

“What if...”

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Narrative Threats to Democracy: Polish Attitudes Toward Ukrainian Refugees

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Poland has played a crucial role in supporting Ukrainian refugees, providing shelter, resources, and aid on an unprecedented scale (UNHCR, n.d.; Maciejewska-Mieszkowska, 2022; Staniszewski, 2023). An impressive 68% of Poles personally assisted in some way (CBOS, 2022). Initially, public support was overwhelming, with nearly 94% of Poles in favour of accepting refugees (CBOS, 2022). However, by mid-2023, sentiment had shifted dramatically: only 40% of Poles had a favourable opinion of Ukrainians, while 30% expressed unfavourable views (CBOSNews 2024/07, n.d.). Support for accepting refugees dropped to 57%, the lowest since the war began and even lower than pre-war levels (CBOS, 2023).

This decline can be understood through **Intergroup Threat Theory** (Stephan et al., 2009), which suggests that intergroup contact can heighten conflict when groups perceive each other as threats (Jolly & DiGiusto, 2014). Perceived competition for resources—such as jobs, social welfare, housing, and medical services—exacerbates negative attitudes toward immigrants (Esses et al., 2001; Ha, 2010). In Polish-Ukrainian relations, this tension is further intensified by historical narratives. Viewing the current situation through the lens of Ukrainian nationalism and the 1940s massacres of Poles amplifies perceived threats, reinforcing the idea of Ukrainians as competitors (Hilton & Liu, 2008).

Key themes in negative narratives include¹:

Welfare: Ukrainians receiving state benefits are perceived as undeserving or "demanding."

Healthcare: Concerns about the healthcare system's capacity and fears of a COVID resurgence due to the refugee influx.

Work: The belief that Ukrainians are taking jobs from Poles.

Safety: Fears of crime and a weakened military.

Housing: Perceptions that Ukrainians are driving up housing prices and receiving state-funded housing.

Agriculture: Resentment over government support for Ukrainian farmers at the expense of Polish interests.

History: References to the 1943 Volhynia massacre, which become more frequent when debates are particularly contentious.

¹ This overview is based on my Bachelor's thesis research.



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This polarization poses a significant **threat to democratic cohesion**, as it fuels misinformation, radicalization, and social fragmentation. Importantly, these fears stem from **perceived threats**, not necessarily real ones—studies show that Ukrainian refugees contribute positively to the economy and fill labour shortages (*“Emigranci z Ukrainy”*, 2025). Feelings of constraint can emerge organically from resource competition but can also be **strategically amplified by external actors**. Research shows that Russian cyber operations have played a role in worsening attitudes toward Ukrainians by spreading disinformation, such as claims that demographic shifts will make Poles second-class citizens or that crime and disease rates will rise due to Ukrainian refugees (Grabowska & Pięta-Szawara, 2023). “When perceptions of [group-based] conflict run high, people will be much more willing to believe and share misinformation about rival groups” (Mazepus et al., 2023, p. 2). This polarization is further exacerbated by political campaigns that exploit anti-Ukrainian sentiments to gain support, especially during election periods.

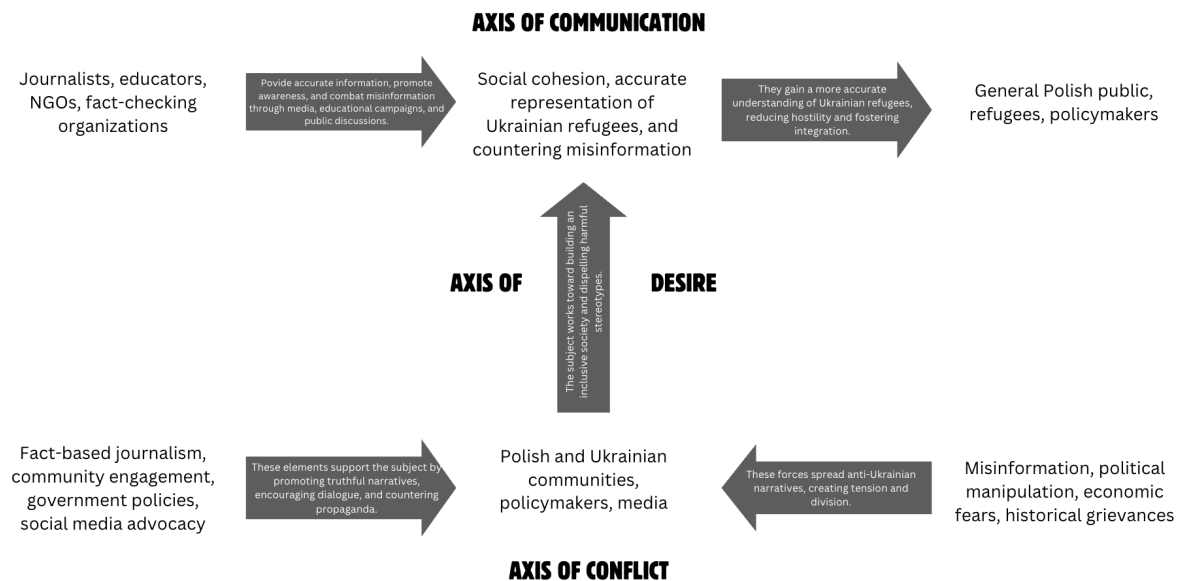
A Path Forward: Intergroup Contact Theory and Counter-Narratives

