

Citizenship /Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Russian	9 972	10 583	11 415	11 976	12 531	12 687	14 241	17 304	21 251
Belarusian	11 172	11 428	15 339	2 114	25 567	28 745	40 704	71 620	117 827
Ukrainian	65 886	103 457	145 252	179 154	214 719	244 152	307 735	426 804	1 485 050

Source: Compiled by R. Marchwacki based on data by Urząd ds. Cudzoziemców.\*

\* Urząd ds. Cudzoziemców. *Zestawienia roczne*: <https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/zestawienia-roczne>

icantly. The previously discussed migration policies pursued by Poland after 2016 definitely exacerbated the pre-existing differences to the disadvantage of Russians. As Table 3 shows, between 2015 and 2023 Poland saw a more than eighteenfold increase in the number of Ukrainians and a more than tenfold increase in the number of Belarusians, with only a twofold increase in the number of Russians. As a result, the percentage of Russians in Poland decreased tenfold during this period: while in 2015 they accounted for 11.5% of the community comprising citizens of all three countries, by 2023 they already had a share of only 1.3%. In other words, in recent years, Russian numbers have literally dissolved into an ever-growing number of Ukrainians and Belarusians.

**T**o be even more precise, from the beginning of the invasion until the end of 2023, the community of Russians living legally in Poland increased by only about 7,000 people. These new migrants did not modify the previous geographic redistribution of Russians in Poland, as they mainly headed to a few of the largest cities – the same cities where Russians have already lived for years, with Warsaw in first place.

The labor market and the housing situation are two important indicators of migrants' life stability. In both cases, the situation of the 7,000 post-2022 Russian migrants is not very easy to grasp precisely on the basis of available public statistics. We still do not know, for example, the exact number of those Russian newcomers who received their Pole's cards in 2022–2023, although this number can be estimated at more

Table 4. Foreigner work permits issued, by citizenship (2021–2023)

Citizenship / Year	2021	2022	2023	Total
Russian	6 228	2 330	2 407	10 965
Belarusian	34 820	18 418	6 383	59 621
Ukrainian	325 213	85 074	7 298	417 585

Source: Compiled by R. Marchwacki based on data by the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Policy\*

\* Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Policy, *Zezwolenia na pracę cudzoziemców* [Work permits for foreigners], September 9, 2024. Available at: <https://psz.praca.gov.pl/-/8180075-zezwolenia-na-prace-cudzoziemcow>

than 1,000.<sup>9</sup> The situation of this group on the labor market is relatively the easiest.

Next, on the basis of data provided in Table 4 – which shows that a total of about 4,700 work permits have been issued to Russians since the invasion – we can surmise that a large portion of these were received by newcomers. At the same time, this total number also includes extensions of work permits issued earlier. In any case – since as of October 2022 acquiring a work permit is obligatory for Russians – we conclude that slightly more than half of Russian newcomers may have gained such access.

**A**s a rule, it is much easier to find jobs in large cities than in small towns or rural areas. However, in practice, Russians have serious problems finding stable employment anywhere. The first reason behind this is Polish

society's strong aversion to Russians. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section. The second reason is the domination of the migrant labor market, especially the manual labor sector and medium service jobs, by members of the Ukrainian community. As our interviewees reported, Polish employers have had a strong preference for hiring Ukrainians, who are abundant in the country; also, their employment brings fewer bureaucratic formalities and their prospects of staying in the country for the long term appear more stable. Moreover, Russians are usually not welcome due to employers' common belief that hiring them would increase the likelihood of tensions in the workplace between members of different communities.

In short, Russian newcomers are rather undesired on the Polish labor market, and even if they manage to find some employment – and, consequently, obtain the right of temporary residence – they tend to lose it relatively quickly. According to the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Policy, in 2021–2023 there was a clear downward trend in the total number of Russians receiving work permits. This was accompanied by a growing number of Belarusians and Ukrainians coming to work in Poland.

Moreover, a relatively large group of post-2022 Russian newcomers, especially those staying on humanitarian visas and those applying for international protection, face major formal obstacles to obtaining a work permit. First, a humanitarian visa is issued for a maximum of 12 months and having it does not invalidate the latest restrictions on Russians' access to the labor market. In practice, Russians have been

issued humanitarian visas to Poland for 6–12 months without an extension. This lack of a clear prospect for the future, combined with the need to go through a 30–60-day procedure to obtain a work permit, makes them highly unpredictable in the eyes of potential employers. For a Russian who fails to find a job during this relatively short period after arrival, the only way to further extend his/her legal stay in Poland is to apply for international protection. This, however, further worsens his/her position on the labor market, as the filing of such an application formally prevents a newcomer from taking up any work for another six months.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, as showed by Table 5, the overwhelming majority of Russian applications for international protection are rejected in the first instance by the Polish authorities, and even in the most liberal year 2023, the percentage of refusals was as high as 90%. At the same time, disadvantaging Russians in this regard again goes hand in hand with the clear favoritism of Belarusians and Ukrainians, who experience the opposite trend. With Belarusians, almost all of their applications for protection were granted after the 2020 breakdown of the anti-Lukashenka social protests. This trend continued in the subsequent years. With Ukrainians, this rate dramatically increased right after the 2022 invasion.

