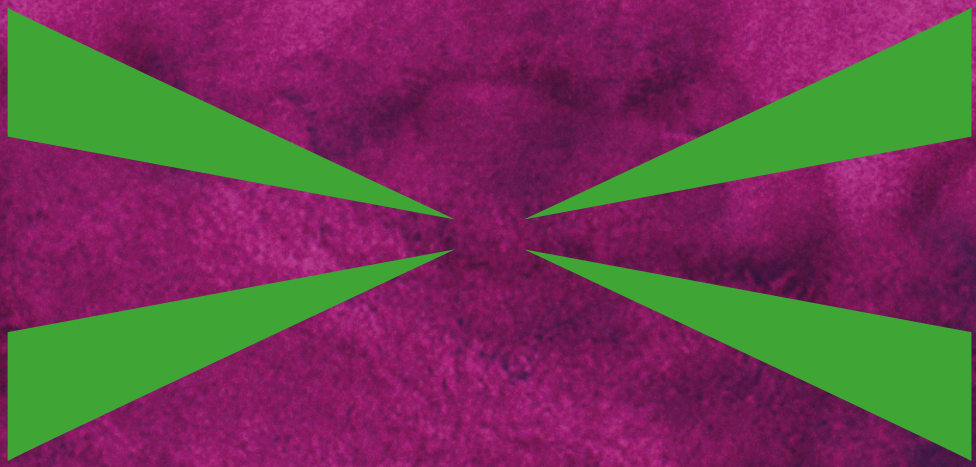
FUNDACJA OCALENIE

(In)visible Violence



VIOLENT BEHAVIOUR AGAINST MIGRANTS, INCLUDING REFUGEES

RESARCH SUMMARY

Research context

The study was undertaken in response to increasing concern about hostility and violence directed at migrants, including refugees, living in Poland. Public attention has focused mainly on severe incidents reported by the media and investigated by law enforcement agencies. These cases, however, capture only a limited part of the problem. Insults, threats, humiliation, harassment, economic exploitation and other forms of violence often remain unreported and largely absent from public debate. Ocalenie Foundation sought to document these experiences from the perspective of people directly affected by them.

The report situates the study within changes in Poland's migration situation and public attitudes over the preceding five years. The humanitarian crisis at the Polish–Belarusian border, which began in 2021, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 placed migration, international protection and integration at the centre of political discussion. The initial mobilisation of Polish society to assist refugees from Ukraine demonstrated considerable solidarity, which nowadays, at the end of 2026, is fading away.

According to the report, public discussion on migration has increasingly been shaped by security-focused narratives, political competition and disinformation. It identifies the dehumanising portrayal of people crossing the Polish–Belarusian border, anti-Ukrainian narratives, hostile discussion of migrant integration measures and the activities of anti-migrant groups as elements of this environment. Insufficiently developed integration policies and inconsistent responses from public institutions have contributed to a climate in which expressions of prejudice can more easily develop into harassment or violence.

The report draws on public opinion data to illustrate changing attitudes. CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre) surveys cited in the study show that the proportion of respondents declaring a positive attitude towards Ukrainians fell from 51% in 2023 to 29% in 2026, while the proportion declaring a negative attitude rose from 17% to 43%.

The authors aimed to determine what forms of violence migrants and refugees encounter, where incidents occur, who is perceived to commit them, what circumstances precede them and how those affected respond. The study also examined whether victims seek assistance, which institutions they approach and what prevents them from reporting incidents. It also investigated the consequences of violence for everyday life.

Methodology and research sample

The study used a mixed-methods design combining a multilingual online survey with individual in-depth interviews. It adopted a broad definition of violence covering conduct causing, or capable of causing, physical, psychological or sexual harm, economic loss, threats, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty. The questionnaire examined types and frequency of violence, perceived perpetrator characteristics and motives, places and triggering circumstances, reporting and access to support, and effects on respondents' functioning and sense of safety. It was available in Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, English, French and Persian between May and August 2026. The analysis included 988 fully completed questionnaires.

Respondents came from more than 70 countries. The largest groups were from Ukraine (388), Belarus (257) and Russia (76); smaller groups included people from Afghanistan, Türkiye, Iran, Tajikistan and other countries. Women accounted for 67% of the survey sample and men for 33%. Approximately three-quarters had completed

higher education. Most were established residents rather than recent arrivals: 77.8% had lived in Poland for more than three years, while 4.5% had been in the country for less than one year. A total of 7.8% reported having refugee status, and 11.5% identified as belonging to a national, ethnic or religious minority in their country of origin. The sample was geographically concentrated: 82.8% lived in Warsaw and a further 10.1% elsewhere in Mazowieckie province.

