

Poland – a Gate to a Better Life for Immigrants

Katarzyna Dojerska (University of Łódź)

Poland is a relatively big country in Central Europe. Although it has a population of 38 million, more than 2.5 million Poles currently live and work abroad. Situated between the Ukraine, Belarus and Germany, Poland is on the Eastern periphery of the European Union. Poland has the 23rd largest per capita GDP in the world and the 10th largest in the EU, which it joined in 2004.

Poles have been actively and increasingly emigrating since the second half of the last century. During the socialist regime, Poles migrated mainly to the United States, Canada and Australia. Lately, however, Germany has become the number one destination for Poles. Since joining the EU, Poland has sent migrants also to the UK, Ireland, Norway and the Netherlands. Some years ago, Polish government officials made statements predicting drastic drops in the number of Polish emigrants, but the number of departures has continued to rise at ever increasing rates.

It is important to note, however, that whereas in the past emigration was driven by necessity, there being no jobs to be found at home, today, Poles are leaving their country by choice in spite of the increased strength of the Polish economy. Thanks to higher levels of education and easy access to mass media images of prosperity abroad, Poles with higher expectations, leave their country in search of higher pay. Blue-collar workers too, are migrating, attracted by higher salaries abroad even for menial work. In many cases, the wages of a waiter, maid or janitor abroad are higher than what a teacher, or other well-educated person can expect to earn in Poland.

It is important to be aware of the above trend because massive emigration by Poles is the main reason the domestic Polish labor market needs to attract foreign workers. Moreover, such inward migration at present is encouraged by employers.

Another important factor impacting the Polish labor market is the “Family 500+ Program,” introduced in 2016 by the governing Law and Justice Party. Under this program, couples with two or more children receive 500 zlotys (ca. US\$130) per month per child starting with their second child. This program has encouraged mothers to quit low-wage jobs and live off social benefits, since doing so is less troublesome than spending money on commuting to

work, hiring a nanny or sending a child to kindergarten. It is widely believed that this program is in part responsible for the shortage of waiters, salesclerks and even factory workers. This is because a mother who gives birth to three additional children can add just under US\$400 to her family's income. If she lives in a small town where prices are low, and she accepts employment in the so-called gray zone – where payments are made in cash and taxes are not paid – she may do better than if she took a low-wage job. .

Yet another factor contributing to the shrinking of the domestic labor force is the trend toward early retirement. It is said that this will remove as many as 100,000 workers from the labor market.

Let us now turn to which countries supply Poland with the largest number of workers and how Poles respond to their presence/. According to official figures, the largest number of foreign workers come from Ukraine. In 2018, there were supposedly 180,000 Ukrainians registered as workers in Poland, accounting for 85 percent of total number of foreign workers. However, according to unofficial sources, the real number of Ukrainian workers is closer to 1 million. Other countries whose citizens have found work in Poland include Belarus, Germany, Vietnam and India. In recent years, there has also been a rapid increase in numbers of migrant workers from countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal, about which more will be said later.

The numbers are drastically different between 2010 and 2018, almost 10 times higher. Between 2017 and 2018 alone, the numbers doubled. We can assume the reason is the rising demand for workers mentioned above. At the same time, some data indicates a decrease in numbers of residency permissions granted to Ukrainian citizens in 2018. It has been suggested that the reason for the decline in residency applications by Ukrainians is related to reports of a change in German policies that would result in the opening of the German labor market to non-EU citizens. Not only Germany but even Slovakia or Czech Republic are better options for foreign workers as wages in all three countries are now noticeably higher than in Poland. In response, the Polish central government is implementing many laws to help employers hire foreign workers, and local administrations as well are proposing integration programmes to help Ukrainian workers adjust better to life in Poland. Even small changes in migration trends could have an adverse impact on regional economies in Poland. For example, in any cities' markets. In Poznań – Poland's fifth largest city, every tenth resident is a recent migrant from the Ukraine. This means that about 20 percent of Poznan's work force is Ukrainian. Officials in Poznan are

reported to be doing everything they can, to make sure the Ukrainian workers do not move to Germany. Many cities have posted signs in Ukrainian in public places such as tram stops and train stations as well as offering free courses in the Polish language. But there is a limit as to how much laws and programs can do when ultimately it is popular attitudes toward foreigners that determine whether outsiders feel welcome.

As in most countries, when there is a mixture of people of different nationalities, there will be conflicts. Many will take advantage of every little difference, such as skin color, accent or nationality to fuel pre-existing discriminatory tendencies. In Poland some groups have it worse than others. According to surveys² Poles look most favorably on Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, Americans and Hungarians. This should not come as a surprise since all these groups tend to have similar skin color, religious backgrounds and traditional customs. At the other extreme, we find Arabs and Romani people. Many Poles distrust them, fear them and even despise them. The reason might be bad stereotypes and fear of the unknown. Even though Romani people have been living in Poland for 500 years, they are not fully integrated into Polish society.

Although there are many public opinion surveys regarding attitudes to foreigners in Poland, the figures alone do not give a clear picture as to whether discrimination in Poland is getting better or worse. In one survey taken in 2010, 81% of respondents said foreigners should be permitted to work in Poland, however, of this group 31% stated that foreigners should be allowed to work “only in specific fields.” The number is significantly higher than in 1992 when 42% said that foreigners should not be hired at all. In 2010 only 14% wished to ban foreign workers completely.

