

Ukrainian Refugee Immigration Patterns & Cultural Similarities

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ABSTRACT: On the 24 of February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, impacting millions of people's lives. In addition, the millions of displaced refugees have sparked a major international relations conflict. As a result, most refugees have traveled to their neighboring country, Poland. This research paper, based on a set of survey responses and interviews, outlines key policy recommendations that the Polish government should apply to best adjust to the rapid influx in population. The policies are family, religion, and language-oriented and focus on lengthening the stay of Ukrainian refugees.

KEYWORDS: Behavioral and Social Sciences, Ukrainian War; Ukraine Refugees; Cultural Similarities; Immigration Patterns; Policy Recommendations.

■ Introduction

Since the beginning of the Ukrainian War on February 24, 2022, the number of Ukrainian refugees has continued to rise. A significant percentage of them have traveled to their neighboring countries, most commonly Poland. The war has persisted despite initial speculation that it would be over in a week. Around half a year later, refugees can still not safely return home. Poland has implemented many refugee-specific policies to help them, including access to employment, education, health care, and other social welfare programs. This war in Eastern Europe has significant global implications, so it is essential to understand the complexities of its effects. Upwards of 5 million Ukrainian refugees have passed through to the Polish border; that is a significant amount of people compared to Poland's population of approximately 37.8 million.

Given that upwards of 5 million Ukrainian refugees have crossed the border, it is valuable to understand the factors influencing a refugee's decision to stay in a given country. The three factors measured in this research paper are family, language, and religion. Specific elements of culture, such as family, language, and religion, can influence one's decision to immigrate to a new/unknown place. This research paper is designed to generate original data and analyze why specific groups of refugees choose to stay in the country, thus demonstrating how to best help that group adjust to the country. The sudden influx in population has completely destabilized Poland's social systems. Additionally, the country has seen a decrease in population preceding the war; therefore, considering the demographic changes, Poland must take informed measures to reposition itself economically most effectively.

This research paper begins by describing the research methodology, which later serves to support the policy recommendations. The research was conducted as a survey and interviews examining the abovementioned factors: family, religion, and language, which influence refugee decision-making processes. For the data analysis portion, the questions from the survey were cross-analyzed between two variables, helping to

gather more apparent results separated into three sections. The policy recommendations are created based on the data analysis, which also employs data from the interviews. Cultural similarities can help make people feel more comfortable in a time of change; this effect may be amplified for Ukrainian refugees. Therefore, the hypothesis states that the greater the cultural similarities of Poland for Ukrainian refugees, the more likely the individual is to stay in the country.

■ Methods

The research was conducted as a survey and interviews, examining the three lenses: family, religion, and language in influencing refugee decision-making processes. The survey was sent as a Google Form and garnered approximately 50 responses for each question. The Google Form was sent to an educational institution offering classes to Ukrainian refugees. For the data analysis portion, the questions from the survey were cross-analyzed between two variables, helping to gather more apparent results separated into three sections. Finally, the policy recommendations are created based on the data analysis, which also employs interview data. Many of the following figures have a percentage on the y-axis, which indicates the percentage of respondents who agree with their corresponding answer on the x-axis.

Data Analysis:

Many aspects can affect one's decision to immigrate. This paper researches the extent to which family, language, and religion can impact Ukrainian refugees' immigration decisions. To do that, the answers from the survey were cross-analyzed between two variables. For example, when language was analyzed, the duration of stay was compared to people's fluency levels. Therefore, each question will clarify what factors may influence a Ukrainian refugee's decision to immigrate, specifically, which individuals will stay in Poland and why. The hypothesis is that religion, family, and language impact Ukrainian refugees' duration of stay in Poland.

Interview Overview:

Three separate interviews were conducted to gather more in-depth information. The first individual, Interviewee #1 (49), fled the city of Kharkiv and arrived in Wroclaw on March 1, 2022, alongside her daughter. Interviewee #2 (29) also came from Dnipro to Wroclaw on March 1, 2022. Lastly, interviewee #3 (51), although she is not Ukrainian, is the head of a Ukrainian foundation, which is why her perspective is considered in this paper. Also, through her job as a patent official, she aided in many ways, including organizing various charity events.

