

AN EXCEPTIONAL REFUGEE RESPONSE: PUBLIC OPINION
AND POLITICS IN EUROPE AFTER UKRAINE

by

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This thesis looks at how public support for Ukraine has changed across Europe since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, focusing especially on the arrival and integration of the millions of Ukrainian refugees. It asks: **How and to what extent has public support for Ukraine evolved in European countries, particularly in relation to the influx of Ukrainian refugees?**

Using a comparative analysis of Germany, Poland, and Latvia, the study draws on public opinion data, institutional reports, and political discourse from 2022 to 2025. It analyzes how refugee integration affected areas like housing, labor markets, and politics, and whether financial and social pressures led to a decline in public acceptance. It also compares responses to Ukrainian refugees with reactions to the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis.

The findings show that although integration sparked debate, especially around welfare and jobs, public support remained broadly strong in all three countries. This thesis argues that the most notable feature is the durability of that support. Unlike earlier refugee crises, acceptance remained notably high, shaped by perceptions of Ukrainians as part of a shared European community, influenced by factors such as racial and cultural proximity, historical ties, and security concerns.

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Introduction

On February 24th, 2022, Russia began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which then triggered the largest refugee movement in Europe since the Second World War. This refugee crisis, however, differed greatly from previous crises, like the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis. Ukrainians were quickly given legal status across the European Union and welcomed with unprecedented public support. Countries used significant financial resources to incorporate Ukrainians into society, and solidarity remained high despite these initial costs. Responses across Europe contrasted sharply with the Syrian crisis, which faced significant political backlash and was highly polarizing. This refugee response is exceptional and warrants analysis for many reasons.

Refugee reception is not simply a humanitarian issue, it is deeply intertwined with politics. The refugee question is one of the most politically polarizing issues in Europe today. Since 2015, migration issues have contributed to the rise of the far right, become a wedge issue in political parties, and reshaped public opinion. Given this backdrop, the support seen for Ukrainian refugees is unexpected. If refugee reception tends to generate backlash, why did Ukrainians receive such a different response, and how has that response played out in the long run?

My research will center around the question: **How and to what extent has public support for Ukraine evolved in European countries, particularly in relation to the influx of Ukrainian refugees?** This study examines how public attitudes and support for Ukraine have shifted since the 2022 invasion, focusing on where and to what extent the initial wave of solidarity has changed over time. It explores whether the arrival of Ukrainian refugees influenced public support, how citizens organized to support humanitarian efforts and military aid, and

whether public opinion has remained welcoming or declined as the war has continued. My key sub-questions relate to public opinion and expressions of support, the refugee influx and its impact on public attitudes, and opinions across partisan lines, as follows.

- Public Opinion and Expressions of Support
 - How was public support for Ukraine expressed in 2022?
 - Why was public support for Ukrainian refugees so high immediately after the invasion?
- The Refugee Question and Its Impact on Public Attitudes
 - Did the influx of Ukrainian refugees change public sentiment from 2022 to 2025?
 - How did the costs of integrating refugees affect public opinion?
- Opinions Across Partisan Divides
 - To what extent did attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees fall along or break on party-political lines?
 - How and why do partisan patterns vary across Germany, Poland, and Latvia?

Methods

My research uses a qualitative comparative analysis of public opinion data, institutional data, and political discourse to examine how attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees have changed since the start of the war. It also examines how those attitudes have aligned politically across Germany, Poland, and Latvia. It will use a combination of primary and secondary sources to understand how public sentiment has evolved and how it has influenced decision-making. Given how recent the Ukrainian refugee crisis is, this thesis draws from a wide range of sources rather than a single journal or dataset.

Primary Sources

- **Public Opinion Surveys (2022–Present):** EU-wide surveys from sources such as Eurobarometer, national polling from INSA for Germany and CBOS for Poland, as well as multi-country surveys on refugee attitudes to track the levels of public support over time and identify partisan differences in refugee acceptance.
- **Government and Institutional Documents:** Policy documents and reports from the European Union and various state governments are used to help explain the legal and policy frameworks used for reception, including social welfare programs and specific integration efforts.
- **UNHCR and Administrative Data:** Data from the UNHCR and national refugee statistics to provide information on refugee numbers and statuses, which helps give context to public opinion in relation to refugee hosting.
- **Party Platforms and Political Discourse:** Party platforms, official statements, and media sources are analyzed to understand how different political actors frame refugee reception and consider its economic, social, and national security impacts.

Secondary Sources & Analytical Approach

The project uses recent academic literature on refugee reception, public opinion, migration politics, and populist movements. Since this topic is quite new, relevant scholarship is largely spread out across journal articles, public opinion polls, policy research, and migration literature. With articles on refugee reception and public opinion polls, it examines how host countries and their citizens respond to refugees. It focuses on the role of factors like cultural proximity, economic costs, and security concerns in shaping these public attitudes. Studies have

shown that support for refugees often depends on characteristics such as their country of origin and religion. Survey-based work by scholars such as Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner highlights that preferences towards refugees are shaped less by the crisis that has led to their refugee status and more by attitudes of identity and belonging.¹ This literature offers us a deeper understanding of why Ukrainians were treated differently from other groups, specifically the Syrians, during the 2015 refugee crisis.

Next, the second line of scholarship looks into refugee integration and the state-level impacts of displacement, including the pressure on housing, labor markets, healthcare systems, and schools. This work provides context for understanding how material resources and strain affect public attitudes towards refugee reception, as the crisis has continued rather than a temporary initial welcome. Rather than focusing on a single consensus, current scholarship analyzing the impacts is dispersed across a variety of journal articles and reports from international organizations, as these impacts evolve. Reports from institutions such as the UNHCR, OECD, and the European Commission demonstrate strains on welfare systems and uneven labor market integration under the Temporary Protection Directive, highlighting the variation in state capacity and policy implementation. Survey-based research, including Eurobarometer and studies by Geddes and Dražanova, demonstrates how these material pressures cross over with public perceptions of solidarity and fairness.²

¹ Kirk Bansak, Jens Hainmueller, and Dominik Hangartner, “Europeans’ Support for Refugees of Varying Background Is Stable over Time,” *Nature News*, August 9, 2023, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-023-06417-6>.

² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Ukraine Refugee Situation: Operational Data Portal* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2022–2023), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> ; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “Labour Market Integration of Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection from Ukraine,” *OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics*, May 2024, <https://www.oecd.org/employment/labour-market-integration-of-beneficiaries-of-temporary-protection-from-ukraine.htm> ; European Commission, *Eurobarometer*, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2098> ; Andrew Geddes and Lenka Dražanova, “There’s Still Strong Support for Ukrainian Refugees across Europe: New Evidence from Eight Countries,” *Migration Policy Centre*,

Scholars analyze how labor markets have been affected, housing impacts, and the financial impacts of refugee intake. In a co-authored study, Bansak, Hainmuller, and Hangartner demonstrate that economic and humanitarian reasons both shape European public attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees. Country-specific studies further show how these pressures have manifested differently.³ Jankowski et al. explore the strain on Poland's healthcare system, Rolke et al. identify gaps Ukrainians faced in accessing healthcare, and UNHCR surveys describe the socioeconomic challenges Ukrainians faced in Latvia.⁴ Taken together, this scholarship shows that integration outcomes are tied to state initiatives and capabilities. This thesis contributes to the emerging literature by linking integration issues to public opinion instead of examining material impacts and public attitudes separately.

Lastly, there is much to gain by viewing this crisis through a comparative lens. A comparative approach reveals how integration pressures can produce different political and humanitarian responses depending on the state context. Drawing on three case studies of Germany, Poland, and Latvia, this thesis builds on scholarship that views migration as a politically divided issue shaped by partisan lines and historical memory. Scholars such as Grzymala-Busse and Szeptycki show how refugee policy in Poland has become intertwined with democratic backsliding and party competition.⁵ Research on Germany shows how debates

November 22, 2024, <https://migrationpolicycentre.eu/theres-still-strong-support-for-ukrainian-refugees-across-europe-new-evidence-from-eight-countries/>

³ Kirk Bansak, Jens Hainmueller, and Dominik Hangartner, "How Economic, Humanitarian, and Religious Concerns Shape European Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers," *Science* 354, no. 6309 (October 14, 2016): 217–22, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aag2147>.

⁴ Mateusz Jankowski et al., "One Year on: Poland's Public Health Initiatives and National Response to Millions of Refugees from Ukraine," *Medical science monitor : international medical journal of experimental and clinical research*, March 31, 2023, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10071878/>.

⁵ Anna Grzymala-Busse, "Poland's Path to Illiberalism," *Current History* 117, no. 797 (March 2018): 96–101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48614331>; Andrzej Szeptycki, "Polish Assistance for the Ukrainian Refugees: Current State and Perspectives of Research," *Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny* 50, no. 2 (192) (October 22, 2024): 53–73, <https://doi.org/10.4467/25444972smpp.23.035.19344>;

surrounding welfare benefits and asylum policies intersect with the rise of far-right parties like AfD. In Latvia, research by Schulze and Rostok demonstrates how refugee reception is intrinsically tied to security concerns and the politicization of Russian-speaking minorities.⁶ A comparative analysis enables this thesis to highlight the broad consensus across Europe in support of Ukraine. The refugee issues became politicized in distinct ways in each country as a result of security framing, historical experiences, and party systems. By doing so, comparative analysis explains not only whether refugee integration generates political tension, but also when and why it becomes a partisan wedge issue.

⁶ Jennie L. Schulze and Juris Pūpcenoks, “Securitizing Russian-Speakers in Estonia and Latvia: The Frame-Policy Nexus before and after Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” *Nationalities Papers* 53, no. 5 (January 13, 2025): 1035–59, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.97>; Toms Rostoks and Inta Mierīņa, “NATO’s Reassurance and the Willingness to Defend One’s Country: Survey Evidence from Latvia,” *European Security* 34, no. 3 (December 30, 2024): 386–406, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2024.2434087>

Initial Public Support

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to one of the most significant humanitarian crises in recent European history. The European Union's supranational response to this crisis signified a turning point in collective and humanitarian action towards refugees in Europe. Within a few months of the war, more than 5 million people became refugees, fleeing from their homes to neighboring countries seeking safety. The forced relocation of these Ukrainian people meant that the European Union had to respond both publicly and politically. However, the initial welcome and support for Ukrainian refugees were not only positive but also unprecedented in scale and scope. The European Union responded on a wide scale, cross-country response, unlike any seen before with a crisis of this size.

One clear example of this is the Temporary Protection Directive, enacted in March 2022, which offers protection to all Ukrainians living in Ukraine. It was originally created in 1999 as a response to a mass influx of displaced people from Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia. The refugee flows demonstrated the need for better regulatory frameworks for newly arrived people. Although conceptualized, the TPD had never been actually used before. It was a council directive that was designed to manage the influx of people into EU member states and to establish minimum standards for temporary protection. This was because there were fears that member states would be unable to respond to and adequately support people. To address these concerns, standards for what an adequate response included were the right to legal residence, access to employment, education, housing, social welfare, and medical care. There were

provisions ensuring family unity, procedural guarantees, and mechanisms for solidarity and burden-sharing among EU member states.⁷

Early European solidarity emerged quickly following the invasion and was developed by political leadership and multilateral action. In February 2022, a special European Council, comprising the EU's Heads of State or Government, demonstrated its full solidarity with Ukraine and its people and invited the European Commission to put forward contingency measures to protect Ukraine.⁸ The commission provided strong, coordinated support to member states that demonstrated high solidarity with Ukrainians through both government and citizen initiatives. Under the TPD, Ukrainians were granted the right to reside and work in the EU immediately. This meant no lengthy asylum process and immediate protection. This directive was described as “the enabler of an unprecedented whole-of-society effort.”⁹ Through a top-down initiative from the EU as a whole, countries and their citizens respond to Ukrainian refugees. Now, with the war ongoing and no clear end in sight, the TPD has been extended from March 2025 to March 2026. The EU mobilized quickly, demonstrating immense solidarity by providing resources and moral support to Ukrainians fleeing the war. This section draws on polling data, media sources, and local responses from Germany, Poland, and Latvia to examine the factors that drove early solidarity from the start of the war in February 2022 through the end of 2023. Those factors included a strong sense of shared European identity and proximity to the war, given shared borders.

⁷ Council Directive 2001/55/EC of 20 July 2001 on Minimum Standards for Giving Temporary Protection in the Event of a Mass Influx of Displaced Persons and on Measures Promoting a Balance of Efforts Between Member States in Receiving Such Persons and Bearing the Consequences Thereof, *Official Journal of the European Communities* L 212 (7 August 2001): 12–23

⁸ Katrien Luyten, “Temporary Protection Directive,” *European Parliamentary Research Service*, July 2024.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Unprecedentedly high support was recorded through polling data in the EU. In April 2022, polls found that 88% of people approved of welcoming refugees fleeing the war, and 89% said they felt sympathetic towards them.¹⁰ This support remained remarkably high when, again in February 2023, 88% supported welcoming refugees and 91% supported humanitarian aid. The solidarity demonstrated was not just from one specific country but spread across borders and political lines. There was near-unanimous moral support for Ukraine and its sovereignty. Russia was the clear aggressor in the situation, going against European values of democracy.¹¹ In a multilingual study of European media sources, there are clear narratives of kinship and common destiny that differ from other framings of migration. From the start, other past crises were called a “challenge” and a “burden.” Though early support was broad and high, it was not uniform, and reasons and responses varied by country.

