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Finding New Homes: Projecting the Impact of Ukrainian Refugee Migration to Poland

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ABSTRACT

As a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, more than 9.6 million Ukrainians have fled their homes, with many of them relocating to bordering countries. Poland, which shares the westernmost border with Ukraine, has been met with the challenge of housing, aiding, and transporting this refugee wave. This paper uses analysis of notable past migration cases to project the ability to which Ukrainian refugees will be able to integrate into the Polish society and economy. The paper also discusses the ways in which the Polish economy will be affected by this migration wave, and how they can best facilitate this influx of refugees. The paper concludes that refugees will seamlessly integrate into Poland's social fabric, but take some time before fully integrating into its economy. On the part of Poland, I discussed pessimistic and optimistic scenarios, ultimately finding that despite short-term costs, the country's economy will benefit most from integrating Ukrainian refugees into the workforce as opposed to transporting them to other countries.

Introduction

On the morning of February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared war on Ukraine, sending airstrikes and troops to major cities in the eastern part of the country and advancing his army into the Donbas region. Over the past 5 months, these destructive and unprovoked attacks have forced 9.6 million Ukrainians to flee their country, as the long-feared threat of Russian aggression had finally become a reality.[1] In order to keep potential soldiers in the country, the Ukrainian government has banned all men between the ages of 18 and 60 from leaving the nation, resulting in this refugee population being almost 90% women and children.[2] While it is still largely unclear where many of these refugees plan on relocating to, as of July 28th about 4.9 million have crossed over the border into the neighboring country of Poland, presenting the country with a challenging situation that has potential long-term economic benefits.[3] This refugee crisis, which stands as one of the largest in world history, will put a significant short-term strain on the entire Polish economy and society; however, these culturally similar refugees have the potential to become taxpayers and economic contributors in Poland for years to come.

Since the crisis has begun, the Polish government has made concerted efforts to support this influx of refugees. Upon arrival, refugees are given 300 zlotys (67 USD) and are granted the opportunity to register for a national identification number which gives refugees access to the same healthcare and educational services as natural-born

[1] UNCHR, ed., "Ukraine Relief Situation," Operational Data Portal, last modified July 22, 2022, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine.
[2] Samantha Lock, "European Commission Pledges €1bn to Support Ukraine – As It Happened," The Guardian, accessed April 9, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2022/apr/09/russia-ukraine-war-latest-zelenskiy-calls-for-firm-global-response-to-war-at-kramatorsk-train-station-live?page=with:block-62517ca78f081f653cd8c59d#block-62517ca78f081f653cd8c59d.
[3] UNCHR, "Ukraine Relief," Operational Data Portal.

Poles.[4] On top of this, grassroots movements in Poland by various NGOs and private citizens have allowed most refugees to find temporary housing and support systems. Due to these strong accommodation efforts, Poland has already felt some economic strain, which can be seen through a 30% increase in rents in the capital city of Warsaw.[5] To combat these types of economic stressors, the Polish government is offering free transportation within the country for Ukrainian refugees in an attempt to minimize the population shock in specific cities. Generally speaking, the work of the Polish government, combined with that of NGOs, has created a supportive short-term environment for facilitating both temporary housing as well as travel throughout Europe for long-term settlement.

In this paper, I will use historical analysis of other notable migration crises to predict the degree to which these specific refugees will be able to assimilate into Polish society and the long-term effect they will have on the Polish economy. Pulling from each of the historical cases I used, which include the Mariel boatlift (Cuba-Miami), Syrian/Iraqi refugees in Germany, and Venezuelan-Colombian migration, I will build a prediction for Poland, as well as outline optimistic and pessimistic scenarios for the unfolding crisis. Based on factors such as cultural similarities, workforce integration, and support from governments and NGOs, analysis from past cases suggests that Ukrainian refugees in Poland will be able to maintain jobs, find homes, and build lives in their new country.

Research Methodology

In order to effectively analyze and predict the outcome of this refugee wave into Poland, I will be studying three past cases of migration. Each case presents unique similarities and differences to the Polish case and thus will help us draw predictions for the economic impact of refugee integration and facilitation. In order, I will discuss the Mariel boatlift of 1980, Middle Eastern migration to Germany (2015-present), and Venezuelan migration to Columbia (2016-present). In the end, I will develop a clear prediction for the assimilation of Ukrainians into Poland through an assessment of their impact on the Polish economy, as well as quantify my analysis in a chart that allows for a simple visual comparison, which I present in the appendix.

