

Europe in the World – Final exam project

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The issue of migration in Poland and
specifically Gdansk

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Hate is the daily bread of many migrants in Poland

Expatriates, especially those who look dark or Arab, face many difficulties in their daily life in Poland.

Juan¹, a thirty-odd doctor from Chile who has lived in Poland for over two years was attacked by a nationalist wearing the logo of the ONR, a far right organisation which has ties to a pre-World War II fascist organisation. “Most of my South American friends have had a similar episode,” he says, “Especially the ones who have darker skin like Peruvians or Ecuadorians”.

A reason for this is in part the growing islamophobia in Europe as he is often mistaken for a Turk or an Arab, mistake which the Never Again Association that monitors such attacks has identified to have occurred to other South Americans. He argues that sometimes they have asked him whether he is Muslim and when they have found out that he is a catholic they have left him in peace.



Nationalist ONR are not strong in Pomerania but they have large numbers nationwide and they can summon big groups in their demonstrations. Photo credit: Derzsi Elekes Andor.

Hate crimes are very assiduous in the current Poland. Nationalist organizations are strong and immigration has become a central debate among the Polish political parties. The attitude of

¹ Fictional name. Due to his position he wanted to remain anonymous.

Poles towards migration has worsened in the past three years from 45 per cent viewing it negatively in 2014 to nearly 70 in just three years.

Religion is a core element of the different nationalist groups in Poland, which is the only European country which still builds churches and nearly 90 per cent of the population state being catholic as opposed to around 70 in equally traditionally catholic countries like Spain or Italy.

Many of these nationalist groups have made a point about standing up to what they perceive as an 'Islamic conquest of Europe' and uphold white supremacy values and ideas of keeping 'Europe white' and 'Poland for the Poles'.

Since the attack, Juan wears leather straps on his wrists as protection whenever he goes out at night and carries brass knuckles in his pocket to use as deterrent. He says he has been approached a couple of times more by thugs and when showing them the brass knuckles while saying that he doesn't want problems they have chosen to avoid him.

The police have been known for turning a blind eye.

When recounting the night when he was attacked Juan states that a friend of his tried to stop a Police car to get help and that even if they saw the situation they chose to carry on driving. When denouncing it the next day at the station, he says one policeman told him a police officer was suspended after he had intervened in one such fight and one of the participants had died, so that it might have been the case that the policemen wanted to wait until the fight was over.

"Either way, it is a very serious negligence", says Juan, and he adds "The Police is not on our side".

Maciej Ostrowski, member of left wing party Razem witnessed an attack on a fellow demonstrator by nationalists in the Polish city of Tczew. He says that several policemen were standing idle just 10 meters away from the incident. "The policemen are afraid of them [the nationalists]," he says.

Amnesty International also recounted the story of a student from Mozambique who was attacked and decided not to report it to the Police out of "distrust". Last year [the organization urged Poland](#) to "take its hate-crimes seriously."

Juan argues that many Polish citizens don't see how big the problem really is. "Many of them, even if they don't agree, think it is not a big deal but we, the foreigners are aware of what is going on."

Kingsley, a Nigerian man who lives in Gdansk, has never been physically assaulted but he has faced verbal abuse. "Sometimes you have to close your ears to those side talks," he says, "when you are a foreigner you don't have to keep everything in mind."

Juan knows what places to avoid and never goes out on certain football match days, nationalist rallies. The only public transportation he uses is the train and he abstains from

using the rest. “The tram and the bus are dangerous, a friend of mine was hit with a bottle on a tram,” he explains.

Poland used to be one of Europe’s most heterogeneous countries before the Second World War, with Germans, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Jews and others within its territory and only 2/3 being Polish. After they moved (some groups forcibly, some voluntarily and of course the Holocaust being a big part) it became what it is today, one of Europe’s most homogeneous countries with [around 5.5% of immigrants in 2016](#).

But certain parts of history are often ignored by the nationalist movements in Poland which are very strong at the moment. Poland for the Poles and White Europe are just some of the sentences they chant. Last November a nationalist rally organised among others by ONR – whose logo Juan’s attacker was wearing on his T-Shirt– and the All Polish Youth gathered 60,000 people in Warsaw to commemorate Poland’s Independence Day.



The conservative Polish government did not condemn the march even though Nazi paraphernalia was present. Photo Credit: Max Pixel

Some of the marchers were reported to have been wearing white supremacist symbols and chanting the Nazi gesture “Sieg Heil”. [The Washington Post noted](#) that none of them were arrested, but instead tens of counter protesters were.