Historical and cultural factors in countries such as Poland, Germany, and Latvia influenced the crisis's resonance. In Poland, a special Eurobarometer poll in May 2022 found that 94% of Poles supported welcoming Ukrainians, the highest rate in the EU. This level of support is almost unanimous, indicating consensus across political parties. The depth of this support can be attributed to historical, cultural, and geographical factors, starting with Poland’s geographical proximity to Ukraine and Russia. As a border state, Poland is acutely aware of the invasion's impacts. Within the first weeks of the invasion, Poland took in over 1.6 million refugees.¹² Poles

¹⁰ European Commission, *Flash Eurobarometer 506: EU’s Response to the War in Ukraine* (Brussels: European Commission, April 2022)

¹¹ Gabriele Prati, “Attitudes toward the Response of the EU to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: The Role of Empathic Concern, Identification with the EU, and the View That Ukraine Is Part of the European Community.,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 29, no. 3 (August 2023): 253–56, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pac0000679>.

¹² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Ukraine Refugee Situation: Operational Data Portal* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2022–2023)

are concerned about both the realities of the war and the threat of invasion, making them predisposed to want to be welcoming to Ukrainians.

Furthermore, to Poles, assisting Ukraine for Poland demonstrated their “post-communist moral maturity.”¹³ Poland parallels Ukraine as both were historically under Soviet occupation or part of the Russian Empire; in both countries, people remember the communist occupation. Poland accordingly has a moral consensus that assisting Ukraine is an ethical obligation as well as a defense of freedom for both countries.¹⁴ These factors play a vital role in fostering the depth and breadth of support demonstrated towards Ukrainian refugees.

The element of moral obligation created significant grassroots mobilization beyond the robust governmental support. There were high rates of volunteerism as “the large influx of refugees overwhelmed local services... this necessitated a 'whole of society response.’”¹⁵ Polish society came together to bridge the gaps that the government could not. This is striking in both the amount and the type of support demonstrated. In Poland, the Ukrainian refugees were embraced as neighbors who were victims of an invasion. Poland and Ukraine have had a fraught historical relationship, and still, people openly housed refugees in their homes, spending time, money, and effort. With efforts from NGOs, churches, and citizens, strong support resonated throughout the country.

Additionally, in the first months following the invasion, European media played a key role in creating a moral consensus that demonstrated support for refugees. In media outlets

¹³ Andrzej Szeptycki, “Polish Assistance for the Ukrainian Refugees: Current State and Perspectives of Research,” *Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny* 50, no. 2 (192) (October 22, 2024): 53–73, <https://doi.org/10.4467/25444972smpp.23.035.19344>.

¹⁴ Btihaj Ajana, Hannah Connell, and Tyler Liddle, “‘It Could Have Been Us’: Media Frames and the Coverage of Ukrainian, Afghan and Syrian Refugee Crises,” *SN Social Sciences* 4, no. 7 (July 11, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-024-00943-4>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

throughout Poland, Ukrainians are framed in the media as innocent victims of the invasions. These were civilians being bombed, and democratic ideals that European countries deeply valued, such as sovereignty, were being attacked. The created attitudes towards them were affected by a sense of moral deservingness.¹⁶ Through this, assistance is shown as neighborly solidarity and defense of democracy.

Like Poland, Germany warmly welcomed Ukrainians. Embracing its role as one of Europe's key leader states, mobilized both its institutions and civil society for this welcome. A special Eurobarometer poll in May 2022 found that 92% of Germans supported accepting refugees from Ukraine. Chancellor Olaf Scholz made multiple statements saying Germany had a duty to stand with Ukraine.¹⁷ Here too, moral concerns were paramount. There is a sense of shared responsibility to protect victims, especially given Germany's leadership in the EU. In recent years, Germany has had a strong tradition of protecting refugees. It is considered to be one of the most important countries of immigration in Europe. In Germany in 2020, there were 1.4 million refugees along with 10 million migrants, accounting for 13.7% of the German population.¹⁸ The German government has extended a warm welcome to Ukrainian refugees through policy and public support.

Additionally, in Germany, there was a robust civil society mobilization as seen in Poland. These significant grassroots efforts meant that organizations outside government found housing and worked to integrate refugees. In major German cities like Berlin and Hamburg, train stations

¹⁶ Natalia Letki et al., "Has the War in Ukraine Changed Europeans' Preferences on Refugee Policy? Evidence from a Panel Experiment in Germany, Hungary and Poland," *Journal of European Public Policy* 32, no. 1 (February 2, 2024): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2304610>.

¹⁷ Bilal Mahli, "Zeitenwende: Germany's Strategic Shift in Foreign and Security Policy," *Policy Center for the New South*, September 13, 2024.

¹⁸ Kerrie Holloway, Irina Mosel, and Christopher Smart et al., *Public Narratives and Attitudes towards Refugees and Other Migrants: Germany Country Profile – Second Edition* (London: Overseas Development Institute, January 13, 2022).

even become temporary humanitarian hubs. Berlin Hauptbahnhof, the central station, became one of the most visible humanitarian hubs in Europe. Volunteer groups provided constant assistance, including handling arrivals, providing temporary beds, distributing food, and more, for those who had arrived. Similarly, the city set up a Welcome Center at the former Tegel Airport, which housed thousands of refugees. The Tegel Airport functioned as a temporary large-scale refugee reception center in Berlin.¹⁹ In Hamburg, similar efforts were seen at Hamburg Hauptbahnhof and the Messehallen convention center, which were turned into emergency shelters. Different civil society groups provided meals and integration support, reflecting the whole-of-society efforts to support arriving Ukrainians.²⁰

In contrast to Poland, Germany was initially quite supportive because of democratic principles more than proximity. Factors such as duty, the rule of law, and European unity initially led to greater acceptance of refugees. In Germany specifically, media coverage emphasized democratic values, the rule of law, and civilian suffering. The proximity of such a clear violation of international norms to a leader of a democracy in the EU intensified attention in German media. German media outlets portrayed the invasion with narratives of humanitarian obligations and global order.²¹ This remains a significant motivator in support of Ukraine. Since the Ukrainians are framed as deserving and charging identity, now the EU feels a much greater obligation to Ukraine to provide support.

¹⁹ “Refugee Shelter Expanded at Ex-Airport to Prepare for Ukrainian Influx,” Euronews, November 9, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/11/09/berlin-turns-old-tegel-airport-into-shelter-amid-peak-refugee-housing-shortage>.