Section 1: Cuba-Miami

In 1980, the Mariel boatlift brought over 125,000 Cuban refugees to the shores of Miami over the course of 5 months, flooding the city with people fleeing the political and economic uncertainty of Castro-led Cuba.[6] By this time, Castro's promise of prosperity under communism had been far from realized, as the U.S. trade embargo and poor policy decisions had resulted in the deterioration of the Cuban economy, as well as violent political oppression. As more and more Cubans attempted to escape, it became harder for Castro to enforce his strict emigration embargo, ultimately leading to him lifting the ban altogether, opening the floodgates for thousands of Cubans to leave the country. Meanwhile, in the U.S., President Jimmy Carter vowed to accept and support all Cuban defectors arriving in the United States, a move that received significant political backlash. Taking advantage of President Carter's promise, Castro not only allowed people to leave but actively cleaned out Cuba's prisons and mental institutions with the hope of ridding the country of people he deemed as "criminals, lumpenproletariats, antisocialists, bums, and parasites". While it is

[4] Amandas Ong and Nils Adler, "Worlds Apart: 24 Hours with Two Refugees in Poland," Aljazeera, last modified May 22, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/5/22/worlds-apart-24-hours-with-two-refugees-in-poland.
[5] Lauren Egan, "Poland's Resources Running Dry as Ukrainian Refugee Crisis Continues," NBC News, last modified April 30, 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/polands-resources-running-dry-ukrainian-refugee-crisis-continues-rcna25991.
[6] Karen Juanita Carrillo, "The Mariel Boatlift: How Cold War Politics Drove Thousands of Cubans to Florida in 1980," History, last modified September 28, 2020, https://www.history.com/news/mariel-boatlift-castro-carter-cold-war.

important to recognize that many of the people deemed as "criminals" by Castro were often simply political opponents, the United States was still met with the challenge of dealing with the rapid arrival of Cubans, many of which had criminal records or mental health conditions.[7]

In the aftermath of this migration wave, Cubans in Miami were able to successfully transition into the Miami labor market. Between the years directly following the Mariel Boatlift (1981-1983), the mean Cuban unemployment rate in Miami was 11.3%, with only black citizens (14.6%) having a higher rate. Although, in 1984 the Cuban population seemed to hit a breaking point, as their unemployment rate dropped to 7.7%, trailing only that of the white population (3.6%)[8]. The specific reasons for this workforce integration delay could stem from language unfamiliarity, social stigma, or countless other unknown factors, but the important part is that initially low economic integration indicators don't always mean sustained economic weakness for refugee populations. Despite their improving unemployment rates, Cuban-Americans were not able to out-earn their fellow Miami citizens over that period of time. From 1981 to 1985, the real hourly earnings of Cuban workers aged 16-61 in Miami were the lowest of any group in Miami at the time. The largely unskilled workers who made up most of the Mariel immigrants resulted in a 7% increase in the Miami labor force, but did not significantly impact the wages of non-Cuban unskilled workers in Miami.[9] Clearly, Miami had a need for unskilled labor at the time, which allowed for job opportunities for low-skilled workers that wouldn't affect the wages of the already employed population but led to Cubans earning less than their counterparts.

The circumstances and timeliness of this wave of migration draw significant similarities to that of the unfolding Polish-Ukrainian refugee crisis. While Poland is receiving far more refugees today than Miami was in 1980, both waves of migration were unfolding over the course of several months, forcing each nation to make decisions and accommodations for their new guests fairly quickly. Luckily, in both cases, the receiving country was amply prepared to accept these asylum-seeking refugees. The United States, with the highest GDP in the world in 1980 (21% of global GDP)[10], was more than capable of allocating the necessary funds to help Miami house and support these migrants. Poland, being another financially capable country (12.6% of Europe's GDP) and the recipient of tremendous funding from the E.U. and various NGOs, has the wealth to support this migration in the short term.[11] On top of this, the political similarities between refugee and host communities of both migrant groups were comparable. In Miami, the migrants departing Cuba were primarily exiled due to their anti-Castro beliefs, which fit into the largely anti-communist narrative in America, where according to a Gallup Poll in 1980, 73% of Americans viewed communism "unfavorably"[12]. Similarly, immigrants coming from Ukraine are largely anti-Russia, which is the same as sentiment in Poland, as according to Pew Research, 91% of Poles view Russia "unfavorably". So, on a political level, both migrant groups share similar perspectives to that of those in their respective receiving countries.