“60,000 people can’t be Nazis,” argues Michał Barniak, member of nationalist party Ruch Narodowy (National Movement). “Maybe there are some Nazis, but it’s less than 1 per cent in my opinion.”

Both Juan and Kingsley clarify that it is a very small part of the Polish population who act like this. “In a mix of a 100 there must be one or two bad people (...), the people who welcome me are much more than those who don’t,” says Kingsley. Juan goes even further. “It isn’t all the Polish, (...) but I hope they become aware of the problem because they themselves wouldn’t like to be treated like this when they went to other countries.”

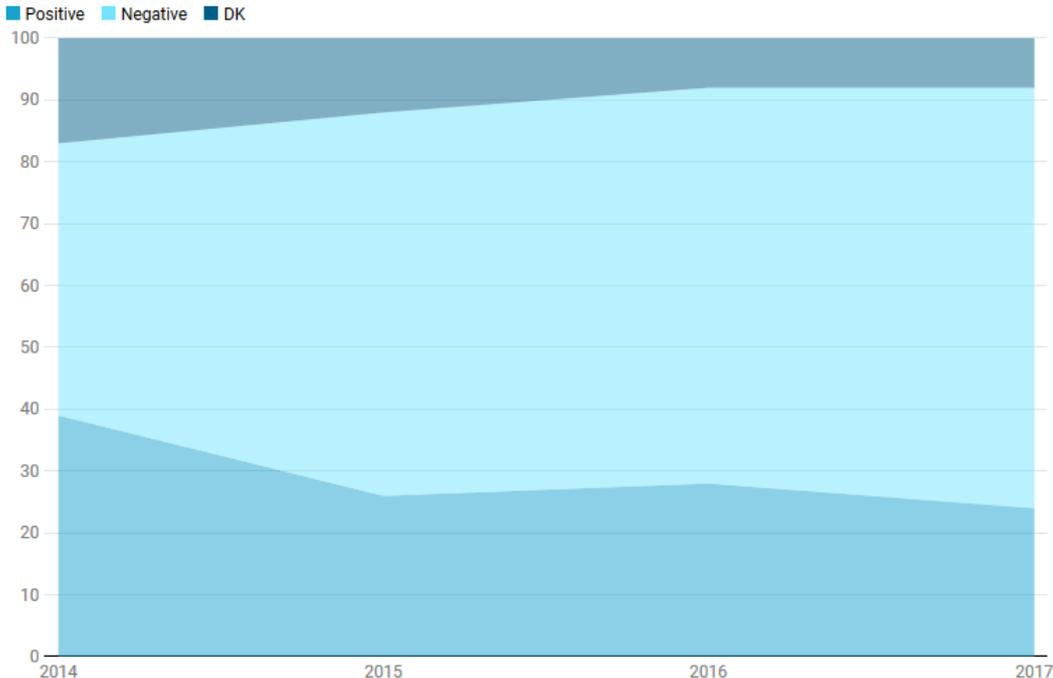
Ukrainians filling in Polish vacancies

Poland’s labour shortages have caused large numbers of Ukrainian workers to flock in with the promise of higher pay.

Poland, one of the most homogeneous countries in Europe is infamous together with other Central and Eastern European states for not accepting any refugees from the relocation scheme. The measure, which was aimed at relieving weight of Greece and Italy, found strong opposition in the Visegrad states –Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic– and at some stages became a central political battle among parties. The Polish state, which had pledged to receive 6,128 refugees in 2015, ended up hosting none after a change of government from centre right Civic Platform (PO) to the conservative Law and Justice (PiS).

Those same elections made Poland have the only parliament in Europe with no left wing parties in it. Public opinion in favour of migration quickly declined from nearly 40 per cent seeing it as positive in 2014 to less than 25 per cent in 2017 while the negative point of view increased from less than 45 per cent to nearly 70 per cent in the same period, according to the Eurobarometer. The issue became more polarised with the undecided taking sides after the Refugee Crisis.

Answer to the question "How do you view migration of people from outside the EU?"



Negative attitudes towards migration have grown and the opinions have become more polarised. Infographic: Javi West. Data: Eurobarometer.

Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS even said that refugees from the Middle East would bring in bacteria and protozoa if they were let in Poland, arguing that they don't suppose a threat in their organisms but that they would in European ones.

In this time, to make up for the fact that they are not taking in refugees from the Middle East many of the politicians from the ruling party have argued that hundreds of thousands out of the unknown number of around 1,500,000 Ukrainian migrants living and working in Poland are refugees. In reality, the vast majority of them don't have refugee status and are not people who are directly affected by the war.