Additionally, because of her job, she helped settle many officials from the government patent agency in Ukraine in Warsaw, Poland. The interview questions varied depending on the interviewee and their responses. One aspect that followed throughout was that the interviews were separated into the three factors that were researched. They were open-ended questions; for example, 'What are some of the biggest challenges you have faced since coming to Poland?'. The open-ended questions allowed for a dialogue to continue.

Result and Discussion

Survey Overview:

Section 1 of the survey consists of three preliminary questions. The first question is, "How long will you stay in Poland?" The responses were very divided, but the majority stated that they would return to Ukraine after the war. The next biggest group was still undecided. A quarter stated they would be staying in Poland regardless. One individual said they would be continuing to another country.

The second question in section 1 asks, "When did you move to Poland?" The dates were scattered, but 42/48 came after the war began, which was in February. The greater majority of the refugees arrived in March of 2022 (Figure 1).

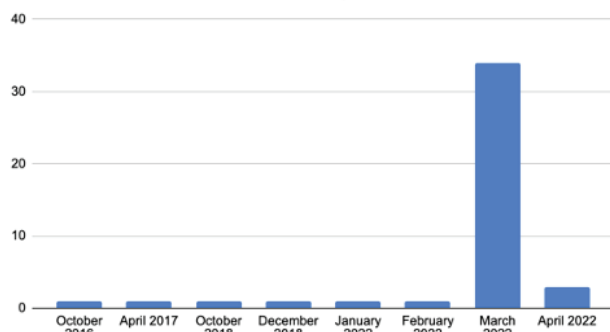


Figure 1: Dates of arrival compared to the number of people. The influx that occurred in March 2022 due to the war is highlighted.

The last question in this section is a long-answer question about the individual's reason for leaving the country. Nearly every answer was in Ukrainian/Russian, with two being Polish. Most of the responses were along the lines of 'the war' (Figure 2). Some specified that it was for their children's safety. Two stood out because they had nothing not to do with the war, with one stating they would be studying in Poland and the other saying that it is God's Will and to serve in the Church.

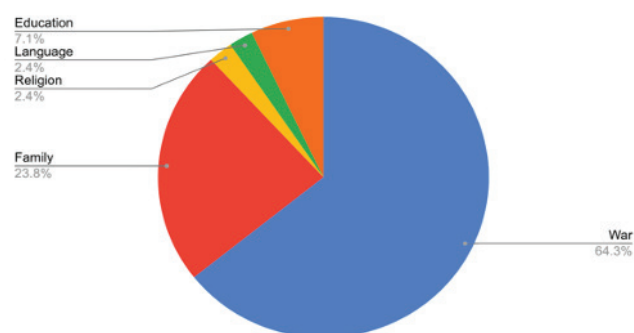


Figure 2: Reasoning to move to Poland. The majority moved due to the war and their family.

The first factor that the survey analyzes is family. It is composed of two general questions, including "Did any of your family live in Poland before the war?" and "Did any of your family move with you after the war?" It is meant to show how the family may have impacted some people's decision to immigrate. Both the questions had very even responses, with a few more people stating that they did not have family living in Poland before the war.

A very similar response is seen for the latter question, with a few more stating that no one from their family moved with them. Many families were forcefully split due to the conscription for males above 18, with very few exceptions, which may have impacted that statistic. Poland supports these women and children and provides the soldiers and volunteers with the understanding that their families are safe.

Section three focused on religion, specifically Christianity. It is composed of 3 questions. The first question asks if the individual identifies as Christian. Less than 10% stated they were not, with the rest of the responders stating they were Christian. The second question asked if they identified with any religious group in Poland, with only 37.5% of respondents stating yes. It is important to notice that even though both countries' main religion is Christianity, most Polish people are Roman Catholics, while in Ukraine, they identify as Orthodox Christians.