²⁰ “Refugees from Ukraine,” Support for Refugees from Ukraine, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.hamburg.com/residents/hamburg-for-refugees/ukraine-refugees-19442>.

²¹ Florian Trauner and Sarah Wolff, “The Impact of the Russian War against Ukraine on the Reform of the Common European Asylum System,” *European Politics and Society* 26, no. 4 (December 3, 2024): 797–813, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2024.2435401>.

In the third case study for this thesis, Latvia also mobilized in support for Ukraine. Latvia's solidarity with Ukrainians was deeply tied to national security and post-Soviet experience, as many viewed defending Ukraine as synonymous with defending Baltic independence. In May 2022, 89% of people supported welcoming Ukrainians fleeing the war. Latvia is a border country of both Russia and Belarus; moreover, unlike Germany or Poland, it was forcibly annexed by the Soviet Union.²² This caused anxiety among many Latvians about border security. The people who live in the Baltic states are well aware of the existing military imbalance between the Baltic states and Russia, which favors Russia.²³ Latvia, a small state with a low population and a weak military, knows that Russia poses a threat to it. Not only are they small, but they also have a substantial Russian population: 24% of Latvia's population is Russian. This parallels Ukraine and creates a split in opinion surrounding support for either Russia or Ukraine. When looking at polling data between ethnic Latvians and ethnic Russians post-invasion, 90% of ethnic Latvians supported Ukraine, compared to just 22% of Latvia's Russians.²⁴ These numbers are clearly concerning to ethnic Latvians and to Latvian sovereignty, as there are fears about Latvia's ability to respond to the potential threat from Russia. A Ukrainian victory means fewer national security concerns for Latvia; therefore, Latvian solidarity is "a security imperative, not simply humanitarianism." Furthermore, as a post-Soviet state, Latvia remembers Soviet occupation, and its citizens can empathize with Ukrainian refugees.

²² *Key Challenges of Our Times – The EU in 2022*, Special Eurobarometer 526 (Latvia), fieldwork conducted 19 April–16 May 2022.

²³ Toms Rostoks and Inta Mieriņa, "NATO's Reassurance and the Willingness to Defend One's Country: Survey Evidence from Latvia," *European Security* 34, no. 3 (December 30, 2024): 386–406, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2024.2434087>.

²⁴ "BTI 2024 Latvia Country Report," BTI 2024, accessed November 30, 2025, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/LVA>.

All three countries, Germany, Poland, and Latvia, show sympathy for Ukrainian refugees and a sense of moral clarity. The reasons vary by country: Poland remembers its history, Germany defends its values, and Latvia fears its security. Significantly, while support has declined somewhat, acceptance remains high across Poland, Germany, and Latvia. The level of support for the Ukrainian refugee crisis stands in stark contrast to past events of displacement, such as the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis. In that instance, only about 30% of people supported welcoming Syrian refugees into the EU, reflecting divided opinions across the continent about migration, religion, and identity.²⁵ In contrast, the Ukrainian refugee crisis was met with a shared European identity, explicit moral agreement, and a perceived proximity that made the Ukrainians seem more like neighbors and less like refugees. They were not distant and different but predominantly white and Christian. This framing is precise in the Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petrov's statement that “[t]hey are not the refugees we are used to... These people are Europeans. These people are intelligent. They are educated people... This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people whose identity we were not sure about, people with unclear pasts, who could have been even terrorists.”²⁶ The Syrians were framed as the problem, while the Ukrainians were framed as an unfortunate result of a greater problem. Media framing, especially in the beginning, played an important role in garnering support.²⁷ Since EU citizens could identify with Ukrainians through appearance, experience, and religion, they could empathize with them more. An essential factor in this newfound solidarity with refugees was clearly

²⁵ Neli Esipova and Julie Ray, “Syrian Refugees Not Welcome in Eastern Europe,” Gallup.com, October 16, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/209828/syrian-refugees-not-welcome-eastern-europe.aspx>.

²⁶ Btihaj Ajana, Hannah Connell, and Tyler Liddle, “‘It Could Have Been Us’: Media Frames and the Coverage of Ukrainian, Afghan and Syrian Refugee Crises,” *SN Social Sciences* 4, no. 7 (July 11, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-024-00943-4>.

²⁷ Wildemann, Sergej, Claudia Niederée, and Erick Elejalde. “Migration Reframed? A Multilingual Analysis on the Stance Shift in Europe during the Ukrainian Crisis—the Attitudes themesupport levels.” *Proceedings of the ACM Web Conference 2023*, April 30, 2023, 2754–64. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3543507.3583442>.

empathy and identification. Since the Ukrainians are framed as deserving and charging identity, now the EU feels a much greater obligation to Ukraine to provide support. As demonstrated in this chapter, the EU, specifically Germany, Poland, and Latvia, were extremely welcoming to refugees at the start of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The Refugee Question and Its Impact on Public Attitudes

The robustness of financial, moral, and public support clearly resonated throughout different European countries. However, it raises the question of what impact refugees had on these countries. Did public support shift as the impacts supporting refugees were reflected in housing, employment, and healthcare? The cost of hosting refugees became increasingly evident over time. However, this section will demonstrate that while the mass influx of refugees did impact housing, employment, and healthcare, what is more striking is that support remained broadly high and largely positive.

Germany has borne some of the most substantial financial and infrastructural pressures among EU states to support displaced Ukrainians; however, its support levels have remained strong. Germany has absorbed the highest number of Ukrainian refugees, estimated to be between 1.2 and 1.3 million refugees. Beyond absorbing refugees, they have also provided some of the most robust social and financial support, spending billions of euros on housing, social services, education, and health care since 2022. Total spending since 2022 is estimated at 30 billion, split between federal, state, and municipal budgets. This is a substantial financial burden with clear fiscal pressure, as 6.3 billion euros were spent in 2024 alone.²⁸ The federal government has established a transfer of 7500 euros per refugee to help support newly arrived refugees with housing, education, and other costs. More importantly, individual municipalities took on the majority of immediate expenses. These municipalities turned local halls and train stations into emergency centers, expanded school capacities, and provided primary care.