Despite these commonalities, there is still a major difference that affected the ease of assimilation of these two refugee groups: the cultural and economic similarities of the migrants and the receiving country. Due to Ukraine's proximity to Poland, as well as the fact that Western Ukraine was once a part of Poland, migrants coming over the border are mostly of the same race, religion, and cultural background as native Polish citizens. The two countries also

[7] Carrillo, "The Mariel," History.
[8] David Card, "The Impact of the Mariel Boatlift on the Miami Labor Market," ILR Review 43, no. 2 (January 1990): 250, accessed July 28, 2022, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2523702
[9] Card, "The Impact," 252.
[10] The Global Economy, "Percent of World GDP - Country Rankings," The Global Economy, accessed July 28, 2022, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/gdp_share/.
[11] World Population Review, ed., "GDP Ranked by Country 2022," World Population Review, accessed July 28, 2022, https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-by-gdp.
[12] Tom W. Smith, "The Polls: American Attitudes toward the Soviet Union and Communism," The Public Opinion Quarterly 47, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 280, accessed July 28, 2022, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2749027.

have very similar industries, both being leading producers of wheat, coal, and chemicals.[13] Additionally, there is already a significant Ukrainian population living in Poland, meaning these refugees will be able to find communities that share their language and nationality fairly easily. On the other hand, Cuban immigrants were of a different race than most Americans, spoke a different language, and the two countries had very different economies. While Cubans still accounted for the largest immigrant population in Miami before the Mariel boatlift, they were still met with an overarching sense of American racism and anti-immigrant sentiment, both due to the fact that they were from Latin America, but also that they were regarded as criminals in their former country. So, if the financial data from the Mariel Boatlift migrants is used to forecast the economic integration of Ukrainian migrants, we must also acknowledge that Ukrainian refugees should face much fewer language and cultural boundaries than Cuban refugees.

Section 2: Syria-Germany

Another notable refugee case took place in the years following 2015, as Germany agreed to take in over 1 million Syrian, Afghani, and Iraqi migrants who were fleeing their war-ravaged homes. Over the past 20 years, much of the Middle East has been destabilized by internal terrorist threats, as well as conflict between Western nations and regional governments, leading to the destruction of communities and the forced relocation of millions of people. Unfortunately, much of the Western world has been reluctant to take in these refugees, citing fears of terrorism as a justification for the rejection of asylum-seeking Middle Eastern migrants. These racist and unsubstantiated claims have put tremendous pressure and responsibility on the few countries that have been accepting refugees, forcing them to take in massive numbers of asylum seekers. Of those few, Germany, beginning under the leadership of former Chancellor Angela Merkel, has been by far the most open to Middle Eastern refugees, as the country alone is responsible for hosting about 60% of all Syrian refugees in Europe.[14]

This large number of Middle Eastern migrants has not only presented Germany with the task of housing and supporting this population, but also of integrating culturally distinct individuals into their society. In order to ease the pressure on German communities, the country instituted a plan to spread migrants across the nation, placing the correct amount of people in specific cities and towns so that their presence does not overwhelm regional economies and societies. On top of this, Germany has created extensive programs to help refugees acquire language skills, culturally integrate and aid in job-seeking efforts. As a result of these programs, about half of these refugees have found jobs or internships, and about 44% have cited having good or very good language skills. The latter statistic is the most impressive, as fewer than 1% of the same refugees cited having good or very good language skills upon arrival in Germany.[15] While the German government has done a tremendous job of integrating these refugees into society, there are other areas that still need to be addressed, such as healthcare coverage and opportunities for women and non-German-speaking laborers. However, on a social level, the refugee population has faced more apparent challenges. In 2015, there were more than 3,500 recorded violent crimes against refugees in Germany. While this number has started to come down in recent years, it has been doing so at a significantly slower pace than general violent crime in Germany. In 2021, violent crime declined by 26%, while refugee-targeted violent crime only declined by 12%[16]. So, despite the government's efforts to integrate these asylum-seekers, they still face the threat of violence from their new neighbors.

[13] Index Mundi, ed., "Poland Vs. Ukraine," Index Mundi, accessed July 28, 2022, https://www.indexmundi.com/factbook/compare/poland.ukraine/economy.

[14] UNHCR, ed., "Syria Refugee Crisis – Globally, in Europe and in Cyprus," UNHCR, last modified March 18, 2021, https://www.unhcr.org/cy/2021/03/18/syria-refugee-crisis-globally-in-europe-and-in-cyprus-meet-some-syrian-refugees-in-cyprus/.

[15] UNHCR, "Syria Refugee," UNHCR.