The last question asks on a scale of 1 (not greatly) to 5 (greatly) how religion has influenced their immigration decisions, and the responses can be seen in Figure 3:

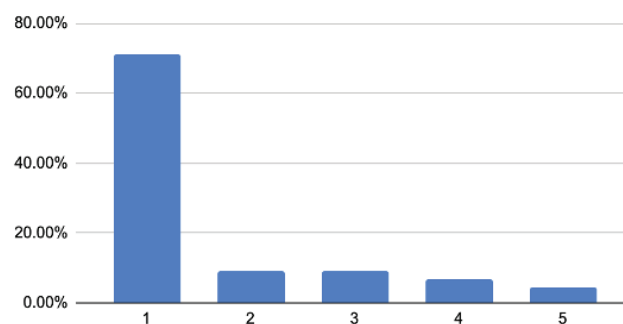


Figure 3: How much religion has influenced immigration decisions. Most respondents stated 1, meaning religion did affect their immigration decisions significantly.

The last factor analyzed is language. Language is imperative in immigration, so this section comprises five questions. The first question asks, “Do you speak Polish?” A simple question gathered a wide range of answers (Figure 4). The second question provides a better understanding by asking the individual to rate their fluency level from 1 (not very) to 5 (fluent). Responses were once again very scattered, but there is a steady decrease in people towards 5.

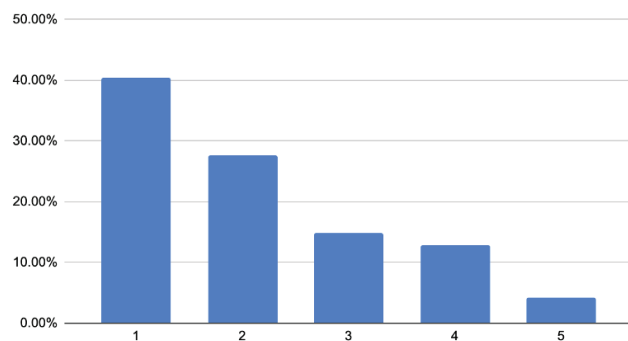


Figure 4: Fluency levels and confidence in one's fluency in the Polish language steadily decrease towards the number 5.

The next question asked, “If you don't speak Polish, are you currently learning Polish?” Again, over 90% of respondents stated they are learning the language. The follow-up question asks, “If you don't speak Polish, would you like to learn it?” Again, there is a slight increase from the previous question, with over 95% of respondents stating that they would like to learn it. The last question asked, “Do you think your knowledge of the Polish language influenced your immigration decisions?” Nearly 75% stated 1, which means that the individual believes that language did not affect their immigration decisions. The rest of the responses can be seen in Figure 5.

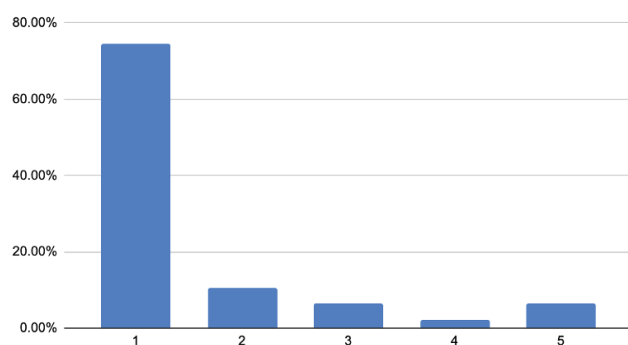


Figure 5: Reflects how much language influenced immigration decisions regarding Poland. Over 70% of respondents stated 1, which means that fluency in the Polish language did not impact their immigration decisions to Poland.

The last section is about demographics—five questions to understand who answered them. The first demographic focused on age; over 58% of respondents answered that they were between 18 and 39, and the second largest group (35%) was people aged 40 to 65. Two individuals responded that they were above the age of 65 and one under the age of 18.