**T**he housing situation is another important topic. For post-2022 Russian war migrants arriving in Poland and having nowhere to live, the first address used to be the Warsaw branch

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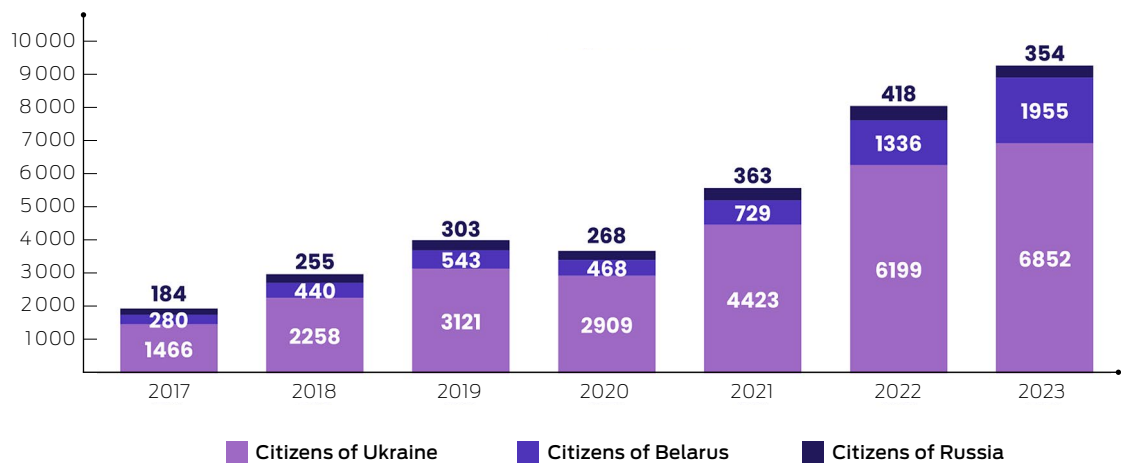
Table 5. The percentage of applications for international protection granted among all applications to which a decision was issued at first instance (2018–2023)

Citizenship / Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Russian	2.50%	3.10%	3.60%	8.60%	6.80%	10.20%
Belarusian	25.60%	6.80%	62.30%	95.30%	97.10%	96.70%
Ukrainian	14.10%	3.30%	6.40%	2.10%	62.00%	82.40%

Source: Compiled by R. Marchwacki based on data by Urząd ds. Cudzoziemców.\*

\* Urząd ds. Cudzoziemców. *Zestawienia roczne* [Office for Foreigners. Annual reports], Available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/zestawienia-roczne>

Figure 1. The number of apartments bought in Poland by its eastern neighbors (2017–2023)\*



\* F. Majewski, „Mieszkania w Polsce kupują również cudzoziemcy. Głównie dwóch narodowości” [Apartments in Poland are also bought by foreigners. Mainly of two nationalities], *300Gospodarka*, April 17, 2024. Available at: <https://300gospodarka.pl/news/mieszkania-w-polsce-cudzoziemcy>