[16] Benjamin Bathke, "Germany: Less Violence against Asylum Seekers in 2021, but Attacks Continue," Infomigrants, last modified February 22, 2022, https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/38708/germany-less-violence-against-asylum-seekers-in-2021-but-attacks-continue.

Similar to Ukraine, the Middle East is plagued with war, causing millions of people to lose their homes and loved ones, ultimately forcing them to flee the region. Both these receiving nations, Germany and Poland, were not only willing to accept these refugees but were also similarly financially capable of doing so. Both countries have viable economies with strong allies and support from the E.U, so much like Germany, Poland is mobilizing this financial strength to create various integration programs. These should lead to alike, if not more successful, results due to the similarities between Ukrainians and Poles. While the scale of the Ukraine-Poland refugee crisis is much larger than the Middle East-Germany crisis, the makeup of refugees is notably similar. In both cases, the majority of asylum-seekers are women and children, meaning workforce integration will need to occur in very specific fields.

Despite this, the relationship between natives and foreigners in these two cases could not be more different. In the German-Middle Eastern situation, there are clear racial, religious, and language barriers between the Middle Eastern migrants and native Germans, but the larger public perception of the two groups is also very different. In the Ukrainian-Polish situation, a study by the Market and Social Research Institute (IBRiS) found that around 90% of Poles supported the country's open-door refugee policy[17]. On the other hand, in Germany, a study conducted in 2015 revealed that 38% of Germans felt “frightened” by this large migration wave.[18] These differing levels of social acceptance can both affect the ability of refugees to attain jobs, but also the extent to which the general population contributes to relief efforts. For example, in Poland during the immediate aftermath of Russia’s most recent invasion, many Polish citizens offered to house Ukrainian refugees, supplementing the existing government housing programs. This strong early polling shows that if this welcoming attitude persists in Poland, Ukrainian migrants should be able to successfully transition into Polish society and Polish citizens will be able to ease some of the strain on government programs.

Columbia-Venezuela

Another interesting case that displays the effects of a government motivated to integrate refugees is that of Venezuelan refugees immigrating to Columbia. In 2016, when the Venezuelan economy collapsed, an influx of almost 1.7 million people poured into the neighboring country of Columbia. In response to this occurrence, Colombian president Iván Duque has actively tried to encourage immigration into Colombia in an attempt to grow its economy in the long term. Despite not having close to the amount of international funding support as Poland, Columbia has tried, and for the most part succeeded, to integrate every refugee into their society. Columbia has set up programs that allow for all Venezuelans to become Colombian citizens, granted housing subsidies, extended healthcare and education programs, and ensured safe border crossings. While Columbia has experienced a short-term strain in funds, these refugees are starting to transition into Columbian society, providing hope for long-term economic development.[19] While the differences and similarities, in this case, overlap the previous cases, it can be seen as an example of the kind of economic success that Poland can gain from offering similar programs.

[17] SchengenVisa, ed., "Over 90% of Poles Welcome Ukrainian Refugees in Poland, Survey Reveals," SchengenVisa, accessed March 4, 2022, https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/over-90-of-poles-welcome-ukrainian-refugees-in-poland-survey-reveals/.

[18] Reuters Staff, "Most Germans Not Worried by Influx of Refugees - Poll," Reuters, accessed September 10, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-europe-migrants-germany-poll-idAFKCN0RA2PY20150910.

[19] The World Bank, "Supporting Colombian Host Communities and Venezuelan Migrants during the COVID-19 Pandemic," The World Bank, accessed October 31, 2021, https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2021/10/31/supporting-colombian-host-communities-and-venezuelan-migrants-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.