As for gender, more than 80% of respondents identify as women and the rest as men. However, it must be acknowledged that Ukraine passed a martial law under which men

between 18 and 60 are not allowed to leave the country except under very specific exemptions. This may account for the discrepancy in respondents.

The next question asked is regarding family status. This graph was more difficult to understand; 26 people stated they were married, and two respondents answered ‘other’ and wrote that they were also married. This means that over half of the respondents are married. Six (12%) responded that they are divorced, and 8 (17%) are single. Three individuals stated that they were widowed.

The last two factors taken into account are education and occupation. For education, 70% reported having higher education, and an equal number of respondents stated that they have a ‘professional’ and ‘high school’ education. The last question in the survey showed that just above 50% of respondents stated that they are employed, 27% that they are unemployed, and nearly 20% stated that they are unemployed and looking for a job.

Family:

Family impacts many daily decisions and, in many ways, the opportunities one has for the future. Even before the war, Poland had a significant Ukrainian population in its major cities. Approximately 1.5 million Ukrainians were in the country before the war, around 4% of Poland's population. Therefore, the hypothesis is that the greater the familial ties to those Ukrainians who lived in Poland, the greater the chance that the refugee will stay in Poland.

When the responses to the question, ‘Did you have any family living in Poland before the war?’ were cross-analyzed with ‘duration of stay’, the conclusions were as follows: First, refugees who stated they would return to Ukraine as soon as the war was over were more likely not to have had any family living in Poland before the war, which supports the hypothesis. The ones who decided to stay in Poland were more likely to have had some family living in Poland before the war. Finally, the numbers for individuals who do not know yet if they will stay or leave were very even, with only one person stating they had no family living in Poland (Figure 6).

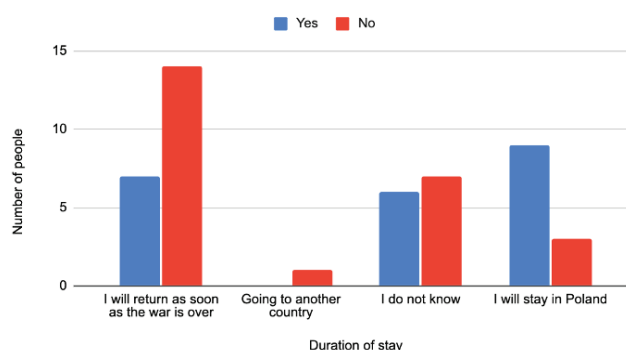


Figure 6: The duration of stay was cross-analyzed with the family living in Poland before the war. People with familial ties in Poland were more likely to stay than those without.

The results from cross-analyzing if someone moved with their family and the stay duration did not support the hypothesis. Refugees who reported that they would return to

Ukraine as soon as the war was over were more likely not to have moved with their families. For the undecided, more stated that they moved with their family. However, the numbers of people staying in Poland were precisely the same. This means that whether or not a refugee moved with their family would not impact the probability of their duration of stay in Poland (Figure 7).

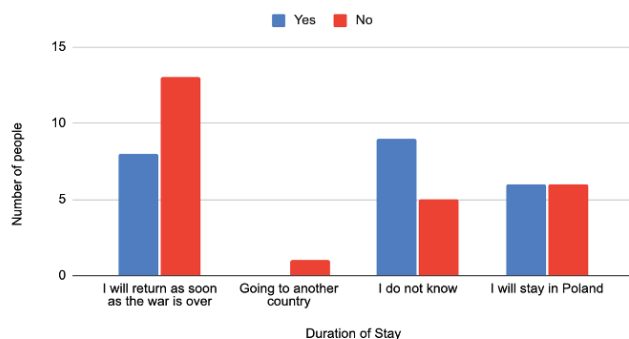


Figure 7: The duration of stay was cross-analyzed with the family having moved, too. If families did not move together, they are more likely to return to Ukraine after the war.