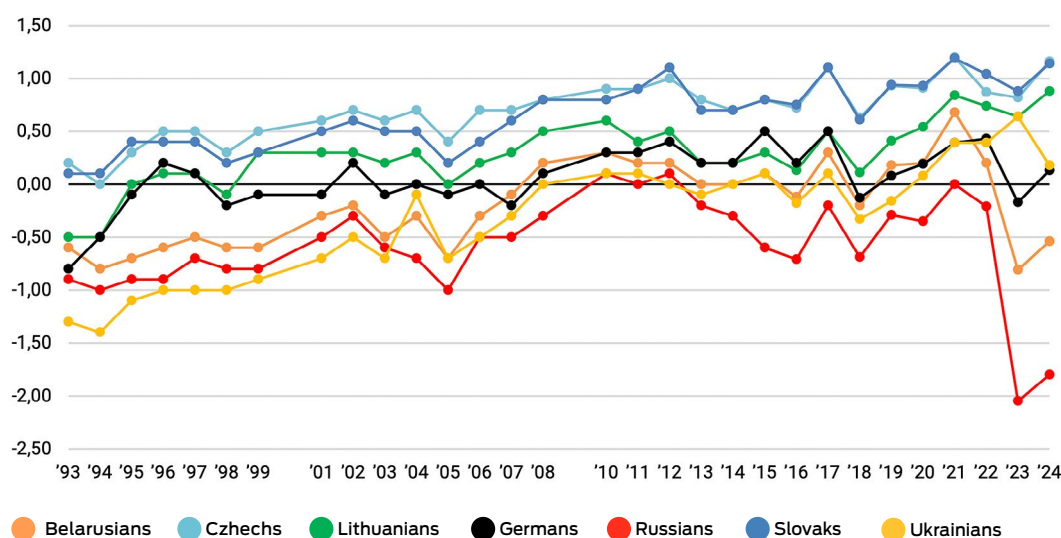
of an international support network for Russians: *Russkiy Kovcheg* [En. the Russian Ark], founded in March 2022 and funded mainly by selected Russian oligarchs living in the West. In 2022–2024, the Warsaw *Kovcheg* provided temporary shelters to freshly arrived Russians for the first few weeks of their stay in Poland. Cumulative estimates indicate that about one thousand post-2022 migrants passed through this organization. Importantly, *Kovcheg* offered temporary legal and psychological consultations to Russians, provided space for migrants to learn the Polish language for free, and tried to organize educational courses to make them better able to adjust to life in the new country. The Warsaw *Kovcheg* was the main and only stable point of support for freshly arrived Russians until August 30, 2024, when the branch was closed until further notice.

In Poland, after the invasion, no law has been introduced restricting Russians from buying land or property. Nor has a public discussion on this issue emerged, unlike in many countries in the Baltic region, including Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, and Norway, where such a ban was framed as a solution to strengthen national security.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the housing market in Poland is almost completely open to foreigners, including Russians. Only the purchase of real estate in the border zone – i.e. in cities such as

Szczecin, Tri-City, Świnoujście, or Zakopane – requires a special permit from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Despite the lack of restrictions, a minimal number of Russians are buying apartments in Poland, and this has been a stable trend for years. As shown in Figure 1, in 2020–2023, Russians bought just 1,403 apartments in Poland, mostly in major cities such as Warsaw, Kraków, and Wrocław. It is a very marginal number. This clearly indicates the reluctance of Russians to settle in Poland on a long-term basis, most probably due to both restrictive migration policies (described earlier) and strong anti-Russian sentiment in Polish society (described below).

Interestingly, in the same period of 2020–2023, there was a more than twofold increase in the number of apartments bought by Ukrainians and a nearly fivefold increase in the number of transactions by Belarusians. It should be noted, however, that they all represent only a tiny fraction of the entire Polish real estate market. The total number of apartments bought by Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians during this period (26,274 apartments) does not exceed the number of apartments available in one small town in Poland. The situation with land purchases looks very similar. Thus, we conclude that the vast majority of newcomers from all three nations

Figure 2. Changes in attitudes towards Poland's neighbors – average scores.\*



\* Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej [Public Opinion Research Center], „Stosunek Polaków do innych narodów” [The Attitude of Poles to Other Nations], CBOS: *Komunikat z badań*, [CBOS: Research report] no 25 (2024): [https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K\\_025\\_24.PDF](https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_025_24.PDF).

rent housing on the open market or live in apartments owned by relatives or friends. This means that they are operating in an unstable housing situation, especially as rental prices in Poland have experienced a strong, continuous upward trend since 2022.

### Public Attitudes: From Negative to Extremely Negative

The opinion polls on Poles’ attitudes towards other nations are regularly conducted by the Centre of Public Opinion Research [pol. *Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej* (CBOS)]. They show that while Poles had been strongly united in their negative attitudes towards Russians for decades, these attitudes turned exceptionally negative with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Firstly, as shown in Figure 2 above, Russians have been the most disliked nation since 2004. Interestingly, for the first dozen years after the fall of communism, Ukrainians were considered most disliked. However, the latter began to gain a better image after the so-called 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine<sup>12</sup> and this trend kept growing after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. Meanwhile, in 2012–2014, the image of Russians deteriorated even more. This can be explained by widespread condemnation

by the Polish public of Vladimir Putin’s third term as president and especially the annexation of Crimea. Then, with the beginning of the full-scale invasion, dislike of Russians instantly became widespread and radical. The CBOS report<sup>13</sup> indicates that while in 2021 such dislike was declared by 38% of respondents – i.e. dislike of Russians was at the same level as dislike of Roma people – already in 2022 this percentage more than doubled and concerned 82% of respondents, making it unrivalled and stable. Moreover, as Figure 2 clearly shows, after 2022, dislike of Russians was followed by dislike of Belarusians, who became Poland’s second most disliked neighbor.