However, narratives are not fixed—they can be reshaped. **Intergroup Contact Theory** suggests that interaction between different groups reduces prejudice (Allport, 1954). Research confirms that intergroup contact improves attitudes toward migrants and refugees (McLaren, 2003; Graf & Sczesny, 2019; De Coninck et al., 2021). In the case of Poland and Ukraine, **direct contact** (such as daily interactions) and **indirect contact** (such as media portrayal) both shape public opinion. During the early days of the war, media framed Ukrainians as “close neighbours in crisis,” emphasizing their similarities to Poles (Konieczna-Sałamatin, 2016). Highlighting this cooperation can counter political and media narratives that seek to divide.

The Actantial Model of this situation is shown below.



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A strategic **counter-narrative campaign** can help reverse this trend by shifting the conversation from competition to cooperation. Using personal storytelling and historical reframing, such a campaign can emphasize Polish-Ukrainian solidarity.

Counter-Narrative Strategies for Polish-Ukrainian Solidarity

A counter-narrative campaign could aim to **reframe the conversation** around Polish-Ukrainian solidarity.

A successful campaign should:

1. **Reframe the conversation:** Shift focus from competition to shared struggles and mutual benefits.
2. **Highlight positive integration stories:** Showcase Poles and Ukrainians working together, supporting each other.
3. **Emphasize economic contributions:** Present factual data on how Ukrainians strengthen Poland's economy.
4. **Use personal storytelling:** Counter stereotypes with real-life experiences.
5. **Address historical tensions with nuance:** Acknowledge past conflicts while framing Polish-Ukrainian wartime solidarity as part of a shared resistance.
6. **Include fact-checking:** Counter misinformation with verified data.

A mix of **short videos, testimonials, and infographics** can illustrate how Ukrainians and Poles coexist positively. A **hashtag campaign**, such as **#RazemSilniejsi** ("Stronger Together"), could encourage user-generated content and community engagement. These posts, targeted at Polish audiences on platforms like Instagram and Facebook, would directly address common negative narratives against Ukrainians. Encouraging users to share their own stories of collaboration would help counter orchestrated divisive narratives.