Optimistic vs. Pessimistic

Reconnecting these cases to the focus on Ukrainian refugees in Poland, there are various economic results that can come from this crisis. In an optimistic scenario, much like Columbia's response to Venezuelan immigrants, the Polish government continues to treat these refugees as potential citizens and creates incentives for them to stay in Poland. In this scenario, an outcome much like the Cuba-Miami situation should take place, where refugees eventually become integrated into society, maintain relatively low unemployment rates, and blend their culture with the already existing Polish one. Therefore, the short-term strain on Poland's social systems will be worth the long-term benefits, as these refugees will simply contribute to growth by becoming reliable taxpayers and using their specialties in IT and manufacturing to obtain Polish jobs, all without having a huge impact on the wages of native-born Poles. In the short term, this scenario would include a relatively easy social assimilation due to their obvious cultural similarities, but it would not be surprising if far-right, anti-Ukrainian movements, much like those in Germany, arise as the war goes on and more and more migrants arrive in Poland. In a more pessimistic case, the Polish government takes the stance of slowing down integration policies with the goal of spreading these migrants throughout the E.U. In this scenario, Poland will continue to bear the tremendous cost of supporting these migrants in the short term, but the economic benefits would instead be spread throughout the 27 countries in the E.U. This scenario would cost far less in the short term, as Poland would slash many of its incentives for Ukrainian refugees, but due to their geographical proximity to Ukraine, they would be forced to house and transport this stream of refugees for as long as the war continues. This scenario would result in little to no economic growth from refugees in Poland, but the shift away from social support would also hinder the ability of Ukrainians who do stay in Poland to integrate into society. This prediction may seem popular to Poles who are trying to avoid some of the short-term costs, but ultimately it will lead to a net negative situation, as Poland will not be able to see a return on their investment in the form of tax dollars and economic contribution.

Prediction

Drawing from each of these historical situations, I can attempt to outline what the following years will look like for Ukrainian refugees in Poland. As seen in the Cuba-Miami crisis, it is reasonable to expect at least a few years of low employment, earnings, and general integration from Ukrainian migrants. Considering the present state of the war, it will take some time for refugees to consider Poland as their new permanent residence, and will therefore delay the assimilation process. With that being said, if it becomes clear that these refugees will not be able to return to Ukraine, they will inevitably be joined by their fathers, husbands, and sons. When this happens, they will be able to seamlessly transition into their Polish communities given their cultural similarities and access to support systems made possible by funding from the Polish government, EU, and international organizations. Again, much like the Miami-Cuban situation, native Poles should be largely unaffected by this influx of refugees in the long term, but similar to the Middle Eastern-German situation the short-term concentration of women and children may hurt the wages and employment of native-born Poles in certain women-dominated industries like childcare and health associates.[20] On a social level, one can be skeptical of the potential for the immediate violence and hatred that was targeted towards Middle-Eastern immigrants upon arrival in Germany due to the strong cultural similarities between Ukraine and Poland. With that being said, the longer this crisis continues and Poland has to keep pouring money into refugee facilitation efforts, the possibility of anti-immigrant political ideologies surfacing in Poland only increases.

[20] International Labour Organization, "These Occupations Are Dominated by Women," International Labour Organization, last modified March 6, 2020, https://ilostat.ilo.org/these-occupations-are-dominated-by-women/.

Conclusion

After studying these cases I can conclude that there should be three main takeaways for Ukrainian migrants in Poland: cultural assimilation should be easily attainable, economic integration will come but should take some time, and Poland's level of impact will vary based on their level of incentivization for refugees to stay in the country. Additionally, it should be noted that these predictions and takeaways are based on generalized analysis. I am studying this situation from the standpoint of the average refugee, but it is important to acknowledge that there are many Ukrainian refugees who don't share the same race as most Poles, speak totally different languages, and have varying reasons that could prevent workforce integration and make assimilation more challenging. As the crisis continually unfolds and geopolitics evolve, these predictions should be revisited and if necessary, reevaluated to fit the current situation. Even in the early stages of the crisis, there has been an overwhelming level of support from Polish citizens, which should be a sign of hope that the most optimistic of these predictions will be attainable, and these displaced refugee population will be able to build successful lives for themselves and their families in their new country.

Appendix

Below is a scorecard outlining a few significant areas of analysis discussed in the paper. For simple digestion, the chart includes just one number between 0 and 3 in each category, with 3 being the strongest, and 0 being the weakest.

Countries	Cultural Similarities Between Countries	Ability to integrate into workforce	Wealth of receiving country (including foreign aid)	Population shock factor	Political similarities	Cost on social services	Reason for Refugee Status
Ukraine-Poland	3	2	3	3	3	2	War
Columbia-Venezuela	3	2	2	3	3	3	Economic Collapse
Germany-Syria	0	1	3	1	1	3	War
Cuba-Miami	1	2	3	2	3	1	Oppression

Personal Touch

As someone deeply interested in this topic, I have spent time in both Poland and Ukraine helping with refugee relief efforts. Through my work in Poland and Ukraine, and my interactions with people I met along the way, I have two main takeaways: The Polish people are some of the most hospitable in the world and are eager to help their neighbors, and the Ukrainian people have an overwhelming sense of national pride, and will not go down without a fight. In order to keep this paper as analytical and data based as possible, I have refrained from mentioning these takeaways or any of my experiences in the main portion of the paper but think they are important to share for those curious.

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