


Michał Bilewicz  
University of Warsaw

# The refugee crisis as a crisis of attitudes

After prolonged negotiations, the government of the Republic of Poland decided to allow in 7,000 refugees out of the around 120,000 individuals who had come to the European Union from war-stricken countries (chiefly Syria and Eritrea). Such a number does not appear particularly high in the context of the earlier influx of foreigners into Poland: 12,849 Russian nationals (mainly from Chechnya) applied for refugee status in Poland in 2013, and 15,373 individuals from Ukraine received temporary residence permits in the first half of 2015 (Ukrainian nationals could not be granted refugee status, because war affected only some areas of their country).<sup>1</sup> Poland's share in the response to the influx of refugees was proportionately much lower than the numbers pledged not only by Germany and France but even by such countries as Finland and Slovenia. Sweden, whose population does not exceed 10 million people, experienced an influx of approximately 10,000 refugees from Syria and other war-torn countries in just one week in late October and early November. At the same time, only three foreigners from Syria applied for refugee status in Poland.<sup>2</sup>

Although the influx of refugees into Poland remains small in scale, the "refugee crisis" story has attracted considerable media coverage in Poland in recent months. The effects of



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this situation have been reflected in the findings of research on people's attitudes conducted by the Center for Research on Prejudice at the University of Warsaw. In a survey carried out on a nationwide sample of adult Poles in 2014, 20% of the respondents declared they would not accept Muslims as their neighbors. In a nationwide survey taken in summer 2015, the share of those who expressed a lack of acceptance for Muslim neighbors rose to 32%.<sup>3</sup> Studies also revealed significant links between Islamophobic attitudes and the frequency of accessing online news portals: those who use such sites more frequently were also more likely to express a stronger aversion to Muslims.

Lively media debates on the issue of refugees appeared to invoke the Poles' earlier fears and prejudices against immigrants. And yet numerous studies conducted by sociologists, economists, urbanists, and psychologists have indicated that ethnic diversity not only facilitates cultural enrichment but also boosts creativity, thus fostering a given country's economic development.<sup>4</sup> While conducting the Polish Prejudice Survey on a nationwide representative sample in 2013, we noticed that the Poles were more likely to perceive an influx of foreigners as a threat than as potentially conducive to the country's development. A vast majority of those surveyed did not want more people from different ethnic groups to live in Poland and regarded an influx of immigrants as unfavorable

to Poland's economy. More than half of the respondents feared that immigrants were taking jobs away from Poles. On the other hand, 40% recognized that immigrants were enriching Polish culture. The survey found that aversion to foreigners was especially strong among poorly educated respondents from small towns. Interestingly, the financial situation of the respondents proved unrelated to their attitudes to immigrants. Aversion to immigrants was more likely to be influenced by the subjective feeling that "things are going badly" (a sense of relative deprivation).<sup>5</sup>

## Sources of the crisis of attitudes

What lies at the source of the public's strong reaction to the so-called refugee crisis in Europe and issues related to the influx of foreigners to Poland? Social psychology identifies two fundamental factors shaping such attitudes: direct contact (or the lack of it) and the message conveyed by the media and opinion leaders (including politicians, members of the clergy, and experts).

Direct contact with minority groups and immigrants is the most certain way to reduce prejudice and boost openness in relations with those groups. Reviews of hundreds of studies devoted to this issue demonstrate that those who have personal contact with members of minority groups or immigrants not only acquire knowledge of such groups but also fear them less and show greater empathy and compassion for their fate.<sup>6</sup> Greater empathy and reduced fear translate into generally more favorable attitudes towards those groups. In the context of immigrants from Muslim countries, it is especially worth highlighting the studies conducted in Germany, aimed at explaining regional differences in aversion to adherents of Islam. For years, East Germany has had the highest statistics of vio-



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1 Figures based on the yearly reports of Poland's Office for Foreigners: <http://udsc.gov.pl/statystyki/raporty-okresowe/zestawienia-roczne/>.

2 Figures based on the weekly reports of the Office for Foreigners for the last week of October 2015.

3 Bilewicz M., Marchlewska M., Soral W., Winiewski M. (2014). *Mowa nienawiści. Raport z badań sondażowych* [Hate speech: Report on survey studies]. Warsaw: Batory Foundation and Center for Research on Prejudice; Stefaniak A. (2015) *Postrzeżenie muzułmanów w Polsce: Raport z badania sondażowego* [The perception of muslims in Poland: Report on a survey study]. Warsaw: Center for Research on Prejudice.

4 Cf. Florida R., Gates G. (2003). Technology and tolerance: the importance of diversity to high-technology growth. *Research in Urban Policy*, 9, 199–219; Gołowska M.A., Crisp R.J. (2013). On counter-stereotypes and creative cognition: When interventions for reducing prejudice can boost divergent thinking. *Thinking skills and creativity*, 8, 72–79; McLeod P.L., Lobel S.A., Cox T.H. (1996). Ethnic diversity and creativity in small groups. *Small Group Research*, 27, 248–264.