The qualitative component consisted of 25 individual in-depth interviews with people who had experienced aggression or violence. The largest interview groups came from Ukraine (12), Afghanistan (4), Belarus (4) and Sudan (2). Interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, Russian, English and Persian. They explored specific incidents, the circumstances surrounding them, responses by victims and witnesses, and subsequent effects on daily life.

The study was restricted to adults, although some interviewees described violence experienced by their children. Participants were anonymised and offered psychological support. The sample is not statistically representative of all foreign nationals residing in Poland.

Research findings: forms of violence

General exposure and perceived safety

A total of 72.5% of respondents stated that they felt safe in Poland. Nevertheless, more than half reported experiencing violent behaviour during the six months preceding the survey, and 46% had experienced more than one type of violence. In addition, 25.8% reported experiencing violence several times a year. Among those who had experienced violence in Poland, 61% attributed the incidents to prejudice related to nationality, 15% to ethnic or racial prejudice and just under 7% to religious prejudice. These figures describe respondents'

perceptions of motives; they are not legal determinations about individual offences.

Verbal violence

Verbal aggression was the most frequently reported form of violence. Of respondents answering the relevant question, 45% had experienced offensive remarks or insults, including 34.1% who reported such conduct by Polish nationals. The incidents described in the interviews ranged from profanity and derogatory labels to statements denying the right of foreign nationals to live in Poland. Some remarks drew on national stereotypes or political accusations; others dehumanised entire ethnic or national groups. Respondents encountered this behaviour in streets, shops, parks and public transport, often from people they did not know.

Language was a prominent feature of verbal aggression. Speaking Ukrainian or Russian in public, or speaking Polish with a noticeable accent, could prompt hostile comments and demands to leave the country. Respondents from Belarus and Russia sometimes reported being identified as Ukrainian solely because they spoke Russian. In these cases, the nationality attributed to the victim by the perpetrator, rather than the victim's actual nationality, appeared to determine the target of abuse.

Verbal violence online

Online abuse was examined separately. Among respondents who answered the relevant question, 34.4% had personally experienced offensive comments online and 18.4% reported such comments from Polish nationals. Participants described nationality-based hostility directed at individuals through social-media interactions, as well as hostile comments addressing entire migrant, ethnic or religious groups. They also encountered anti-migrant content beneath news reports, even where the articles themselves were neutral.

Economic violence

Economic violence and employment-related rights violations were reported by 24.2% of those answering the relevant question. The survey category included non-payment or delayed payment of wages and breaches of employment law. Interviews provided further examples: unpaid overtime, arbitrary deductions, unequal pay, employment without formal contracts, failure to register workers for social insurance, and contracts specifying fewer working hours than were actually required. Some employers imposed tasks beyond the agreed scope of employment or retained workers on insecure civil-law contracts despite prolonged service.

Respondents associated these practices with structural disadvantages in the labour market. Limited knowledge of Polish labour law, language barriers, financial need and a weak professional support network reduced their ability to challenge abuses. The relationship between employment and residence procedures was especially significant. Some employers allegedly used their influence over residence-related paperwork to demand compliance or additional work, or assumed that workers would not complain for fear of losing their income or residence entitlement. Interviewees also reported exploitation by employers who were themselves foreign nationals.

Intimidation and threats

Intimidation was reported by 14% of respondents answering this question. Most identified perpetrators as Polish nationals. Reported acts included threats of assault or property damage, threats involving firearms or other weapons, persistent harassment and pressure exerted through employment, housing or personal relationships. In some incidents, the purpose was to compel the person to leave a location, end an activity or submit to demands. Other incidents appeared to be directly related to racial or national prejudice.

Parents also reported threats made against their children at school, including demands to leave Poland and threats of assault linked to nationality. Some schools intervened, and one reported case was referred to the police and courts.

Physical violence

Approximately one in eight respondents answering the relevant question reported experiencing physical violence in Poland. In most of these cases, the perpetrators were identified as Polish nationals. Acts ranged from pushing, hitting and spitting to serious assaults involving groups of attackers or dangerous weapons. Interviewees also reported attempts to remove a woman's hijab by force, threats involving vehicles, and repeated racist attacks. The report describes an assault on a Ukrainian teenager by a group of adult men that resulted in serious injuries.