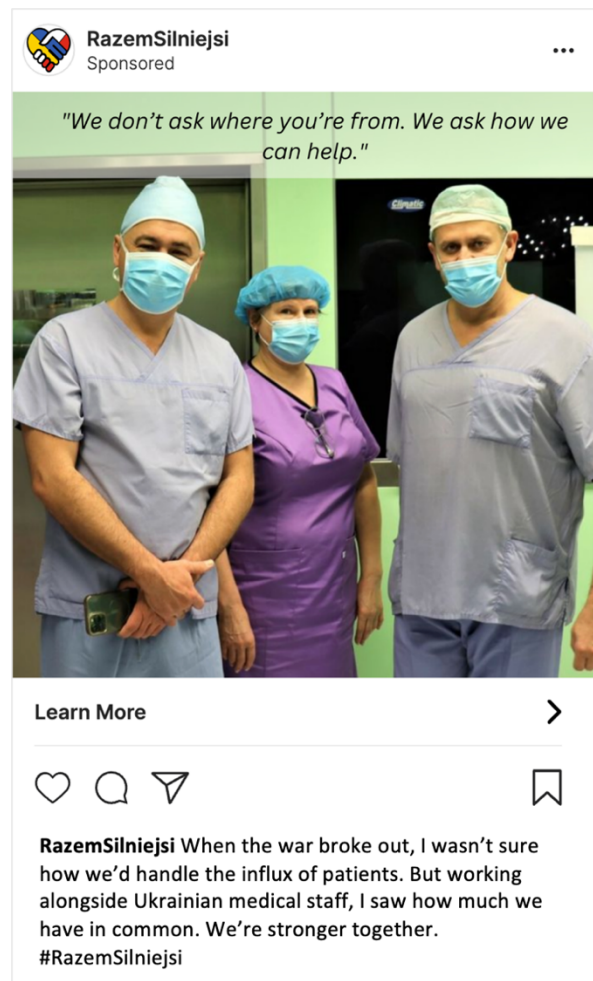
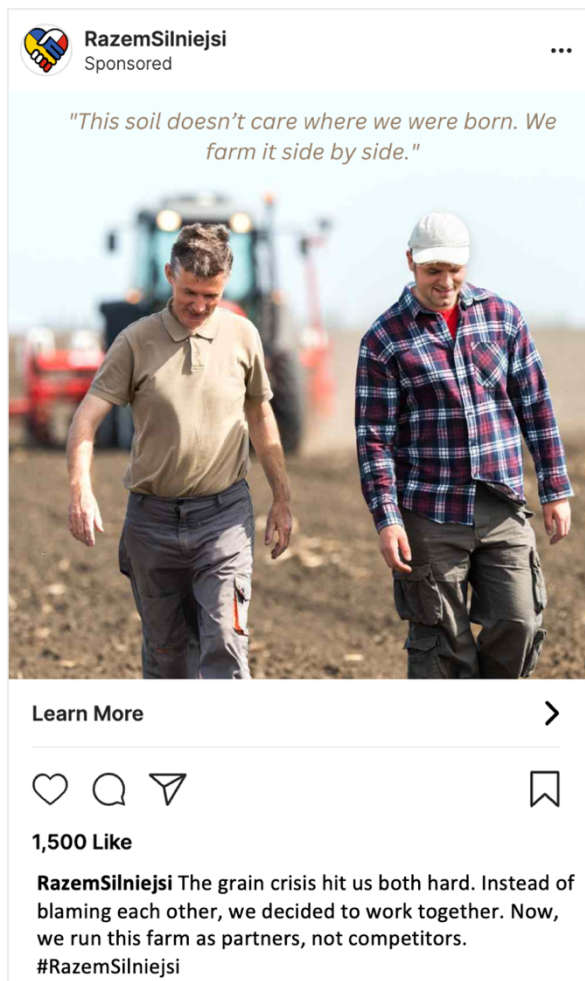
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Mock-up Post Ideas for the Social Media Campaign

Here are some examples of posts that could be part of the **#RazemSilniejsi** ("**Stronger Together**") campaign:

1. *Personal Stories – Emotional Connection*

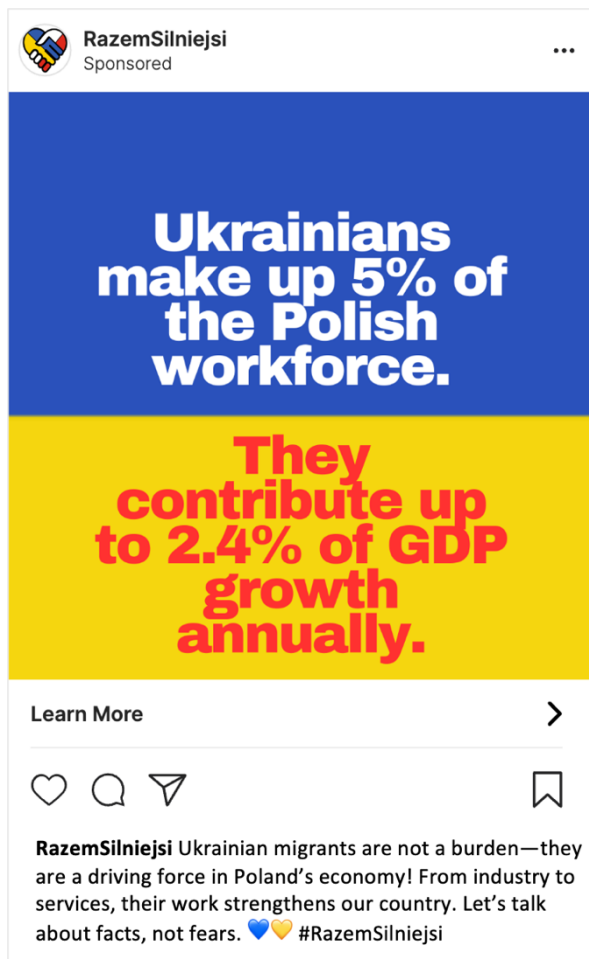
These posts highlight real-life collaborations between Poles and Ukrainians, showing that unity benefits both sides. Emotional, relatable stories help counter division and foster solidarity.