After looking at the data³ on crimes grouped by the offenders’ ethnic, national or religious affiliation we may be surprised. While the number of offences committed by minority groups is clearly rising, there does not seem to be a direct correlation between such statistics and attitudes toward outside groups in Poland today. It is possible that police officers are trained better to recognize and report offences committed by members of outside groups. Although Polish attitudes toward Ukrainians and Jews have improved somewhat, cases of violence committed by Poles against Muslims has risen dramatically in recent years.

In 2015 of racially motivated offences no more than 12% were committed against Muslims, in 2016 the ratio had risen to 22%. In other words, in just one year physical violence targeting Muslims increased by 40%. It should be mentioned that Polish hatred of Muslims is

based entirely on stereotypes. As the accompanying graph shows, some 70% of Poles dislike Muslims, but since Poland's Muslim population is a mere 0.5% very few Poles have ever actually met a Muslim. The 2015 European refugee crisis saw a marked increase in anti-Muslim feelings among Poles, many of whom were angered by the prospect that the refugees might be allowed to settle in Poland. As of present writing, there are no more than 1,500 refugees in Poland, most of whom are from Russia and the Ukraine. Still, even this low number has not stopped hatred of Muslims, and there is no shortage of conservative Poles who are convinced that this 1,500 are ruining the entire country.

The sad truth is that in recent years fascism has been on the rise in Poland. Many fascist groups have been operating in the open. They display fascist, and even Nazi symbols, proposing to make Poland white again. This may be the reason we have seen a resurgence in discrimination against Ukrainians and Russians, and also fresh instances of racism against Arabs and African Americans. The fascist and neo-Nazi groups attract young people between the ages of 18 and 25. Unless the government takes action against them, we can assume they will thrive for many more years, making Poland unwelcome and potentially dangerous for foreigners, especially persons of color. But there is cause for optimism. The rise in the popularity of fascist and neo-Nazi groups has triggered a backlash. The majority of Polish citizens have opted to reject racism of the ultraright. We can observe the process of the far right getting even more radical and as a result the majority becoming more reasonable, choosing to treat people of all backgrounds with dignity and empathy.

Currently unemployment in Poland is the lowest it has been for almost 30 years, creating big shortages of staff in some regions. For many years now Ukrainian workers were helping to offset the shortages and our economy will be still needing them in coming years. Experts say that Poland will have to accept five million foreign workers by 2050 to fill those shortages, a big number considering Poland has 38 million citizens right now. Poland is a great destination for Ukrainian people looking for work at wages higher than in their own country. Poland has one of the most comprehensive legal environments in the EU to help foreign workers. Work permits are relatively easy to obtain and there are many counselors to help the Ukrainians adjust to Polish life. Moreover, Polish is similar to Ukrainian making communication easy even without formal language study. All the same, many employers fear that when Germany opens its borders for non-EU workers the Ukrainians in Poland today will opt to go there. This is not surprising as

68% of Ukrainian workers are reported to be considering moving to Germany at some future time. However, some experts have argued that this process will be slow and perhaps of minimal significance for the reasons mentioned above. This is because Poland will remain an easier destination for Ukrainians than Germany. Unlike in Poland, in Germany foreign workers must be able to speak the local language well. Moreover, the cost of living in Germany is much higher than it Poland. One possibility is that Poland could become a gateway, a stepping stone to Germany for Ukrainians, who could come to Poland to work for a few months and after they had saved enough to rent an apartment in Germany they could move on. This is a grim prospect for the Polish economy but not entirely unreasonable. As a result, business owners have asked the government to ease regulations with regard to the hiring of foreign workers.

At present, laws make it easiest to hire workers from the Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, Russia and Georgia. Faced with the risk of losing many Ukrainian workers, employers are turning to countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, India and in some cases the Philippines and Indonesia. We have seen a rise in numbers of workers from these countries in recent years and we can predict that the trend will continue. Even though the Polish economy needs workers from these countries, employing them will not be without risk. Firstly, we need to be concerned about the poor treatment they will get from many Poles. Ukrainians have been working in Poland for many years and although they have adjusted remarkably well, we Poles should not delude ourselves into thinking that we treat them completely equally; in many cases Ukrainians are doing the same jobs as Poles but being paid less. They face discrimination in hospitals and at government offices. There is reason to fear that workers from poor countries such as Bangladesh are going to be treated like cheap labor and their needs are going to be ignored. This can be avoided with strict laws and an increase in the number of inspectors. But that will not be enough to protect the workers against discrimination in society. Given that 90% of Bangladeshi are Muslim, and that a large number of Poles fear Muslims, we can anticipate serious problems. We can hope for additional assimilation programs in schools and work places, but looking at the data from recent years, it is unreasonable to expect that discrimination will suddenly disappear. Poles still need many years to throw away their stereotypes and accept people from the Middle East and beyond. I personally believe that the goal of a liberal, tolerant and open Polish society is an attainable one. After all, we have been able to discard our past negative attitude toward our former enemies, the Germans.

There is still much to be done in Poland regarding immigration. Firstly, Poles need to change their attitude toward people they perceive as outsiders. Negative views of outsiders is said to be closely linked to perceptions of one's own well-being and wealth. Perhaps when more Poles attain wealth and happiness, they will no longer feel the need to blame outsiders for their failures. Perhaps, as a result discrimination will ease together with hate speech. Without foreign workers the Polish economy would come to a standstill so the country should do everything it can to make the lives of foreigners in Poland easier. This is especially true since the trend of Poles migrating to the West is unlikely to come to an end any time soon.

¹ *migracje.gov.pl*

² *oko.press*

³ *statystyka.policja.pl*