Most accounts concerned public places, but violence also occurred in private relationships and accommodation settings. One interviewee described violence by a partner and a decision not to pursue a complaint because of her isolation, the partner's social position and her expectation that authorities would consider her less credible.

Across these categories, respondents described changes in their behaviour following violence or in anticipation of it. Some avoided speaking their first language in public, concealed national symbols, stopped using certain places or altered travel and work routines. These measures reduced visibility but also limited ordinary participation in social life.

Other aspects examined

Violence between foreign nationals

Several dozen respondents described aggression or other violent conduct by foreign nationals living in Poland. A recurring group of incidents involved tensions between Ukrainians and Russian-speaking people from Belarus or Russia against the background of Russia's war against Ukraine. Speaking Russian sometimes triggered hostility, including incidents directed at children. Other accounts concerned harassment and intimidation between foreign national colleagues, including the use of longer residence in Poland or greater familiarity with local rules to pressure more vulnerable workers. Violence was also reported in accommodation centres for foreign nationals.

The interviews further indicated that racist and national stereotypes may be reproduced within migrant communities. Respondents described hostile treatment associated with skin colour, ethnicity, country of origin and perceived religious identity.

Places where violence occurs

The report identifies seven broad settings: public transport; other public spaces; workplaces; schools; healthcare facilities; public offices and institutions; and places of residence. Public transport was one of the most frequently mentioned settings in the interviews. People described verbal attacks prompted by hearing another language, intimidation by intoxicated passengers and incidents in which other passengers remained passive. Others recalled passengers intervening and preventing escalation.

Streets, parks, shopping centres, gyms and other leisure spaces were also associated with harassment or physical aggression, often initiated by strangers. At work, threats and humiliation were compounded by the need to maintain contact with colleagues or supervisors and by the risk of losing employment. In schools, parents described

peer aggression, exclusion and occasional hostile behaviour by adults. In several cases staff intervened; in others the response was inadequate. Healthcare encounters included perceived unequal treatment, hostile reactions to foreign accents and difficulty obtaining information or services. Public offices were associated with discourteous treatment and insufficient language access, particularly in residence procedures. At home, interviewees described threats from neighbours, abusive practices by landlords, loss of possessions and discriminatory barriers to renting accommodation.

Circumstances triggering violence

In most of the incidents described, respondents reported no prior conflict or interaction with the perpetrator. The immediate trigger was commonly an indication that the person was, or was perceived to be, foreign. Speaking another language or having a non-Polish accent was the most frequently described trigger, followed by visible differences in skin colour, appearance or religious clothing and the display of national symbols.

Alcohol and violence

Alcohol featured repeatedly in descriptions of verbal aggression, intimidation and physical attacks. Interviewees recalled incidents involving intoxicated individuals or groups in public transport, on the street, at concerts and near places where alcohol was consumed. Some respondents considered evenings and weekends particularly risky and avoided certain neighbourhoods, journeys or night-time work. A number described intoxicated strangers as a more immediate concern than other sources of insecurity.

Reporting violence and obtaining support

Reporting to public authorities was uncommon. Only 13.2% of respondents reported the violent behaviour they had experienced to the relevant authorities. A total of 71.5% said they did not know where to report such incidents, while 20.7% were unaware that reporting was possible. Interviews revealed additional barriers: limited trust in police effectiveness, language difficulties, fear of adverse consequences for residence proceedings, anticipated disbelief and previous unsatisfactory encounters with law enforcement officers.

Support was also limited. Of 424 respondents who answered the relevant question, 67.9% said they had received no assistance after experiencing violence. Family or friends had supported 24.5%, non-governmental organisations 4.5% and state institutions 2.6%. Avoidance, silence or leaving an unsafe place were common immediate responses. Bystanders frequently failed to intervene, although examples of effective assistance were also reported.

Summary of recommendations

Effective laws and public institutions

The report calls for systematic training of officers and staff who are likely to receive complaints or encounter victims of prejudice-motivated violence. Priority groups include police patrol and duty officers, Border Guard personnel, municipal guards and labour inspectors. Training should cover identification of prejudice-related motives, intercultural communication, appropriate treatment of victims and procedures for preserving evidence. Consistency at first contact is important both for protecting victims and for ensuring that incidents are classified and investigated correctly.