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2. Economic Contributions – Shifting the Narrative

By presenting data on Ukrainian contributions to Poland’s economy, these posts challenge negative stereotypes and replace fear with facts, emphasizing mutual economic benefits.

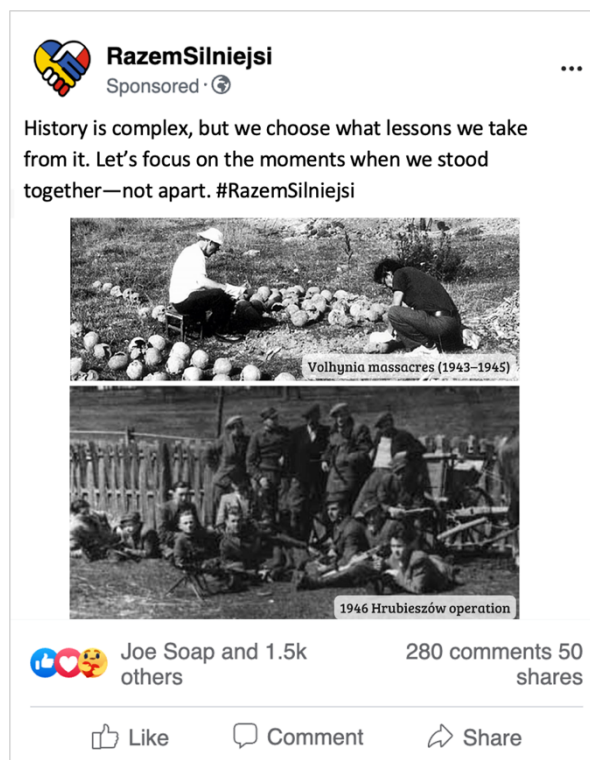


3. Historical Reframing – Changing Perceptions

These posts reframe Polish-Ukrainian history, focusing on acknowledging past conflicts while highlighting moments of Polish-Ukrainian solidarity. They encourage people to learn from history in a way that fosters cooperation rather than division.



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Explanation:

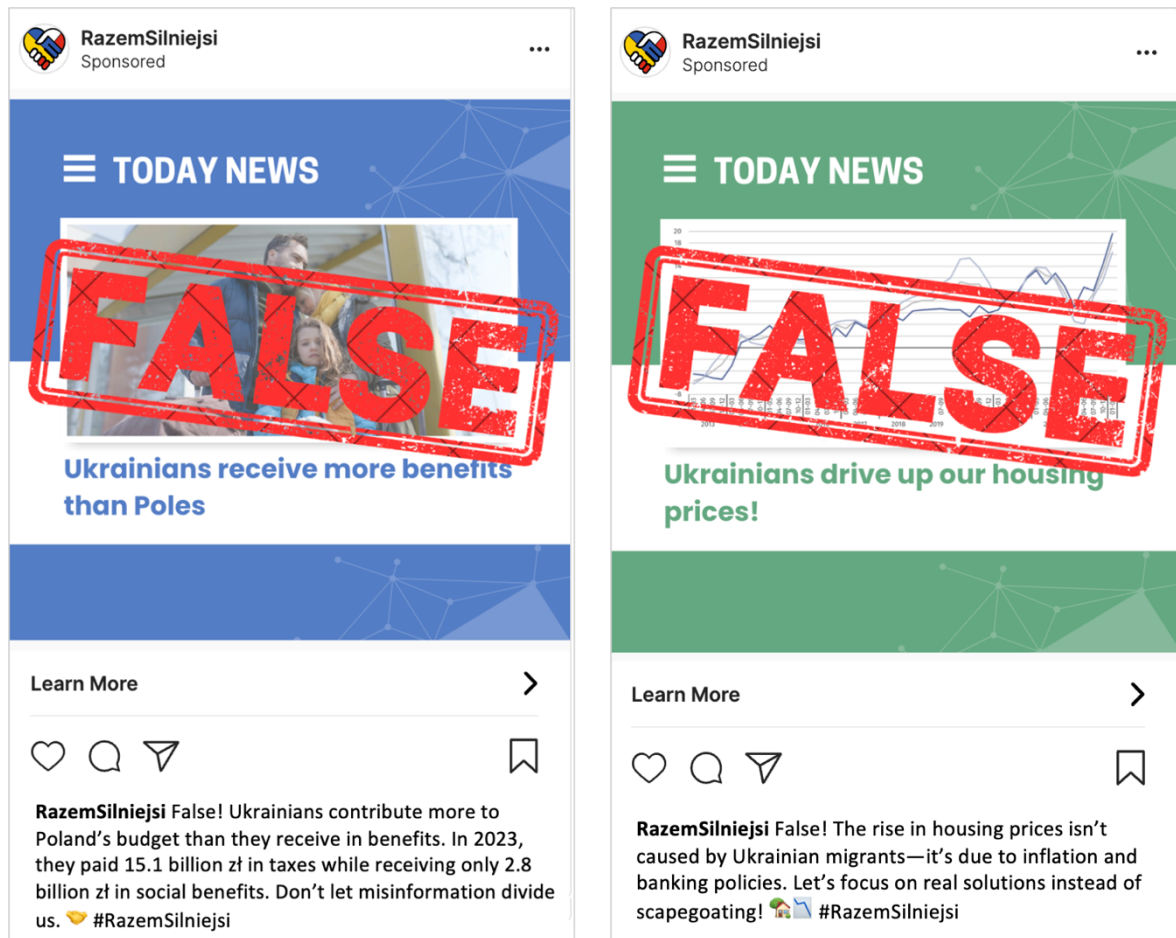
The Volhynia massacres (1943–1945) were mass killings of Polish civilians by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in an effort to establish an independent Ukraine. Tens of thousands of Poles were killed, leaving a legacy of tension between Poland and Ukraine. However, their history is also marked by moments of cooperation. During WWII, Polish (AK) and Ukrainian (UPA) resistance forces briefly joined forces in the 1946 Hrubieszów operation. They attacked NKVD and Polish communist security offices, freeing prisoners and disrupting Soviet control. Though rare, this alliance highlighted their shared opposition to communist rule despite deep historical conflicts. (“Massacres of Poles”, 2025; “Hrubieszów Revolution”, 2025)

4. Countering Misinformation

These posts debunk false narratives that fuel resentment and division. By fact-checking common myths, they promote an informed, united society based on truth rather than fear. (see next page)



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Source of data:

Emigranci z Ukrainy a budżet Polski 2024 r.: ile wpłacili, a ile dostali?[Emigrants from Ukraine and the Polish budget for 2024: how much did they pay in and how much did they receive?](2025, March 11). *Bankier.pl*.

<https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Emigranci-z-Ukrainy-a-budzet-Polski-2024-r-ile-wplacili-a-ile-dostali-8905790.html>



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5. Fact-Checking Politicians

These posts hold politicians accountable by correcting misleading or false statements about Polish-Ukrainian relations. By providing verified facts, they help prevent political narratives from fuelling division and misinformation.



Explanation: Sławomir Mentzen is a candidate in the current presidential election.

Source of Tweet and fact-checking:

Czy 40 proc. Ukraińców deklaruje potrzebę pomocy finansowej?[Do 40 percent of Ukrainians declare the need for financial assistance?] (2023). *Demagog.org*.
<https://demagog.org.pl/wypowiedzi/40-proc-ukraincow-oczekuje-pomocy-finansowej-to-nieprawda/>

Conclusion: Strengthening Democracy Through Narrative Change

By implementing these strategies, Poland can foster a more inclusive and fact-based dialogue, reinforcing **democratic resilience** and strengthening **Polish-Ukrainian solidarity**.

This campaign demonstrates that by **reshaping narratives**, we can counter polarization and misinformation, ultimately protecting democracy from divisive and exclusionary rhetoric.

