

## **Problems with Adaptation of Post-Accession Polish Migrants in Countries of the EU**

*Dr Hab Czop Edyta*

University Of Rzeszów Professor, Poland

---

### **Abstract**

Starting from 1st May, 2004 countries of European Fifteen have gradually opened their labour markets for the new EU members, including the Poles. The first to take this step was Great Britain, Ireland and Sweden, the last - Germany and Austria.

For the new EU citizens, emerging opportunities were connected with benefits and wide possibilities, but also with limitations and adaptation difficulties. They had to deal with the language barrier as much as the different culture, accepted behaviours, traditions, work culture and model of spending leisure time. Mentality of migrants – whether they were able or not to immerse into the “new” – had impact on finding themselves in another environment. Most of those, who left Poland did not plan to settle, they were leaving “for some time”, temporarily. Mentally, they were still connected with previous place of residence, more interested in environment left behind than new one. Such behaviour was not conducive to adaptation; on the contrary, it made adaptation harder. Migrants through listening to Polish radio, watching Polish television stations, using the Polish Internet portals and reading national press, separated themselves from the new environment. All of these was due to the assumption that engaging in new place has no point since their stay is only temporary. Their attitude to the kind of work and workplace was similar. Majority of migrants from the EU-8 countries was taking up secondary employment, regardless of educational background. Wages comparable with Polish were supposed to compensate depreciation on the labour market.

A wide spectrum of adaptation problems of Polish migrants is an issue raised in reports prepared by specialized research institutions, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Polish Community organisations.

---

**Keywords:** Migration, Polish Community Abroad, the Poles, EU, adaptation

### **Introduction**

Political changes in Poland in 1989, the opening of borders, gradual

abolition of visas for Polish citizens by countries of Western Europe, and finally accession to the EU in 2004 and a gradual opening of these labour markets had a strong impact on the mobility of Poles. The freedom of movement and freedom to seek employment in the EU countries contributed to the increasing number of migrants.

In 2004 there were around a million Poles living abroad, including 750,000 in the area of the EU. Three years later the number of temporary migrants rose to 2,27 million, with 1,925,000 in European countries, of which 1,860,000 were in countries of the EU. Out of 15 EU countries, the majority were in the UK (690,000), Germany (490,000), Ireland (200,000), and the Netherlands (98,000). The decrease in the number of migrants recorded in the years 2008-2010 was associated with a global financial crisis. In 2008, there were about 2.2 million people outside Poland, and 2 million two years later. Another increase in migration took place in 2011 when the total number of Poles outside the country amounted to 2,060,000, of which 1,670,000 were in countries of the EU. Then the largest number of Poles resided in the UK (625,000), Germany (470,000), Ireland (120,000) and the Netherlands (95,000) [GUS, 2012].

In subsequent years, the number of Poles working and living outside the country grew. According to the data of the Central Statistical Office, in 2015 there were about 2,397,000 Poles remaining as migrants, of which almost 2.1 million were in Europe, including approx. 1,983,000 in the EU. Taking into account particular EU countries, the largest Polish diaspora was in the UK (720,000), Germany (655,000), the Netherlands (112,000), Ireland (111,000) and in Italy (94,000). According to contemporary estimates, about 80 per cent of temporary migrants stayed abroad for at least 12 months [<http://www.money.pl/gospodarka/wiadomosci/artukul/ilu-polakow-przebywa-na-emigracji,54,0,2149430.html>].

Post-accession migration included people coming from a wide spectrum of social classes and professions, various education, origin, age, and it resulted from different premises. Apart from economic reasons, worth noting are motives connected with the desire to test oneself, the desire for adventure, getting to know the world, or becoming independent. Departure was not treated as a last resort, but in many cases seen as a chance 'to taste' something new. Largely thanks to the modern means of communication, post-accession migrants did not feel as if they broke ties with their place of origin.