²⁸“Germany Debates Cutting Social Benefits for Ukrainian Refugees,” Anadolu Ajansı, accessed December 10, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/germany-debates-cutting-social-benefits-for-ukrainian-refugees/3650266#:~:text=Germany%20has%20taken%20in%20more,according%20to%20public%20broadcaster%20ARD>

Integration into the labor market was slow, and the impacts were clear. There were about 730,000 working-age Ukrainians in Germany, but only about 120,000 (16%) were working in jobs that qualify for social security by mid-2023.²⁹ This suggests that the other 600,000 refugees were reliant on government support and social services for over a year. Surveys indicate that about 27% of working-age Ukrainians were employed in early 2024. The German government has sought to support integration through initiatives such as language and vocational programs, spending more than 1 billion euros on them.³⁰ However, integration has been slow for several reasons. Germany relies on formal employment, which is regulated by a strict credential system. This means that Ukrainian degrees require checks that can take multiple months, delaying one's ability to work.³¹ Also, Germany desires an intermediate level of German language proficiency for stable employment. Not only does this take time to learn, but the language courses also have waiting lists.³² There are also bureaucratic delays, as many German employers are unwilling to hire Ukrainians until the paperwork is fully complete. In combination with slow processing times for paperwork, Ukrainians have found it difficult to integrate into the labor market. This slow integration and greater reliance on welfare have created a visible fiscal pressure on the government. Moreover, health care systems faced significant pressure from Ukrainian refugees, specifically in mental health, pediatric care, and interpreter services.³³

²⁹ Bocconi University, Institute for European Policy (IEP). "Ukraine Refugees: Temporary Protection and Encouraging Return; Support to Ukrainian Economy." 2023. <https://iep.unibocconi.eu/ukraine-refugees-temporary-protection-encouraging-return-support-ukrainian-economy?>

³⁰ "Labour Market Integration of Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection from Ukraine," *OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics*, May 2024.

³¹ "Information Portal of the German Government for the Recognition of Foreign Professional Qualifications," *Anerkennung in Deutschland*, February 15, 2024, <https://www.erkennung-in-deutschland.de/html/en/index.php>.

³² "Labour Market Integration of Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection from Ukraine," *OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics*, May 2024.

³³ Kristin Rolke et al., "Identifying Gaps in Healthcare: A Qualitative Study of Ukrainian Refugee Experiences in the German System, Uncovering Differences, Information and Support Needs," *BMC health services research*, May 4, 2024, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11069252/>.

In light of the amount of money spent and the pressure felt in Germany, public support remained surprisingly strong. In Spring 2022, 92% of Germans said that they supported welcoming Ukrainians fleeing the war. The following year, in Spring 2023, 85% of Germans reported supporting the welcome of Ukrainians fleeing the war. Though the decrease does represent a shift and the impacts being felt in Germany, it is striking that there was still financial and humanitarian solidarity. It is also striking that, despite the added strain of labor integration, support remained high. Many people were unable to work and contribute to the economy, further burdening the refugee crisis. Therefore, even after billions of euros and pressure from German social services, the reception of Ukrainian refugees has contrasted starkly with the German attitude towards Syrians.

Syrian refugees' reception in Germany shows that public opinion surrounding refugees is, in part, shaped by race and perceptions of cultural similarity. In 2015, during the Syrian refugee crisis, Angela Merkel's "We can do it" was initially well received and symbol of humanitarian openness, but soon criticized as AfD mobilized anti-refugee sentiment.³⁴ The AfD has in the past framed migration, particularly non-European migration, as a cultural and security threat to Germany. In a large-scale study by Bansak, Hainmuller, and Hangartner, Ukrainians were perceived as approximately 20% more favorably than Syrian refugees on a feeling thermometer. They were not seen as a significant threat to national identity. One key finding is that Germans' preferences regarding desirable characteristics for asylum seekers, like religion, reason for migrating, and language skills, changed little between the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crises. Bansak, Hainmuller, and Hangartner, argue that it is this resilience in preferences (rather than a sudden reaction to the state of affairs) that appears to be the primary driver of current support for

³⁴ How the alternative for Germany (AFD) and their voters veered to the radical right, 2013–2017 - sciencedirect, accessed November 30, 2025, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0261379418305158>.

Ukrainian refugees in Europe.”³⁵ This points to the importance of cultural and religious similarities in shaping public opinion. Since Ukrainians are considered European, white, and majority Christian, there is a sense of similarity and cultural belonging. Ukrainians were not racialized in the same way Syrians were in 2015, but rather viewed as part of a greater European family rather than outsiders or others. As a result, the reception of Ukrainian refugees demonstrates not only a change in European attitudes toward refugees in general but also the ongoing racial and cultural preferences that shape who is seen as deserving of support and protection.

Poland likewise has sustained the strongest level of public support for Ukrainian refugees in Europe. At a population of 38 million, absorbing over a million refugees made Poland one of the highest per capita host countries in the world for Ukrainians.³⁶ This has been an immense economic burden, with the Polish government spending an estimated 29 billion euros on housing, welfare, and social services for Ukrainian refugees. This is especially striking given that Poland's GDP is estimated at around 900 billion, while Germany's is around 4.5 trillion. Poland is spending almost as much as Germany, despite having a much smaller economy, which is quite impressive. The OECD estimated that the cost of providing health care, along with social expenditures, totaled 8.4 billion euros in 2022 alone.³⁷ As in Germany, municipalities bore the brunt of refugee placements. They housed refugees in a variety of places, including private

³⁵ Kirk Bansak, Jens Hainmueller, and Dominik Hangartner, “How Economic, Humanitarian, and Religious Concerns Shape European Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers,” *Science* 354, no. 6309 (October 14, 2016): 217–22, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aag2147>.

³⁶ Visit Ukraine - temporary protection in Europe: Which countries have spent the most money on helping Ukrainians, accessed November 14, 2025, <https://visitukraine.today/blog/7140/temporary-protection-in-europe-which-countries-have-spent-the-most-money-on-helping-ukrainians>.

³⁷ Mateusz Jankowski et al., “One Year on: Poland’s Public Health Initiatives and National Response to Millions of Refugees from Ukraine,” *Medical science monitor : international medical journal of experimental and clinical research*, March 31, 2023, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articcrisisles/PMC10071878/>.

residences, dorms, and sports centers. Local schools absorbed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian children. However, Poland has achieved more success in labor market integration, with 65% of working-age Ukrainian refugees finding employment by 2023-2024. These workers contributed to the economy, helping counter narratives of dependency. The rapid integration was enabled by a variety of factors, first and foremost, the immediate work authorization under the Special Act in 2022. There were no long waits for approval, but a quick, simplified process to get work done. Also, Poland was experiencing labor shortages in retail, hospitality, caregiving, and agriculture, allowing both skilled and unskilled laborers to find work. There is greater linguistic similarity between Polish and Ukrainian, which made it faster to learn the language. Ukrainian workers thus quickly boosted economic activity in Poland, which in turn offset welfare costs. Labor integration is a key part of alleviating the financial pressure of taking in a million people into the country.