The reason why families want to return to their home country may be connected to the amount of risk they are willing to take. While one individual may decide to take the risk and difficulties of settling into a different country, a family may not. Interviewee #3 supported this idea with an example. A particular family decided to move back, even though they lived in an area that was not completely safe because that is where their livelihood resided. Although for some families, immigration to Poland is an opportunity for their children to lead a better life or gain access to better education, it is only a short-term solution for others. These factors may be influencing the statistics.

Language:

Language is a core aspect of culture. Interviewee #1 distinguished in her interview that Ukrainian, in contrast with Russian, has many similarities to the Polish language. While the sounds may be similar, she highlighted that there are many common words between Ukrainian and Polish. In Ukraine, many people on the east side speak predominantly Russian, which may change, moving toward the country's west (Interview #1). This is important to note because language familiarity may affect Ukrainian native speakers more than someone who learned the language later in life. From interviewee #3 experience working with refugees, she found that Ukrainian speakers learned Polish exceptionally quickly and were often very determined. This is also supported by the survey, where 95% of respondents stated that they would want to learn Polish.

Many interesting conclusions can be drawn from cross-analyzing Polish fluency levels and a refugee's duration of stay. As the hypothesis assumed, it was more likely for a refugee to stay in Poland if they felt more confident in their Polish language capabilities. Nobody who reported 1 (out of 5) on their fluency level will remain in Poland. Interestingly, the only individuals marked as fluent (5) stated they would stay in Poland.

On the other hand, many refugees still unsure about their immigration decisions described their fluency levels as very

low. However, the statistics may change in the coming months since 95% of refugees stated that they want to learn Polish, and approximately 90% are learning it. With their newfound language-speaking abilities, refugees may feel more confident in Poland and, therefore, may choose to stay.

As the hypothesis stated, most individuals who reported their fluency as level 1 will return to Ukraine after the war. This does not correlate with interviewee #3 situation, who, even though she does not know the language at all, has decided to stay in the country (Figure 8).

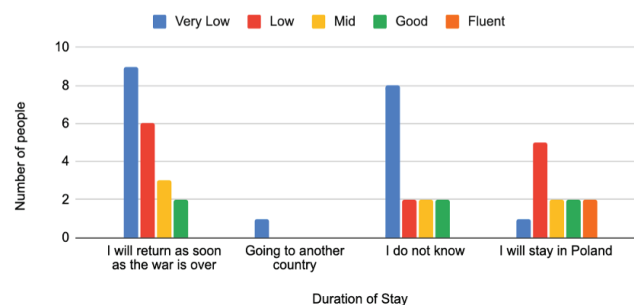


Figure 8: The duration of stay was cross-analyzed with fluency level. Individuals with the lowest fluency level in Polish were more likely to leave Poland.

Religion:

Ukraine's history must be considered when studying religion's effects on Ukrainian refugee immigration decisions. While currently, an incredibly significant percentage of the country's population identifies as Orthodox, people in Poland broadly identify as Catholics. At first glance, there may not be a similarity here as the large influx of Ukrainians has contributed to the increase in Orthodox churches.

Many cities have begun building Orthodox churches to accommodate the refugees. In major cities, including Krakow, there has been an increase in the demand for Orthodox churches. During holidays, the limited number of Orthodox churches were overflowing with people. Ukrainian people have described that going to church makes them feel like they are back at home and, therefore, may affect their willingness to stay. Interviewee #2 described in her interview that she went to church back in Ukraine regularly but has stopped since moving to Poland. As a religious individual, the ability to return to that aspect of her life would make her more comfortable in her new environment. It must be acknowledged that many Polish individuals could oppose this decision, as Poland is predominantly Roman Catholic.

Because nearly no one in the survey stated that they were not religious, there is insufficient data to generate conclusive results about how religion may affect Ukrainian refugees' immigration patterns. Furthermore, the question about identifying with a religion in Poland did not gather definitive information, as seen below (Figure 9).