Among the post-accession migrants, young and educated persons constituted an important group. According to research from 2007, persons up to 34 years of age, with at least secondary education were in majority. Migrants with a short span (up to 3 years) were in majority in Ireland, the UK and in Norway, out of countries outside the EU. And in Austria,

Germany, France, Sweden, Belgium and Italy, and outside the EU, in Switzerland migrants with experience of more than five years were in majority. [*Polscy emigranci w Europie*, 2007]

According to research by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre), in 2013 every seventh adult Pole worked abroad since accession of Poland to the EU. At the same time, 13 per cent of respondents admitted that someone from their household worked abroad, and two thirds of respondents revealed that they had a family member or friend who lived outside the country. [*Informacja o rozmiarach i kierunkach czasowej emigracji z Polski w latach 2004 – 2013*, 2014].

Migration is connected with a range of positives but also problems. Migrants have to face new living and working conditions, climate, language, customs, and relationships in the workplace or at school. They are separated from their previous environment, family circle, friends, acquaintances, and nostalgia. On the one hand, leaving involves separation (at least temporary), the sense of loss, rejection, isolation, on the other hand also transformation, it teaches to notice and understand others. Migration can be beneficial provided the leaving person opens up to a new culture not rejecting their own [*Kto jest emigrantem?*, 1994; Wierzyński, 2008].

Those who decided to migrate to another country were faced with the need to adapt to a new, completely foreign environment. They had to face legal, social and cultural barriers. Among the legal and social barriers worth mentioning are the regulation of labour markets implemented in particular countries, the lack of sufficient information on fundamental issues, especially concerning one's rights, even in the field of social and health insurance, poor orientation in current regulations, etc. On the other hand, among the most important cultural obstacles was no or poor knowledge of the language, which made it difficult to find work and participate in the socio-cultural life of the country of residence. Also the attitude of the society of the country of destination towards the issue of integration of immigrants is important [Plewko, 2010].

This paper discusses the problem of adaptation of Poles migrating to countries of the EU for economic reasons, but also in search of better living conditions. It focuses largely on several difficulties that affected migrants in the early post-accession period as it was then when the difficulty in adapting to new surroundings was most pronounced.

The newcomers from Poland found themselves in a foreign environment, among people who speak a different language, but also with a different directory of values, religious beliefs, political traditions, etc. They had to find themselves in different working and living conditions, under different laws, principles and customs. At the same time, migrants lost touch with their previous environment or the contact became less tight. This

situation affected the attitudes and behaviour as well as perception of the new environment by the newcomers. For a migrant the first days of stay were often associated with positive attitudes towards the new country while negative experiences were played down or minimized. The state changed over time [Czop, 2013; Kapiszewski, 1980].

The motives for leaving affected the behaviour in the new environment. Migrants' attitudes, expectations and adaptational and integrational opportunities depended on them. The first days of stay determined the fate and later doings [Wolff – Powęska, Schulz, 2000]. Depending on the adopted migration strategy the newcomers tried to take an active part in the life of the new society or stayed apart, choosing to live in the diaspora, and did not seek to get to know the new country. An adapted migrant adjusted to the new environment, complied with the law and the applicable rules. The process of adaptation could be slower or faster in different spheres, and its purpose was to provide stability to oneself and the family [Czop, 2013].

Migration strategies adopted after 2004 included short-term or cyclical migration. Persons who took a wait, waiting for the right incentive to stay or return and migrants planning to settle in the new country (although not necessarily realizing this plan) are also worth noting. Post-accession migrations took various forms, the preferred strategy could be changed for another under the influence of external factors, family situation etc. [Grabowska – Lusińska, Okólski, 2009].

The attitude to work and professional career was also important. Those treating migration as an adventure, not following any career path, wanted to live like the locals, thus they sought to adapt quickly. They wanted to participate in the cultural life and entertainment of the new country, to pursue their hobbies. On the other hand, migrants focused on professional success, those who knew the language well were not afraid of contact with the natives. They were sure of their abilities, and in the event of such a need they were happy to take up training opportunities. In between these groups there were persons for whom stay and work abroad was a chance to improve the situation of the family. Usually they did not have the appropriate qualifications and powered secondary sectors of the labour market [Grabowska – Lusińska, Okólski, 2009].