Tremendous support for Ukrainian refugees contrasts sharply with the reception of Syrian refugees. Public opinion surrounding Syrian refugees in Poland during the 2015 crisis was negative and declined even further as the issue became politicized. Survey data show that Poles expressed some of the lowest levels of support for accepting non-European refugees, particularly Muslims. In 2016, 51% of Poles considered immigration the most important issue facing the EU.³⁸ The opposition to immigration and specifically Syrians was, in part, a result of political framing from far-right parties like the Law and Justice (PiS) party.³⁹ They portrayed Syrian refugees as a threat to national security and cultural cohesion. In Polish political discourse, Syrians were framed as incompatible with their national identity, highlighting a perceived

³⁸ European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 85: Spring 2016* (Brussels: European Commission, 2016)

³⁹ James Dennison and Andrew Geddes, "A Rising Tide? The Salience of Immigration and the Rise of Anti-immigration Political Parties in Western Europe," *The Political Quarterly* 90, no. 1 (November 27, 2018): 107–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923x.12620>.

cultural distance. As public attitudes toward Syrian refugees remained largely negative as humanitarian conditions worsened, this points to the fact that declining support was reflective of identity-based preferences, not just a short-term reaction.⁴⁰ Support for the Syrians was quite limited from the beginning but deteriorated quickly as migration became a divided partisan issue. The contrast with the reception of Ukrainian refugees suggests the importance of perceived cultural similarity, shared security threats from Russia, and shared religion. Ukrainians were framed as European neighbors instead of outsiders, resulting in a conditional solidarity expressed by Poles.

Latvia has accepted far fewer refugees in absolute terms, but the burden per capita is much higher than in many larger EU states. In 2024, around 50,000 Ukrainian refugees were residing in Latvia under temporary protection, accounting for almost 3% of Latvia's population of 1.9 million.⁴¹ Like Poland, Latvia has one of the highest per capita Ukrainian refugee populations in the EU. The sudden influx of people placed particular strain on Riga's local institutions since most of the refugees settled there. Housing markets were severely affected, with rental prices increasing and availability decreasing as thousands of Ukrainians sought accommodation in the city.⁴² Municipalities also struggled to provide Latvian-language instruction, which is required in public schools. Schools had to find a way to accommodate Ukrainian children, with teachers providing language support, and municipalities took on

⁴⁰ Karen Hargrave, Kseniya Homel, and Lenka Dražanová, Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Poland country profile | ODI: Think change, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://odi.org/en/publications/public-narratives-and-attitudes-towards-refugees-and-other-migrants-poland-country-profile/>.

⁴¹ LSM+ English, "Nearly 50,000 Ukrainians Have Found Refuge in Latvia," LSM+, February 10, 2025, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/10.02.2025-nearly-50000-ukrainians-have-found-refuge-in-latvia.a587117>.

⁴² Guna Ozola et al., *Ukrainian Refugees in Latvia: Available Data, Needs and Public Attitudes* (Riga: PROVIDUS, 2024), <https://providus.lv/en/raksti/study-ukrainian-refugees-in-latvia-available-data-needs-and-public-attitudes>.

additional costs to hire interpreters and support staff.⁴³ Latvia has had some success in integrating Ukrainian refugees into the labor force. It is estimated that about 70% of Ukrainian refugees in Latvia are of working age; of these, almost half (47%) are officially employed.

While labor integration is important for addressing the pressures of refugee intake, Latvia's response cannot be fully understood by looking only at fiscal pressures or school integration. Their response has been heavily influenced by security concerns along its border with Russia and historical Soviet occupation, as well as its sizable Russian population. Public sympathy and sustained support for Ukraine are rooted in Latvia's fear of possible Russian aggression. Supporting Ukraine, regardless of the pressure that taking in Ukrainian refugees puts on Latvia, is seen as supporting Latvia's own security and taking a stance against Russian influence.⁴⁴ Even more than Poland, Latvia's support is in part strategic. Notwithstanding the pressures seen in housing and education, public support for Ukraine has remained relatively strong. This highlights the broader idea that Ukraine's fight for sovereignty is clearly tied to Latvia's national security and future.

In Latvia, public opinion toward Syrian refugees during the 2015 crisis was low as well.⁴⁵ Latvians, like Poles, expressed opposition to accepting refugees outside of Europe, particularly disagreeing with the intake of Muslim refugees. Latvian opposition to Syrian refugees derives from fears of being incompatible culturally and a lack of integration capacity, which was influenced by their status as a small post-Soviet state.⁴⁶ In public discourse, Latvia would draw

⁴³ “UNHCR Latvia – Socio-Economic Insights Survey 2024,” *Regional Refugee Response for the Ukraine Situation*, June 2024.

⁴⁴ “BTI 2024 Latvia Country Report,” BTI 2024, accessed November 30, 2025, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/LVA>.

⁴⁵ European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 84: Autumn 2015* (Brussels: European Commission, 2015)

⁴⁶ Leonid Ragozin, “Latvians Find Unity in Rejecting Refugees,” *POLITICO*, September 26, 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/latvia-migration-asylum-crisis-baltics-eu/>.

memories of its past occupation and concerns about national identity to frame Syrians as a threat. Support for Syrians remained low over time, unlike the humanitarian outpouring seen for Ukrainians. In contrast, public attitudes of Ukrainian refugees marked a significant shift in Latvian public opinion. Survey data shows an incredibly high level of support, even with the state's limited capacity. This shift can be attributed to the geopolitical proximity, security concerns, and cultural similarity with Ukrainians. This contrast highlights that refugee reception in Latvia was driven more by a sense of perceived cultural similarity and security framing than by humanitarian need.

In each country, the influx of refugees had an evident impact on everyday life. Schools enrolled thousands of new students who required language support and social services. The healthcare system faced new demands for primary care and interpretation services. The labor markets had to rapidly integrate a new workforce. These impacts were seen at both the municipal and national levels. However, what is most striking is not that this pressure was felt, as expected, but rather the consistently high level of support.

Opinions Across Partisan Divides

In Germany, Poland, and Latvia, there is a partisan divide in attitudes and political stances towards Ukrainian refugees. Since 2015, as a result of the Syrian refugee crisis, German refugee politics have demonstrated a clear partisan split. The mainstream political parties, which include the Greens, Christian Democrats, and Social Democratic Party, have generally supported taking in refugees. These parties view refugee intake as a defense of humanitarian responsibility and as a statement of European solidarity. However, the populist right, Alternative for Germany (AfD), has consolidated itself as a single-issue anti-migration party. AfD has targeted migration, framing it as both a cultural and a security threat to Germany. AfD links migration issues to the high cost of living and to unfair benefits for refugees, placing a strain on the state. In a December 2023 poll, the data show that acceptance of refugees is not only high but also reflects partisan patterns. The German political center-left has been overwhelmingly supportive of Ukrainian refugees, with the center-right generally supportive as well. By political affiliation, support for accepting Ukrainian refugees is 88% among the Greens and 86% among the Social Democrats. The clear outlier in this polling is the far right, with AfD at 24% supporting acceptance, which means a substantial majority of the party opposes it. Ukrainian refugees fall into this landscape, as they do not dissolve Germany's migration divide but, for the most part, reproduce it. However, unlike in 2015, the center right, like the Christian Democrats, is still supportive, with 70% agreeing with the intake of Ukrainian refugees.⁴⁷ With the left having nearly unanimous support, this has created a substantial mainstream coalition that can limit AfD's ability to set the agenda and make effective policy.