Even the authorities in Kiev [complained earlier this year](#) about the Polish politicians who were referring to the economic migrants as refugees.

Either way, because they currently don't need any visa to work in Poland some who would be eligible for refugee status don't apply for it, according to Rafał Kostrzyński from UNHCR Poland. "Once you apply you get stuck in an asylum procedure, which is sometimes very slow and for the first six months (...) you don't have the right to work," he says. In some cases it is more practical for the ones who could be eligible not to do it.

"It might be more convenient for them not to apply because if they don't, they can just come as migrants and it is easier for them to find a job and accommodation," says Kostrzyński, but he clarifies that "it is impossible to verify that those who don't apply would be eligible [for refugee status]."

He explains that they have a high risk of being denied because Ukraine is not internationally recognised as being at war, although he admits that the recognition rate has raised from 2 per cent to around or above 20 recently.



Most Ukrainian work in jobs which are described as Dirty, Difficult and Dangerous. Photo credits: Creative Commons

There are less than 400 Ukrainians recognised as refugees or given subsidiary protection by Poland and the UNHCR spokesperson argues that most of the negative decisions regarding Ukrainian asylum seekers involve the ‘internal flight alternative clause.’ This essentially means that even if Eastern Ukraine is affected by war, an asylum seeker does not have to leave the country to reach safety as he move to the West, which is peaceful, and therefore does not deserve refugee status in Poland.

The main reason for Ukrainians to move to Poland is that they can earn around [four times as much](#) as in their home country, the average monthly gross income being €1,135 in Poland and €262 in Ukraine. This stark difference has been created during Poland’s time in the EU as before the fall of communism, Ukraine was better off economically than Poland.

Poland also needs migrants because it has a very low unemployment rate and [labour shortages across many different sectors](#). The ZPP, The Union Of Entrepreneurs and Employers, defends that Poland will need an extra five million workers to sustain growth in the next thirty years. Poland was one of the only European countries which kept growing all through the economic crisis.

Even PiS, who came to power using an anti-immigration rhetoric is now preparing a National Act act on migration to facilitate labour influx although the government is not keen on announcing it.

“They change the narrative step by step,” says Pawel Adamowicz, Mayor of Gdansk and historical figure within the opposing party Civic Platform (PO).

Discrimination

As Ukrainian and Polish are very similar languages the migrant labourers can learn the language pretty quickly, the basics in three months. But even if both groups are Slavs there is a lot of prejudice against Ukrainians due to historical quarrels.

Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera who Ukrainian nationalists and others to this day praise as a hero is a major cause for this as he committed genocide of ethnic Poles and up to 100,000 were killed by his faction. The Polish Parliament [banned the “Bandera ideology”](#) earlier this year and Kaczyński, chairman of the ruling party warned Ukraine that they will not be able to get into the EU with said ideology.

The Never Again association counted several hate crimes towards Ukrainians, some involving stones, clubs and knives.

"Some part of our society feels better than people from the former Soviet Union", says Adam Szcypanski, from recently formed left wing party Razem, pointing at another cause, "People describe themselves as higher humans than Russians and Ukrainians. It's postcolonial."

Sasha Ieltsov, a Ukrainian who works in Gdynia, doesn't feel that he is discriminated in Poland but he recounts that when he was trying to rent an apartment he was told that they “don't have apartments for foreigners” right after they noticed he had a slight accent when speaking.

According to Marta Siciarek, who runs the Immigrant Support Centre of Gdansk many of the workers who come from Ukraine are at the mercy of middle men. “Someone is always ‘helping’ you,” she says. These middle men are active in the labour market but there are also in housing.

“They like to keep the employers and the employees misinformed, because they can rotate people and charge them extra fees,” says Siciarek, “they ask money from them for everything [all the paperwork].”

Her organization aims at breaking this bondage system between the temporary work agencies and the workers and tries to encourage direct employment between the employers and the employees. “There are work agencies working over there recruiting people like that, and people don't even think about what their way of coming is. They are in these channels, always in these channels.”

Another type of solidarity reborn

The city of Gdansk is leading the way to integration in an increasingly xenophobic Poland.

Gdansk, known for the Solidarity movement which led to the demise of the Communist Regime of Poland is leading the country in another form of solidarity. The city is actively trying to integrate its immigrants into Polish society and at the same time creating an image of tolerance in an ever darker and more xenophobic country, where public opinion against migration has risen dramatically in the past four years.

In a country where abortion and LGBT rights are still put in question, Gdansk shows its tolerance in many ways. For instance, it is one of the only major Polish cities where the mayor has backed the Pride Parade –for the second time this past 26th of May– by opening it and marching together with the activists.