Migrant workers who came only for 'some time', whose strategy included return, did not feel the need for deeper adaptation, not to mention integration. Such persons selectively adopted the elements of the new culture, sometimes involuntarily, during contact with other viewpoints or a different system of values. As incomplete migrants they lived in two worlds, not feeling comfortable or fully present in any. What is more, they showed a tendency to divide the world into 'we' and 'they'. They tried to live in a

'Polish world'. Post-accession migrants, just like those before accession, willingly surrounded themselves with people and things associated with Poland. In part, this behaviour was associated with the belief that the leave is temporary, with incomplete migration strategy. These persons never left the country completely and for good. Mentally and spiritually they were still in their home towns, thanks to modern communicators they followed the events taking place in the family and local community. In the case of the latter, with greater intensity than the events in the country of residence. [M. Okólski, 2006]. They used the Polish media, apart from the internet, the press, radio and television stations. In 2008, two-thirds of migrants watched Polish television channels and more than 50 per cent read Polish newspapers or listened to Polish radio stations. [*Polscy emigranci w Europie*, 2008]

One should see a migrant through the prism of sending and receiving countries, more precisely both the social and professional position. Only then can one capture the ambiguity associated with promotion or social degradation. What from the perspective of the sending country may seem to be a fall in the professional and social position, in the perception of a migrant and the perspective of the country of destination is seen as a success or a step to success – a rise in the standard of living, financial independence, professional and personal development. On the other hand, there are cases of a simultaneous increase in the social status in the country of origin and degradation in the target country. [Kolbon, 2013]

When writing about professional or social degradation, one must remember that for some migrants the very fact of living in a metropolis, in a multicultural environment is a source of satisfaction, regardless of the prestige of work and the earnings. They do not feel degraded, especially if they do not aspire to be a part of the new society.

The difficulties in adapting to the life in the new country were influenced by the perception of migrants by the new community. This was especially important in the case of highly-qualified people. The warranty of recognition of diplomas inherent in the Treaty of Accession has not always been realized. Diplomas of many Polish universities were not recognized, and their owners were treated as people with secondary education or first level higher education (United Kingdom, Italy). Also, quite often the new migration had difficulties with promotion at work. Even those who managed to 'take root' had a feeling of a glass ceiling. The problem was the employer's attitude to the qualifications of Polish migrants – their education was underestimated and their abilities were doubted. Some migrants took action, trying to get to know the language and the customs or upgrade their qualifications, while others gave up, not believing in their own abilities [Czop, 2013].

A lot of Polish migrants decided to take employment that was below

their skills and qualifications, taking advantage of the existing opportunities. Sometimes circumstances forced them to conceal their education. Some of them skilfully used the emerging opportunities moving from simple jobs to self-employment or to a higher segment. They managed to adjust to the foreign labour market and get promoted thanks to determination, but only within certain limits [Grabowska – Lusińska, Jaźwińska – Motylska, 2013].

Difficulties with adaptation are also associated with ethnic representation within certain professions. The host society succumbing to stereotypes would attribute a lower professional position to immigrants, even in verbal form. An example would be the treatment of Polish domestic help in Italy [Kolbon, 2013]. Especially women living at the employer's house were subject to discrimination and exploitation. Their work was perceived to be less prestigious, limited to the private sphere thus not requiring any legal regulations. Some migrants felt its menial nature as they were exposed to contempt and malice on the part of the employer's family. In this situation, migrants lost their self-esteem, and attempts to open up to new surroundings, taking up the language, or fighting for their rights required a lot of effort on their part. Employers themselves often made accommodation and adaptation of their workers difficult, making it difficult for them to even learn a language [Czop, 2014]

An extreme example of marginalization is the problem of homelessness affecting migrants in different European cities. Also this group had to adopt survival strategies in order to adapt to the new living conditions. Homeless Poles formed their own small support groups; these could work in church counselling centres, but also 'in the street' [Garapich, 2011].

The problem of marginalization also applies in the case of persons employed in the secondary sectors, in professions of low social standing and with lower earnings, and above all illegal labour. It is worth noting that despite the possibility to take on legal work not everyone decided on it. On the one hand the employer's pressure, on the other a growing competition of migrants from other countries of Eastern Europe. Also the chosen model of migration had an influence on the legality of employment. Those preferring the cyclical model do not want to be bound by contracts which would limit their mobility. Moreover, even legal employment did not always protect against exploitation on the part of the employer. Finally, the last issue is being unaware of one's rights and the inability to look for help.