⁴⁷ "Germany, the War and the Vote," Startseite, July 15, 2021, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/germany-the-war-and-the-vote?tx_rsmbstpublications_pi2%5Bpage%5D=15&cHash=fcb85eef0423a42628ff373a57a8535e.

The AfD uses strategic framing that focuses on how much welfare and government resources are being spent on Ukrainians. AfD politicians point to housing shortages and advocate for “fairness” towards German citizens. In contrast with the Syrians, the AfD does not use racialized rhetoric against Ukrainians. Since Ukrainians are generally considered European and predominantly Christian, they do not carry the same connotations, which allows for more public support.⁴⁸ Hostile rhetoric surrounding Ukrainians tends to exclusively be about the financial strain their intake has caused, rather than a direct attack on identity.

In Poland, support for Ukrainian refugees was striking, as they have had historically fraught relations with Ukraine and past anti-immigration rhetoric.⁴⁹ Poland and Ukraine have had centuries of shifting borders, territorial disputes, and ethnic cleansing.⁵⁰ Despite this, Poland became one of the most welcoming countries in 2022, with public opinion initially being overwhelmingly in favor of accepting refugees.⁵¹ This support was demonstrated across the political spectrum rather than being confined to left-wing parties. In December 2023, survey data found that 70% of supporters of the Civil Coalition (KO) and 62% of supporters of Poland's main conservative party, Zjednoczona Prawica, a notably high number, agreed with accepting

⁴⁸ Kirk Bansak, Jens Hainmueller, and Dominik Hangartner, “Europeans’ Support for Refugees of Varying Background Is Stable over Time,” *Nature News*, August 9, 2023, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-023-06417-6>.

⁴⁹ Anna Grzymala-Busse, “Poland’s Path to Illiberalism,” *Current History* 117, no. 797 (March 2018): 96–101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48614331>.

⁵⁰ Vanessa Gera, “Polish-Ukrainian Friendship Masks a Bitter, Bloody History,” *AP News*, April 5, 2023, [https://apnews.com/article/poland-ukraine-history-war-bandera-tensions-d6a4743ca945dc3144886d9232ed795d#:~:text=WARSAW%2C%20Poland%20\(AP\)%20%E2%80%94,a%20history%20of%20existential%20rivalry](https://apnews.com/article/poland-ukraine-history-war-bandera-tensions-d6a4743ca945dc3144886d9232ed795d#:~:text=WARSAW%2C%20Poland%20(AP)%20%E2%80%94,a%20history%20of%20existential%20rivalry).

⁵¹ Andrew Geddes and Lenka Dražanova, “There’s Still Strong Support for Ukrainian Refugees across Europe: New Evidence from Eight Countries.,” *Migration Policy Centre*, November 22, 2024, <https://migrationpolicycentre.eu/theres-still-strong-support-for-ukrainian-refugees-across-europe-new-evidence-from-eight-countries/>.

Ukrainian refugees. About 54% of other parties' members supported welcoming Ukrainians.⁵² This broad support for refugees is remarkable for a variety of reasons. Within traditionally conservative parties, there has been a history of skepticism surrounding migration and refugee intake. While there are political divisions, even within these conservative parties, there is net support for refugee reception. Also, unlike in Germany, support for refugees does not collapse along party lines. This is in stark contrast to the far-right AfD voters in Germany, who show clear opposition to accepting refugees. Poland's cross-partisan consensus has persisted despite the political differences.

This consensus suggests that refugee support in Poland is not primarily driven by humanitarian commitments or Poland's position within the EU. But instead, this is a reflection of the political framing of Ukrainian refugees in which they are seen as neighbors and part of the fight against Russian expansion, which is a widespread concern in Poland. Polish media and political narratives have emphasized Ukrainian refugees as victims and have moral deservingness of support. They are framed within a narrative of this shared threat of their most feared neighbor, Russia.⁵³ Furthermore, this allows bipartisan agreement, as members can still identify with Ukrainians, fostering widespread support. Poland's long-standing historical concerns about Russia, along with contemporary polling showing Poles' security concerns about its proximity to Russia, allow Ukrainians and Poles to relate to one another. The shared struggle against an external threat makes this not simply a matter of migration policy. As a result of this

⁵² Poland, the war and the vote Eupinions Slides, accessed January 1, 2026, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/EZ_eupinions_Poland_the_War_and_the_Vote_02.2024.pdf.

⁵³ Andrzej Szeptycki, "Polish Assistance for the Ukrainian Refugees: Current State and Perspectives of Research," *Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny* 50, no. 2 (192) (October 22, 2024): 53–73, <https://doi.org/10.4467/25444972smpp.23.035.19344.is>

framing, Ukrainian refugee reception in Poland has transcended historical relations and anti-immigration rhetoric to build solidarity.

However, political parties have responded unevenly to the crisis as the war continues, not by rejecting Ukrainian refugees as a whole but by debating the conditions of assistance. While center and liberal parties have remained generally welcoming and supportive of Ukraine, more conservative parties have underscored the necessity for policies that would limit certain refugee benefits. One example is a proposal supported by PiS and the Polish president that sought to tie benefits such as an 800-zloty monthly child allowance to employment status. Also, there is to be conditional access to certain forms of health care and welfare programs. This is part of a larger effort to prioritize labor market participation and to minimize the perceived financial burden of refugees on the Polish welfare system. These efforts have led to legislative debates, including a presidential veto of a bill that would extend benefits without conditions. This highlights that the disagreements center on the forms and amounts of assistance rather than refugee reception overall. Attitudes towards specific policies, such as long-term integration and welfare, do tend to fall along party lines.⁵⁴ But there remains a strong cross-partisan consensus in seeing Ukrainians as neighbors who are threatened by Russia.