Pawel Adamowicz, the Mayor of Gdansk, has had a personal evolution from more conservative values to liberal ones. Photo credit: Javi West

Marta Siciarek funded the Immigrant Support Centre in 2012 together with other volunteers to help immigrants integrate and be self-sufficient without having to turn to middle men. The association offers legal and job advice to immigrants free of charge and also language courses for less than 10€ a month.

Most of the immigrants in Gdansk are Ukrainians. The majority of them were attracted by job opportunities and the higher pay in Poland but some among them are escaping because of the war. It is hard to know how many of them, because there is very little incentive in applying for refugee status as the risk of getting rejected is very high, according to Rafał Kostrzyński, spokesperson of UNHCR Poland. It is easier for them to access the country just by being hired by a company and working there.

There are approximately 35.000 Ukrainians living in the city of Gdansk and this has been a very recent development, because only 2 per cent of the city's inhabitants were migrants in 2014 and right now that number is around 10. This is what made the authorities realise that measures were to be put in place to handle the integration.

“We can see that people are not treated well and every immigrant who comes here to our office has some experience of some discrimination or exploitation,” says Siciarek.

Every year around 1,500 migrants go to their office for help either registering or finding a job or any other service the Immigrant Support Centre runs. “We don't try to focus or concentrate them here [the services],” she says, “we try to send them out to institutions and make the institutions prepared for servicing them.”

It is not only parts of the society who discriminate against the migrants, but according to Siciarek, the head of the migrant centre, the system itself does as well. “The legal framework is not welcoming at all, to anyone,” she says and even EU citizens seek their legal advice.

“Gdansk, due to the mayor's strong stance on integration and welcoming culture has a good atmosphere relative to other regions,” but she admits that it is dangerous to wear a hijab, as in most other places.

The support centre lobbied since its foundation for a local act on integration since the state of Poland had none whatsoever and was not advancing in that matter.

The mayor's intervention

In 2016, the City Council of Gdansk approved an act on integration and the Immigrant Support Centre started getting city funds to function and be able to do its work efficiently. On top of that five houses were given to Ukrainian refugees in that same year and two apartments are granted to refugees every year.

On the side, the association runs temporary houses which are granted to families in need for a year or two “until they can stand on their own feet,” Siciarek says.



The Immigrant Support Centre organises Polish lessons for both slavic and non-slavic migrants. Phot credit: Javi West.

At the same time that the central government was using a very strong rhetoric against refugees and migrants from the Middle East, Pawel Adamowicz, the Mayor of Gdansk passed this integration act and also created a body called the Migrants Council to help assess the City Council on migration affairs.

He was invited to the Vatican along with several mayors and he claims he was convinced by Pope Francis that it is his moral obligation to welcome those in need as a catholic. Adamowicz is very vocal about it. “The Polish society received a lot of help throughout history from a lot of countries and now we have to open our homes, cities and state for people who are looking for peace, a better life and hope,” he says.

Even if officially the Catholic Church is in favour of the European reception of refugees, Adamowicz points out that many in the Polish Episcopate hold ‘antichristian opinions’. “[Those who] would like to ‘defend Europe against Islamist colonisation’ are not real Christians. They are a sect,” he argues.

The mayor criticises the central government and the ruling party PiS for not accepting any refugees under the relocation scheme and claims that that is the reason there are only a handful in Gdansk.

“Poland needs an immigration policy. This nationalistic, xenophobic government lead by Kaczinsky does not have an immigration policy,” he argues. He adds that he knows the government is preparing one but that they are silent about it because it doesn’t play along with their “use [of] fear of refugees and migrants in the political arena.”

The reason for them to be doing so is because of the [big labour shortage Poland faces](#), the ageing of the population and the different pleas by business associations like ZPP, The Union Of Entrepreneurs and Employers, which defends that [Poland will need an extra five million workers](#) to sustain growth in the next thirty years.

Most of the refugees in Poland are Chechens, from the Russian Federation, but people from Tadjikistan and Syrians as well.

Recently formed left wing party Razem claim that integration is key but must be carried out together with other policies. “We also have to fight for social justice because (...) far right movements in Gdansk are using the cases of people who are losing their homes as a weapon in fighting with immigrants,” says Adam Scepanski referring to the annual flats given to the refugees.

His party meet with people who have lost their social houses to try to help them and stop the far right from using a rhetoric of helping Polish people first.

The mayor Adamowicz knows that his policies are not welcomed by everyone. “I know very well that my pro-immigrant, pro-refugees stance is politically risky because a lot of my citizens are against this policy and I think I lost some popularity too,” he says. “But this is a very important time and we must be clear, not opportunistic”.