Also cultural differences concerning different behaviours and the meaning of gestures influenced the process of adaptation. They influenced the course of adaptation to the local traditions and customs. The differences usually became evident in everyday situations, in different patterns of behaviour. The newcomer had to get used to the different standards of behaviour, often very different from those previously known [Kawczyńska –

Butrym, 2009].

The language barrier caused problems, even if the migrant knew the language. Apart from the accent, the greatest problems were caused by vocabulary, especially professional, work-related. Another issue was a psychological barrier. Many people found it difficult to express emotions and feelings in a foreign language. Over time the barrier weakened [Dzięglewski, 2011].

The processes of adaptation of the newcomers are also influenced by the attitude of the host societies toward them. In the past few years, anti-immigration feelings appeared in a number of the fifteen countries of the EU. In the case of the new EU countries, the economic sphere was the main sphere of integration. The level of integration of particular groups of migrants depends on their education, vocational training, their position in the new society [Plewko, 2010]. It is clear that legal residence and employment are conducive to adaptation. Migrants have the chance to benefit from the right to work, from social and health security, social help, education, banking services, participation in the socio-political and cultural life, etc. [Czop, 2013].

Those not fully prepared to leave had a difficulty in adapting to the new country. Imprecise goals, which the myth of the rich West as an ideal place to live and work was often associated with, negatively affected the process of adaptation. Sometimes the migrants-to-be seemed it was enough to leave to be able to participate in the universal prosperity. However, it turned out on the spot that the working and living conditions do not fit with imagination. This gave rise to frustration which was combated with stimulants, and alcohol – as the leading one. Escalation of problems with alcohol and drug abuse resulted in the establishment of specialized care and addiction therapy centres, the 'Blue Line' in the UK, and AA groups in other countries in Polish parishes. Others, irrespective of the fact that they were in relationships in their home country, established new partnerships in the countries of residence [Czop, 2013; Orzechowska, 2011; Romaniszyn, 2000].

In a majority of EU countries Poles were seen as a well adapting, non-problematic group. Post-accession migrants, compared to earlier streams of migration, found it easier to adapt into the new society, which was often the effect of a better preparation to the life abroad. Young people felt the cultural difference to a smaller degree thanks to the internet and living in the sphere of British and American culture. Besides, most Poles – migrants wanted to get accustomed to the new conditions, the new environment as quickly as possible, to throw off the odium of a 'stranger', a migrant. They wanted to improve their financial and social situation [cf. Dyczewski, 2001; Sakson, 2000; Danek, 2007]

Highly-skilled professionals for whom going to work abroad was related to social and professional advancement should be considered separately. These people were well-educated, knew the language well, worked in accordance with their qualifications and so they willingly opened up to the new community. The process of adaptation and integration was facilitated by the prestige they had in their environment, and problems that a large part of Polish migrants had were alien to them. They were not confronted with intolerance, they did not have any problems with buying/renting a flat, finding suitable schools for children, etc. [Czop, 2013].

At the same time in each group of migrants there were persons who failed to settle in the new environment. They remained in the state of 'uprooting'. In their case, a language barrier or a very strong sense of cultural identity had an influence on the difficulty with adaptation. The lack of acceptance for the host society can be considered an extremity. The result of such an attitude was closing up in a group of people who perceive the new environment as a threat. A lot of migrants struggled with social isolation, a sense of alienation, loneliness, the feeling of being unappreciated. Not everyone could adapt to the new conditions, adjust to the new 'realities'. Hence so important was the initiative of Polish and host institutions to issue compendia with the most important information concerning settling in the new country.