In Latvia, even more than in Poland, support for Ukrainian refugees is intrinsically tied to the country's geopolitical identity. As a Baltic state bordering Russia, Latvia's political landscape is naturally heavily shaped by its security concerns and a sense of vulnerability. With these circumstances, welcoming Ukrainian refugees is not only a humanitarian gesture but also an act of strategic solidarity. Their actions are directly connected to these narratives of national security

⁵⁴ Hélène Bienvenu, "Poland's New President Vetoes Bill Extending Aid to Ukrainian Refugees," *Le Monde.fr*, August 26, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/08/27/poland-s-new-president-vetoes-bill-extending-aid-to-ukrainian-refugees_6744742_4.html.

and to a desire to be more closely aligned with Western institutions.⁵⁵ Although there is less publicly available data on specific parties' positions on Ukraine, it is still clear that within the mainstream Latvian parties, there is solid support for Ukraine. This support, then, is inherently for Ukrainian refugees. The government has consistently framed assisting Ukrainians as part of Latvia's broader security initiatives and emphasis on resisting Russian aggression.⁵⁶ Notably, even more conservative political groups have avoided using rhetoric around Ukrainian refugees being cultural outsiders or threats. This contrasts with the rhetoric and framing used by far-right Latvian parties against non-European migrants.

This cross-partisan agreement is further strengthened by Latvia's history and demographics. With quite a large Russian-speaking population and clear memories of Soviet occupation, the war in Ukraine can be understood through a lens of vulnerability to Russian occupation. Ukrainian refugees can be easily incorporated into this idea of resistance against Russia rather than being a burden on state resources. While Latvia has restraints of physical and financial capacity, about 2.6% of Latvia's population is Ukrainian refugees.⁵⁷ The main political discourse emphasizes solidarity with Ukrainians over exclusion or threat. The reception of refugees has not become a partisan wedge issue; rather, it reflects a broader consensus rooted in ongoing concerns of Russian influence and regional stability.

However, ethnic and linguistic divides do shape attitudes towards the war and refugees. In 2024, polling showed about 80% of Latvian-speaking respondents blamed Russia for the war.

⁵⁵ "Latvia: Nations in Transit 2024 Country Report," Freedom House, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/latvia/nations-transit/2024>.

⁵⁶ LSM English, "Survey Suggests Support for Ukraine Remains Strong in Latvia," LSM, January 28, 2025, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/28.01.2025-survey-suggests-support-for-ukraine-remains-strong-in-latvia.a585468/>.

⁵⁷ "Latvia: Socio-Economic Insights Survey (SEIS) – Refugees from Ukraine," *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*, November 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/114718>.

However, among Russian-speaking respondents, about 39%, which is significantly fewer, blame Russia for the war and are more inclined to express uncertainty about the issue.⁵⁸ This pattern does align with broader research that found that Russian language media and historical narratives can complicate Russian speakers' attitudes towards Ukraine in the Baltic states.⁵⁹ Despite these ethnic and linguistic differences, opposition to Ukrainian refugees has not come from a mainstream party, even in parties that happen to have more Russian-speaking constituents.

⁵⁸ Māris Andžāns, “Do Latvia’s Russian-Speakers Blame Russia for the War in Ukraine?,” Davis Center, June 28, 2024, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/do-latvias-russian-speakers-blame-russia-war-ukraine>.

⁵⁹ Jennie L. Schulze and Juris Pūpcenoks, “Securitizing Russian-Speakers in Estonia and Latvia: The Frame-Policy Nexus before and after Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” *Nationalities Papers* 53, no. 5 (January 13, 2025): 1035–59, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.97>.

Conclusion

This thesis argues that the most striking feature of public attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees is not the original emergence of solidarity in 2022, but its persistence over time. In contrast with previous refugee crises, acceptance remained high despite the extended nature of the crises and clear integration pressures. Through a comparative analysis, this study demonstrates that the durability of this support comes from the unique framing of Ukrainian refugees as part of a greater shared European community, which is shaped by key factors such as racial identity, historical memory, and security concerns.

Public Opinion and Expressions of Support

Public support for Ukraine was overwhelming in 2022 and expressed through both symbolic and material demonstrations of solidarity. The European Union implemented the Temporary Protection Directive, which empowered Germany, Poland, and Latvia to respond so well to the influx of refugees. The TPD granted Ukrainians immediate access to employment, education systems, welfare programs, and more. This also framed refugee reception as a moral and political obligation instead of a short-lived humanitarian gesture. Public opinion surveys from the start of the war show high levels of sympathy for Ukrainians, along with citizen engagement through efforts like volunteering and hosting refugees in private homes, which further demonstrate societal support for Ukraine.

In this thesis, the scale and urgency of public support suggest moral clarity regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainians were widely seen as victims of an act of aggression against a European state, which contributed to being framed as deserving of support. Media narratives additionally emphasized cultural proximity, religious identity, and shared values,

reinforcing the idea that Ukrainians are part of a broader European community. There, initial public opinion and expression of support were not limited to traditionally pro-migration groups but extended across political and social divides.

The Refugee Question and Its Impact on Public Attitudes

As the crisis continued, the response changed to concentrate on long-term integration, and this thesis examined how the influx of Ukrainian refugees affected public sentiment over time. While there were small declines in public support, overall acceptance remained high throughout all three countries. Even with the consequences of integration like housing shortages, pressures on the school systems, and strains on healthcare systems becoming increasingly visible, the challenges did not result in a significant decline in support against the refugees themselves.

Integration costs contributed to the political debate, but their impact on public opinion was mitigated by broader framing. In Poland, despite significant financial and institutional strain, it did relatively little to affect public attitudes, as this support is rooted in historical solidarity and fear of Russian aggression. In Germany, discussions about welfare programs and labor integration were paired with Germany's role as a leader in the EU and its humanitarian values. In Latvia, with less infrastructure for overall support and labor integration, public acceptance remained high due to clear security concerns.

This section challenged the assumption that the prolonged presence of refugees will naturally lead to significant declines in public support. The Ukrainian refugee crisis shows us that when refugee framing portrays refugees as morally deserving and socially aligned with the host country, financial pressures on their own will not deteriorate public acceptance.

Opinions Across Partisan Divides

This thesis considered the extent to which attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees became a wedge issue and split along partisan divides in European politics. Although in the past migration has been quite a polarizing issue, Ukrainian refugee reception did not fully align with traditional partisan lines. While far-right parties tried to portray refugee support as economically unsustainable, there was a consensus amongst most parties of moral support for Ukrainians. A comparative perspective allows a better understanding of why partisan divides varied across nations, while still producing the same outcome: continued support.

Through case studies of Germany, Poland, and Latvia, refugee issues can become politicized, making the Ukrainian refugee crisis unique, as it is not completely affected by conventional thought around migration policy. Framing Ukrainians as part of a broader European family strengthens the durability of support. This is an exceptional crisis that underscores how shared identity, past memory, and security concerns can prolong support even under ongoing strain.

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