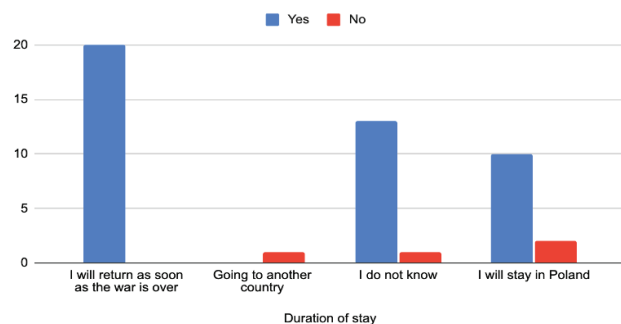


Figure 9: The duration of stay is cross-analyzed to see if someone identifies as Christian. It is difficult to generate conclusions due to the need for non-Christian-identifying individuals.

Policy Recommendations:

Poland has passed several laws that have permitted and helped the stay of Ukrainian refugees. They are allowed to remain in the country for 18 months, after which they can apply for a PESEL number, giving them full residence rights. Some of the most influential factors put into place are the right to attend Polish schools and the access to '500 Plus', a monthly payment that parents can get for each child. This is a significant help for mothers, especially considering that many of the refugees in Poland are mothers who have moved with their children (Interview #3). Many other benefits have been shared with the incoming refugees, including access to the labor market, healthcare, social benefits, and assistance, which are all on the same level as those of Polish citizens, provided there is a PESEL number.

The government should continue to help Ukrainian refugees stay in Poland as it helps those in need and the country itself. Before the war, Poland was facing a decrease in its population, and because the current birth rate is under 2 (1.42), that drop in population would have continued. Many Polish people have also immigrated, commonly for studies or higher salaries and job opportunities (Aljazeera, 2021). As a result, many have started families in other countries. All of these factors have served to decrease Poland's population. In addition, many Polish young adults have stalled their careers to explore the issue further. With leisure becoming more pleasurable than monetary rewards, it has blocked rather than propelled the Polish economy. The conclusion is that the Polish government does want Ukrainian refugees to settle in Poland. Even though this is a costly investment for the country, the supported refugees will be capable of contributing to the Polish economy in the future. If Poland applies specific and effective policies, the country can see a return on its investment in the long term.

The policy recommendations must be specific and best support the population that intends to stay or, even more importantly, that is still undecided in their decision to stay. The hesitant group is just as important when considering policies because their demographics vary from those intending to stay. For the reasons above, the Polish government sees it to its own benefit to have as many refugees remain in the country. This means it will need to help the group that has already decided and convince the undecided group that it is in their best interest to stay. The positive aspect of these policies is that they

will genuinely help both the refugees and Poland. At the same time, the guidelines would help the Ukrainians immediately, although the benefits the Polish economy would see would take longer.

As mentioned, there are many cultural similarities between Ukraine and Poland, including language and familial ties. Religion has also proved to be a cultural similarity, as more Orthodox churches have been built around Poland.

Policies must be specific to garner the most outstanding results. Based on comprehensive surveys and interviews conducted in Poland during the summer of 2022, this paper outlines the policy recommendations that Poland should implement:

- ***Religion-Oriented Policy Recommendations:***

Religion-oriented policies are mentioned first because they primarily relate to undecided refugees. Based on the research, many younger Ukrainians are religious; they are commonly not Catholics like in Poland, but instead Orthodox Christians. This can be seen in the interviews. Interviewee #1 shared in their interview that when Ukraine was in the Soviet Union, atheism was endorsed. After Ukraine stopped being a part of the Soviet Union, many standards changed. Interviewee #1 stated that many younger individuals are religious, but it is less common with older people because of their upbringing. Interviewee #3 supported the preceding statement, as they are part of the younger generation and attend Church regularly in Ukraine. They also stated that they were open to returning to that routine. Poland can use this to its advantage by inviting younger generations of refugees.

Therefore, based on the research, the Polish Sejm should support building Orthodox Churches in Ukrainian-populated areas. The effects of this decision on the undecided group can only be theorized. Still, with greater commonalities, refugees have shown a greater chance of staying in a new location, which supports the idea that Poland should invest in Orthodox Churches.