5 Soral W., Hansen K., Bilewicz M. (2014). *Stosunek do imigrantów oraz jego korelaty – na podstawie Polskiego Sondażu Uprzedzeń 2013* [Attitudes towards immigrants and their correlates – based on the Polish Prejudice Survey 2013]. Warsaw: Center for Research on Prejudice.

6 Pettigrew T.F., Tropp L.R. (2008). How does intergroup contact reduce prejudice? Meta-analytic tests of three mediators. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 38: 922–934.

lent acts against Muslim immigrants and the highest support for extremist parties. German researchers proved that those differences largely resulted from the ethnic structure: there are practically no immigrants in Germany's eastern federal states, which means fewer contact opportunities. Young Germans from Saxony and Mecklenburg meet no Turks or Kurds at school and adults have no experience in contact with neighbors who are adherents of Islam. Such a situation translates into stronger fear and aversion to those groups.<sup>7</sup>

In Poland, all forms of contact with foreigners are very rare. Foreigners account for merely 0.15% of Poland's population.<sup>8</sup> The aforementioned research into attitudes towards Muslims and immigrants conducted by the Center for Research on Prejudice confirms that the lack of contact is a fundamental factor behind fear of refugees and attitudes towards adherents of Islam in Poland. Those who have Muslims among their acquaintances are a lot more open to refugees. However, such contact is relatively rare: over three-fourths of the Poles have had no opportunity to meet a Muslim man or woman.<sup>9</sup> Even brief contact with Muslims (for example among young people taking part in the Erasmus student exchange programs in countries inhabited by Muslim minorities) resulted in visibly more favorable attitudes and reduced fear of Islam.<sup>10</sup>

Media outlets represent another fundamental source of aversion to refugees: focused on terrorist attacks and acts of violence, they seldom report on issues related to the Muslim community in any other context. Consequently, Islam is strongly associated with terrorism and the mental representation of Muslims comprises no other elements. Longitudinal surveys carried out in Germany in recent years indicated that those who watch private TV channels more often felt stronger fear of Muslims and, in consequence, showed greater preference for such channels.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, private channels in Germany expose viewers to violence and emotional messages to a much greater degree than public television channels.

The media have an especially strong impact on attitudes towards Muslims among those who have no other sources of information about adherents of this religion. The lack of contact makes us more susceptible to media messages as well as statements made by politicians and experts. In Poland, Islamophobic content was relatively common in the media, including in the period preceding the so-called refugee crisis. Among adult Poles, one in four had encountered such content on television or on the Internet. More than half of young people had encountered anti-Muslim hate speech on the Internet.<sup>12</sup> Offensive anti-Muslim content usually takes the form of comments posed in online discussions. Our surveys showed that those exposed to hate speech in their surroundings are no longer sensitive to the brutality of offensive language. Consequently, they have lower acceptance for immigrants and minority groups in their surroundings. In recent experimental studies, we examined the effects of exposure to hateful comments posted under articles



**Associate Professor  
Michał Bilewicz,**  
a psychologist at Warsaw  
University, leads the Center  
for Research on Prejudice

published on news portals. We found that those who read such comments were significantly less likely to accept Muslim or Jewish neighbors (compared to those who read the same article without hateful comments).<sup>13</sup>

## Possible ways out of the crisis

Growing aversion to Muslim refugees observed in recent months prompts us to consider effective ways of integrating refugees into the host community and modifying its attitudes. In recent years, we have witnessed similar problems on a local scale, or in the localities where refugee centers were established.

One example is the city of Łomża, which hosted two centers for refugees: one downtown, the other on the outskirts (in Czerwony Bór). The Podlaskie Voivodeship, especially the areas close to Łomża, is a region where researchers have observed relatively high levels of xenophobia in modern-day Poland.<sup>14</sup> Historically, the region has been notorious for numerous acts of ethnic violence.<sup>15</sup> For that reason, the creation of centers for refugees in the region should have gone hand-in-hand with an extensive information campaign combined with broad education activities. The absence of such measures entailed consequences that were especially visible in the years 2008–2010, which witnessed a number of incidents aimed against refugees from Chechnya, including a violent attack on two women. As a result of the escalation of negative attitudes towards refugees in the local community, the refugee center was shut down in 2010.

In collaboration with the "Ocalenie" Foundation, a migrant-supporting non-governmental organization which has been operating in Łomża for years, the Center for Research on Refugees carried out a research project integrated with measures aimed at the local community.<sup>16</sup> The project comprised a survey taken on a representative sample of residents of Łomża, aimed at identifying the fundamental reasons behind tensions in the relations between the local community and foreigners. The survey found that the most negative attitudes towards refugees and the strongest fear had been declared by the youngest residents of the city. We found that the main reasons behind fear of refugees were a lack of personal contact opportunities (not having any acquaintances among refugees) and the

misguided belief that the benefits received by the refugees at the local social welfare center reduced the pool of funds available for the poorest inhabitants of the city. The survey also showed ignorance of the reasons why the refugees had fled Chechnya: the respondents declared that the refugees had been motivated by economic, not political factors.