People from his own party, Civic Platform (PO) have criticised the policy openly but he does not flinch at criticising his faction. “Mr. Schetyyna, the leader of the party said one day that he is against hosting refugees and then another day he said he was open. I don’t know which one of the two is right,” he jokes but believes his party has not been clear.

Even Lech Walesa, the historical leader of the Solidarity movement who is revered for having helped bring democracy to Poland has expressed his doubts about the policy, arguing that Poland is a poor country.

The mayor is careful about him. “Lech Walesa is a historical hero for me, but he is not a religious leader and sometimes he is wrong,” he says. Mrs Siciarek, who runs the centre for migrants, is clearer. “That is a crazy argument, we can definitely afford it.”

She wishes more were done to integrate, but she believes the project doesn’t have enough funds to do so. She puts the example of schools and how they are a pillar of integration, but she regrets that nobody is checking on them to see if they are doing a good job. “We have a system policy now, but implementing it needs capacity, money etc.” she says.

Siciarek believes that “Brussels doesn’t see their situation,” because it’s ‘very basic work’ and it is not innovative. The fact that Poland is not in the relocation scheme also plays against them, she claims. However, she admits that Brussels shouldn’t be the one doing more. “, if the state were okay and we had an act [on the National Level] we would manage.”

Local elections are looming

For different reasons, one involving a scandal with the tax return Adamowicz won't be running under Civic Platform's brand in the elections later this year.

Instead it seems that Lech Walesa's own son Jarosław will be the candidate of the centre right party.



Adamowicz has been the mayor of Gdansk for the past 20 years. Photo credit: Javi West

PiS, the conservatives who are in opposition in the City Council are running with Kacper Płazyński, the son of historical politician Maciej Płazyński who is only 29 and hasn't held public office and has no experience in local politics. Circumstances which invalidate him in the eyes of the experienced Adamowicz, who is just finishing his 20th year as mayor.

He will be running as an independent candidate and is confident he will win. However, it is unclear whether the policy will carry on if he is not re-elected and one of the other two candidates is. Siciarek believes that there is no going back. "Even PiS will need these services to keep going. It is a necessity. They need it and they won't get rid of it."

The local representatives of PiS declined to comment on the matter.

Michał Barniak, from nationalist party Ruch Narodowy thinks that the immigrants who are already in Gdansk should be integrated but he doesn't believe that the formula to labour shortage is bringing Ukrainians and thinks that immigration should not be encouraged. "If we need labour then we should encourage the Poles outside of Poland to come back," specifically referring to the almost million Poles living in the United Kingdom.

The Gdansk model – a model for Poland.

Siciarek, the head of the centre, believes that the Gdansk model would have been impossible had it not been for Adamowicz's proactive stance on these issues. "What he did is very important and it is unique in Poland."

Other cities are also trying to put integrating measures in place and some started earlier than Gdansk itself like Białystok argues Kostrzyński from UNHCR. Siciarek, however, claims that there is no system policy in any of the other cities like Lublin, Wrocław and Warsaw. “It is not about organising some multicultural events or the mayor claiming he is pro integration,” she says, “There needs to be a system.” She even goes as far as saying that some mayors fund NGOs who help migrants but are silent because they don’t want to attract unwanted attention or infuriate their electorate.

According to Siciarek, this attitude is not only present in politics. She recounts the story of a French bank which wanted to allocate some money to refugees, and obliged its Polish branch to spend it accordingly but they didn’t want to admit it. “They had to spend this money because France [the mother company] told them to spend this money with refugees. But in Poland it doesn't give you a good image,” she explains.

Adamowicz was among 11 mayors from biggest Polish cities who signed a declaration about ‘openness for different citizens’. A very moderate declaration in his opinion, but after that the All Polish Youth prepared death certificates for the mayors, making it clear that not everyone was happy with the affirmations.

Either way, Adamowicz is happy with the policy because there are steps being taken to implement an integration policy in the whole region of Pomerania. “This is a very good result of our Gdansk model of integration of migrants. Our political decision, our work inspired regional authorities,” he boasts “I know other mayors from smaller cities are working on the same policy but this is the first stage.”

“We will be developing local plans of action on integration by the end of the year,” says Siciarek. Once it is functional on the regional level, she hopes to see it in all Poland, but that is subject to many other circumstances. “We will see what comes after the elections,” she admits.

The local elections later this autumn and the parliamentary ones next year will ultimately be the ones to decide what path Poland takes when it comes to migration.