Access to language assistance should be expanded throughout the reporting and justice process. The report recommends that emergency number 112 provide basic support in languages other than Polish and English and that interpretation be available wherever necessary from the first police interview onwards. Regional offices of the National Labour Inspectorate should have permanent interpretation capacity and a multilingual anonymous online mechanism for reporting labour abuses. Prosecutorial supervision should be strengthened, particularly over decisions to refuse to open investigations, discontinue proceedings or treat cases as lacking a prejudice-related motive.

The report proposes substantial changes to the link between residence rights and employment.

Workers should not have to remain with a single employer to preserve their entitlement to stay in Poland; residence and work permission could instead be linked to a sector or to the wider labour market. The recommended statutory period for notifying the provincial governor of job loss would rise from 15 to 60 working days, while the time for finding new employment and submitting the relevant application would increase from 30 to 90 days. The report also proposes suspending residence-permit withdrawal proceedings when a worker formally complains to the Labour Inspectorate or brings an employment claim. Responsibility for unlawful employment resulting from employer misconduct should rest with the employer, not the affected worker. Additional measures include closer oversight of labour intermediaries and protection against the transfer of a complainant's residence information from labour inspectors to the Border Guard during an investigation into labour-rights violations.

Criminal-law protection against prejudice-motivated offences should also be broadened. The report recommends extending the protected grounds to include sex, age, disability, sexual orientation and gender

identity. This would address gaps in protection and allow better recognition of incidents involving more than one form of prejudice.

Safer public and information environments

The report recommends stronger action against unlawful hate content and the dissemination of disinformation online. This includes effective implementation of the EU Digital Services Act and further scrutiny of recommendation algorithms and content-moderation practices. Public communication on migration should be based on accurate information and longer-term social-cohesion objectives rather than political competition. Broad educational campaigns could support integration and counter misleading narratives. Media organisations should strengthen professional standards intended to prevent the stigmatisation of people on the basis of nationality, ethnicity or migration background, supported by clearer ethical guidance and specialist training.

Schools require clearer procedures for preventing, identifying and responding to prejudice-motivated violence involving both pupils and adults. The report recommends stronger anti-discrimination education and a more stable, accessible system of intercultural assistants, including staff able to work with languages other than Slavic languages. This is particularly important for newly arrived children and their families. In response to the recurring role of intoxication in reported incidents, the report also advocates national restrictions on night-time alcohol sales, fewer alcohol retail outlets, a complete ban on alcohol advertising and broader prevention efforts.

Accessible support for people affected by violence

Public integration services should be prepared to recognise and respond to violence, not only to address administrative or practical integration needs. The planned national and regional integration offices should provide appropriately trained staff, legal advice covering complaints to law enforcement agencies and access to psy-

chological consultations. Existing crisis intervention centres should expand their language coverage, including through multilingual helplines or dedicated contact points where demand justifies them. The report places particular emphasis on the role of civil society organisations. For foreign nationals uncertain about their residence or employment situation, an NGO may be the only institution they feel able to approach. Reliable assistance therefore depends on continuous, predictable services, practical accompaniment during contact with public authorities and legal or policy advocacy on behalf of affected people. The recommended response combines enforceable rights, accessible reporting procedures, institutional accountability and sustained support; isolated awareness campaigns would not address the economic and administrative dependencies documented in the study.

About Ocalenie Foundation

Ocalenie Foundation has been supporting migrants, including refugees, in building a good and secure life in Poland since 2000. Its assistance is available to all people on the move, regardless of where they come from or which border they crossed to reach Poland. The Foundation offers legal and psychological support, Polish language courses, career counselling, and educational support for children and youth.

In addition to direct support, Ocalenie works to counter harmful stereotypes, racism and anti-migrant narratives. Drawing on long-standing experience, it engages with policymakers, monitors legislative developments and contributes to public debate on migration and integration.

Support Ocalenie Foundation's activities

(In)visible violence
Violent Behaviour Against Migrants, Including Refugees
Summary of the 2026 Research Report by Ocalenie Foundation

Read full report in Polish

Authors

Research report: Julia Şimşek, Mateusz Jeżowski

Comments and recommendations: Olivia Chwat, Dorota Przygucka, Kristina Stankiewicz, Jakub Trendewicz, Marianna Wartecka

Project coordination: Katarzyna Tuzinek

Cooperation: Małgorzata Ćwiek, Mahdieh Gholami, Marta Kalyn, Inna Manchak, Antoni Wołowski

Graphic design and typesetting: Paweł Sky

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00-537 Warszawa
www.ocalenie.org.pl

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