- ***Family-Oriented Policy Recommendations:***

The Polish government finds it in its best interest to assimilate Ukrainian refugees into the country, which, with the cultural similarities, is plausible. Many Ukrainians had families living in Poland before the war began. Therefore, their connection to the government is more robust and, as the hypothesis stated, increases the duration of their stay in Poland. It would be challenging to state which individuals did have family and which did not; therefore, the policy here would be slightly different. Interviewee #3 highlighted a pretty unusual situation of an individual who was fluent in Polish and had lived in the country for a while but had decided to move back to Ukraine because Ukraine would become a country of opportunity. Also, people may continue immigrating to other countries that have even better economic benefits than Poland. To decrease such cases, Poland should make an incentive for a long-term stay. An example could be reduced taxes on homes, specifically for first-time home buyers.

Determining policies for refugees who have moved with their families is slightly more challenging. More families are still deciding whether or not to return to Poland than people

who moved alone. To provide incentives for families to stay, Poland must continue supporting families as it has since the beginning of the war. This means continuing to provide the aforementioned 500 Plus program. With continuous support, Ukrainian families will see their stay in Poland as beneficial and economically realistic.

• *Language-Oriented Policy Recommendations:*

The more fluent a refugee is, the more likely they will stay in Poland. The survey supported that and showed that refugees were open to learning the language. A Polish as a Second Language (PSL) program should be implemented for Ukrainian children in schools. It is unrealistic for them to be able to follow the average Polish student's curriculum. This would act as an extra course for Ukrainian refugees. Alongside a PSL program for students, a similar one should be made available to adults. With simple access to learning Polish, Ukrainian refugees will find their new setting easier to settle in.

According to Interview #3, legislation changed after a certain amount of time, and working online from Poland was no longer legal. To get a job in Poland, at least a basic understanding of the language is necessary. Although fluency does not look essential for employment at present, with the new legislation, it will be (Figure 10).

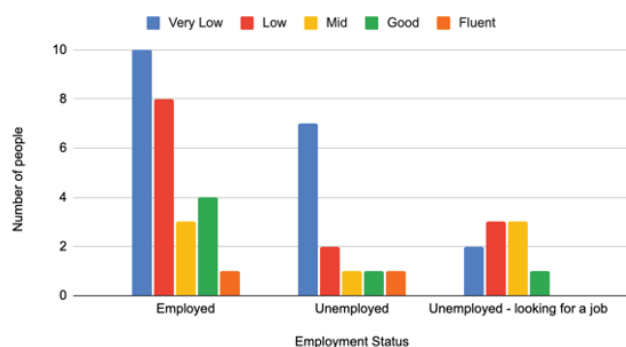


Figure 10: Fluency level cross-analyzed with employment status has inconclusive results on employment status.

■ **Conclusion**

The data for language and family supported the hypothesis that cultural similarities affect Ukrainian refugees' immigration patterns. Although the data on religion did not have clear results, the interviews supported the hypothesis that younger generations may be more affected by their decision to stay in Poland with increased religious ties.

This research project focused on analyzing the relationship between culture and refugees' decision to stay in Poland through the lens of three themes. First, the Ukraine conflict is a major one that has devastated the country and affected millions of people. These millions of refugees are a critical international relations issue in Europe, and accordingly, Poland should reshape and refine its policy to accommodate this pressing humanitarian crisis. Second, this data and research have provided key insights into the relationship between religion, language, and familial ties. Third, it has firmly demonstrated

its connection with the Ukrainian refugee decision to stay in Poland.

Given Poland's demographic challenges, the Polish government should institute the following policies: investing in religious services, implementing long-term incentive plans, and continuing support of 500 Plus and Polish as a Second Language programs. These policies, created based on research, will help alleviate the strain of Ukrainian refugees on the Polish system.

■ **Acknowledgments**

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Dagna Jezioro is a Trinity College School senior in Ontario, Canada. She aims to use the understanding gained from this project in her future studies.