### References:

- Czop, Edyta, *Migranci polscy w krajach unijnej piętnastki (1992 – 2011). Wybrane zagadnienia*, Rzeszów: Uniwersytet Rzeszowski, 2013
- Czop, Edyta, *Mroczna strona polskiej migracji poakcesyjnej do krajów unijnej piętnastki [w:] Od kwestii robotniczej do nowoczesnej kwestii socjalnej. Studia z polskiej polityki społecznej XX i XXI wieku. Tom II* red. Grata Paweł, Rzeszów: Uniwersytet Rzeszowski, 2014
- Danek, Andrzej, *Polska mniejszość czy polskojęzyczni Niemcy*, „Przegląd”, 23.09.2007
- Dyczewski, Leon, *Tożsamość i integracja Polaków w Republice Federalnej Niemiec. Doświadczenia i perspektywy [w:] Polonia w Niemczech. Historia i współczesność*, red. Masłowska, Maria, Warszawa: 2001
- Dzięgłowski, Mariusz, *Bariery na drodze integracji polskich emigrantów poakcesyjnych w Irlandii*, „Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny”, Kraków: NOMOS 2011, z.2
- Garapich, Michał, *Of alkhoh and men – survival, masculinities and antinstitutionalism of Polish homeless men in a global city*, „Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny”, Kraków: NOMOS, 2011, z.1
- GUS, *Informacja o rozmiarach i kierunkach emigracji z Polski w latach 2004 – 2011*, Warszawa, 2012

- Grabowska – Lusińska, Izabela, Jaźwińska – Motylska, Ewa, *Znaczenie migracji w życiu zawodowym kobiet i mężczyzn*, „Kultura i Społeczeństwo”, Warszawa, 2013, nr 3
- Grabowska – Lusińska, Izabela, Okólski, Marek, *Emigracja ostatnia?*, Warszawa: Scholar, 2009
- Informacja o rozmiarach i kierunkach czasowej emigracji z Polski w latach 2004 – 2013*, Warszawa 2014
- Kapiszewski, Andrzej, *Psychologiczne aspekty emigracji i asymilacji* [w:] *Założenia teorii asymilacji*, red. Kubiak Hieronim, Paluch Andrzej K., Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk: Ossolineum, 1980
- Kawczyńska – Butrym, Zofia, *Migracje. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Lublin: Wyd. UMCS, 2009
- Kolbon, Izabela, *Mobilność społeczna w kontekście mobilności przestrzennej: awans, marginalizacja i degradacja społeczna polskich euromigrantów*, www.euromigranci.pl [8.04.2014]
- Kto jest emigrantem?* Z Danutą Mostwin rozmawia Bolesław Klimaszewski, „Przegląd”, 1994, nr 7
- Okólski, Marek, *Wewnętrzna spójność nowej emigracji i przejawy jej łączności z Polską* [w:] *Rola dawnej i nowej emigracji w warunkach Unii Europejskiej*, red. Lohman Wanda, Kraków: PAU 2006
- Orzechowska, Daria K., *Migracje zarobkowe Polaków po przystąpieniu Polski do Unii Europejskiej – skutki ekonomiczne i społeczne. Próba bilansu* [w:] *Bilans pierwszych lat członkostwa Polski w Unii Europejskiej* red. Fiszer Józef M., Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2011;
- Polacy na emigracji. Nowe dane GUS o rodakach za granicą*, <http://www.money.pl/gospodarka/wiadomosci/arttykul/ilu-polakow-przebywa-na-emigracji,54,0,2149430.html>[8.01.2017]
- Polscy emigranci w Europie*, PBI, ACR Rynek i Opinia, Starcom, 29.11.2007
- Polscy emigranci w Europie. Prezentacja wyników internetowego badania polskiej emigracji 2008*, PBI, Warszawa, 2008
- Plewko, Jadwiga, *Warunki integracji imigrantów ze społeczeństwem przyjmującym w wybranych krajach Unii Europejskiej*, „Roczniki Nauk Społecznych”, Lublin, 2010, tom 2 (38)
- Romaniszyn, Krystyna, *Wpływ migracji zagranicznych na formę organizacji rodziny*, „Studia Polonijne”, Lublin 2000, t.21
- Sakson, Andrzej, *Uczestnictwo w życiu społecznym* [w:] *Być Polakiem w Niemczech*, red. Wolf – Powęska, Anna, Schulz, Eberhard, Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 2000
- Wierzyński, Maciej, *Prosto z emigracji*, „Polityka”, 5 stycznia 2008
- Wolf – Powęska, Anna, Schulz, Eberhard, *Założenia i cele badawcze* [w:] *Być Polakiem w Niemczech*, red. Wolf – Powęska, Anna, Schulz, Eberhard, Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 2000