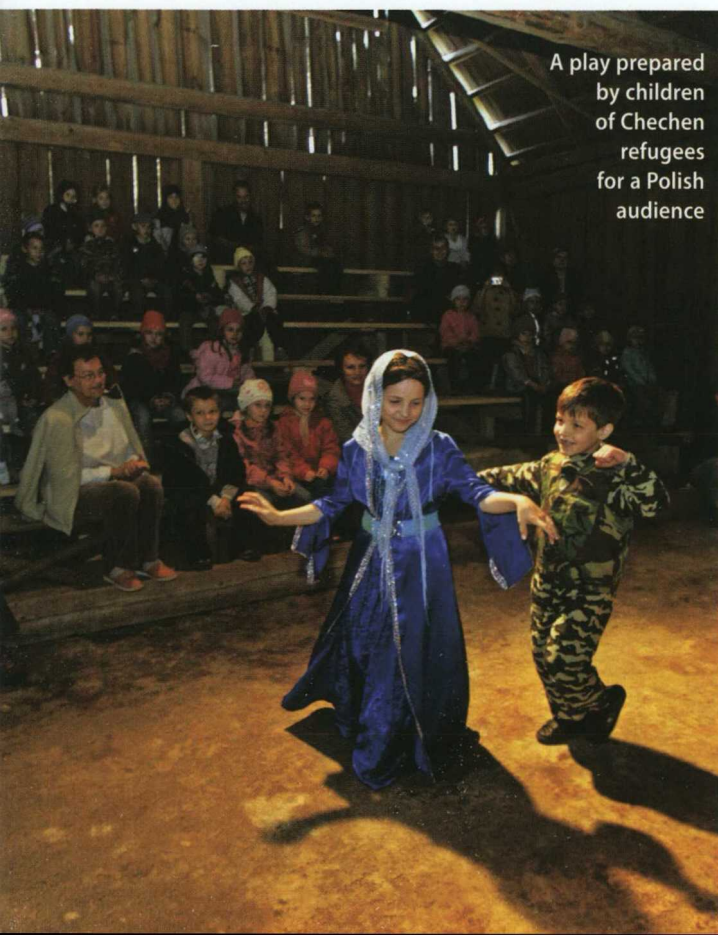
Such findings prompted an extensive education and integration campaign, with the "Ocalenie" Foundation implementing a range of programs addressed to those who showed the strongest aversion to refugees (including martial arts workshops, meetings between martial arts contestants and young people, and a volunteering campaign in a center for high school students). The purpose of such events as the Refugee Day, an exhibition commemorating the victims of the war in Chechnya, and cooking workshops run by those living in the refugee center was to create opportunities for contact (both direct and indirect) with refugees and to make local inhabitants aware of the real reasons behind the refugees' decision to flee Chechnya.

One year later, we carried out another survey on a representative sample of inhabitants of the city to assess potential changes in attitudes and reasons behind such changes. Back then, we noticed that the attitudes towards Muslim refugees improved significantly after a year of integration measures, as did awareness of the reasons behind the influx of refugees from Chechnya. Over that year, the share of respondents declaring that they had Chechen acquaintances rose and more frequent

The reports of the Center for Research on Prejudice on the issue of refugees, discussed in this paper, are available on the Center's website [cbu.psychologia.pl](http://cbu.psychologia.pl).

contact translated into more positive attitudes. Surveys showed that the change in attitudes had been linked to awareness and participation in integration events. One of the elements that were clearly visible in the surveys was the similarity of historical trajectories: the Poles who were made aware of the similarities between the present-day situation of Chechens and the earlier experiences of the Poles were more likely to accept foreigners in their city.<sup>17</sup>

The refugee crisis in Poland is mainly a crisis of attitudes caused to a much larger degree by fear than by the rational calculation of the costs and benefits brought by the influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa. The situation of foreign nationals as well as their attitudes and behaviors depend largely on attitudes in the host society. Experience related to the earlier adaptation of refugees, as was the case in Łomża, suggests that integration and education measures, which can cause real changes in attitudes in local communities, are worth the effort. Currently, such activities are being conducted by non-government organizations, but support from the state is very low. In the light of a growing influx of refugees to the European Union, such measures should be more systematic and receive greater support from the budget, including in Poland. Such campaigns may counterbalance media messages and the statements of politicians, which are much more likely to create antagonism than to resolve problems related to the integration of refugees. In addition, integration campaigns will facilitate the adaptation of refugees and offer protection against their political radicalization. ◀



A play prepared by children of Chechen refugees for a Polish audience

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