Today’s extremely negative attitude towards Russians is also confirmed by the latest Polish Distrust Index constructed by SW Research<sup>14</sup> (2024). As shown in Table 6, distrust of Russians is clearly the most widespread, outpacing even Muslims who are heavily disliked in Poland. The Polish mainstream political and media discourse turned against both these groups in the period 2015–2023. This table also confirms the high level of aversion to Belarusians, who occupy third place in the latest Index. Other findings of SW Research reveal

that a very high level of this dislike is strongly present in the whole of Polish society: across all age groups, all provinces and all political orientations.

**A**t the same time, this radical polarization of attitudes is of course bipartisan, as the current attitude of Russians still living in Russia towards Poles is also very negative. As indicated by a June 2024 Levada Centre poll, as many as 49% of Russian citizens have a very negative attitude towards Poles; 25% rate it as “rather bad”, and only 2% indicate that their feelings are “very good”<sup>15</sup>.

Another interesting context is the most recent transformation in Poles’ attitudes towards Ukrainians. As shown in Figure 2, the radical divergence between increasing dislike for Russians and increasing sympathy for Ukrainians, starting in 2014, reached its maximum immediately after the outbreak of the 2022 invasion, when Poles very hospitably received several million refugees from Ukraine. However, according to CBOS, by the end of 2022, there came a visible, yet still not radical, break in the trend, which resulted in an increase in dislike, and a relatively high level of distrust of Ukrainians (see Table 6). Available qualitative research indicates that Poles, as of fall 2022, have started reporting they did not like the widespread inclusion of Ukrainians in the Polish institutional system and granting them access to government social transfers.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, Russians or Belarusians were not granted these. The researchers identified a public concern, lasting to this day, that Ukrainians were supported too “generously” by the Polish state and have thus become too privileged, which would eventually make them reluctant to return to their home country.<sup>17</sup>

The lastingly negative attitude of Poles towards Russia and Russians has been accompanied by the Polish mainstream media since 1989. Importantly, this negative discourse was politically exacerbated by the Polish right associated with the Law and Justice party after the 2010 Smolensk air disaster. Further radicalization was brought about in 2014, with Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas which were unanimously condemned by all

Table 6. The Polish distrust index (2024) by SW Research

Nation / Group	Distrust index
Russians	57,2
Muslims	44,7
Belarusians	42,2
Ukrainians	34,4
Jews	32,5
Americans	18

major Polish media regardless of their political orientation. As shown in detail by Norstrom,<sup>18</sup> in the period of 2014–2015, an anti-Russian perspective became clearly dominant in Polish media coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. During this period, the Polish media universally and permanently adopted an unequivocally negative assessment of the actions of the Russian elite who were considered an enemy that deliberately worked to the detriment of Poland. At the same time, many journalists – especially from centrist and liberal media – applied a more nuanced message about ordinary Russian citizens, often presenting them in a neutral way and not recognizing them as a side of the war.

**F**inally, with the 2022 full-scale invasion, the unequivocally anti-Russian message was also extended to ordinary Russian citizens. They began to be recognized as compliant with the Russian government’s actions in Ukraine due to their giving active or passive consent to Kremlin’s aggressive policies.<sup>19</sup> Since February 2022, it has become virtually impossible to articulate defense of Russian citizens as people not involved in the war in Polish media discourse. Thus, the onset of the full-scale invasion concluded the polarization of the monolithically anti-Russian media discourse that dominates in Poland to this day.

## Conclusions

Post-2022 Russian war migrants in Poland comprise a very small group in a very small in-



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cumbent Russian minority. Moreover, in recent years, the number of Russians in Poland has literally dissolved into an ever-growing number of Belarusians (fleeing from the political persecutions of Lukashenka's regime) and Ukrainians (fleeing from the war in Ukraine). Due to being passport holders of the aggressor country, post-2022 Russian war migrants in Poland are structurally disadvantaged by the Polish authorities, compared to Belarusians and Ukrainians. While new Russian migrants have difficult access to the job market and almost no access to social security schemes, the latter two groups enjoy facilitations in both spheres. At the same time, all three communities seem to share a relatively difficult housing situation. Moreover, with the onset of the full-scale invasion, Poles' traditionally high level of dislike towards Russians became even greater, while the positive attitude towards Ukrainians continued to rise. ●

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