



On behalf of the
European Commission
DG Employment,
Social Affairs and Inclusion

Gesellschaft für
Versicherungswissenschaft
und -gestaltung e.V.



Social Impact of Emigration and Rural-Urban Migration in Central and Eastern Europe

Executive Summary

Poland

April 2012

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With 6.3% of the total resident population in 2009 who left their country of origin during the transition period (1989-2009), and with several regions suffering from emigration much higher than the national average suggests, Poland has come to be one of the most important migrant-source countries in the EU. The outflow of people intensified after the accession to the European Union. It became more diversified with regard to the origin and destination of migrants; in other words, more people could embark on the move and at the same time more foreign destinations became available.

Due to labour and housing market rigidities, internal mobility of the Polish people has been low relative to the estimated level of territorial imbalances of labour. Since the early 1980s, with a gradually increasing freedom of international movements of people, a large part of the relatively excessive workforce (that predominantly originated from backward and low-urbanised areas) was flowing to other countries in a search for gainful employment. International mobility, which until 2004 mainly took a form of circular migration, to a large degree substituted for insufficient internal movements of people. Since the Poland's accession to the EU, due to opening up of the labour market in a growing number of better-off European countries, the outflow of Polish workers intensified and became a more long-term oriented.

The outflow of Polish migrants was highly selective with regard to their personal characteristics. The young, aged 20-34 and relatively well educated by far predominated, especially among those heading to the countries whose labour markets were fully open. Males and single persons were also in a majority.

On the macro-scale, as it might be argued, international migration contributed to balancing of the Polish labour market. Until 2004 the outflow tended to slow down the growing unemployment. Since then (up to 2008) a continuing (at accelerated rate) out-migration 'supported' a trend of the declining unemployment rate. But a number of negative micro-scale effects were noted, such as deskilling of many migrants in destination countries and difficulties of short-term migrants in re-adaptation to the labour market conditions upon their return to Poland.

In that period, however, some labour market sectors (mainly agriculture and construction) started to reveal deficits of labour and the vacancies were increasingly filled by foreign workers. In some cases (notably in the health care sector), the outflow of Polish professionals (in 2004-2009 5.8% of active physicians and 3.4% of active nurses were believed to search for employment in other EU countries) prompted the reform of sectoral arrangements concerning the terms of employment and pay, which in turn radically reduced the emigration. As a result, despite a significant post-accession outflow of physicians, including highly skilled specialists, access to medical services has not deteriorated in a particular way. This might be due to the organizational improvement of the healthcare system and to the inflow of foreign specialists (mainly from Ukraine).

There exist vast inter-regional differences in the outcomes of recent emigration wave. While all regions encountered net losses of the population, in some of them the losses were considerable (in 2004-2007, 5-8% of the population aged 15+ and close to 20% of the population aged 20-29). No direct influence of emigration on labour markets, however, was observed at the regional level; for instance, in 2004-2008 the high-loss regions recorded generally lower decrease in the unemployment rate than the low-loss regions.

International migration and the return process called for specific social security arrangements allowing it to combine entitlement to benefits across countries. In this respect, Poland relies on the EU co-ordination agreement covering 31 European countries and on a number of bilateral agreements covering main non-European destination countries of the Polish migrants. Migrants, their family members and returnees make effective use of benefits based on the coordination although the scope of benefits granted is still limited and the interpretation of certain rules (eligibility to some types of family support) have involved problems.

The impact of emigration on poverty and social exclusion is not well recognized. Indirect evidence based on the analysis of the main poverty factors (unemployment, population structure by residence and by family type) allows concluding that national poverty rate has not been visibly influenced by the emigration process. But in the localities with very high emigration intensity (some districts in the south-east, for instance) such an influence has been noticed. Families of emigrants benefitted from remittances and/or savings brought back by returnees. Spending has been mostly focused on basic needs (40% on food, energy bills and alike) and rarely on

investment (business, education) therefore its impact on the local economic development looks rather limited. Overall, remittances (reaching about 2% of GDP in 2008) do not reduce regional disparities although some indirect evidence of the reduction of inter-household income inequalities may be found.

The impact of emigration on the vulnerable groups is well documented in the case of children. The number of children aged 9-18 who experienced separation longer than two months with at least one parents has been estimated at 660-960 thousand (2008) and their problems at school, such as lower grades, absences or misbehaviour have been identified. But apparently school teachers are not well aware of the scale of the issues and are not prepared to handle them properly. Some efforts have been already done to change it (teachers' training, a special guidebook published).

The issue of women who stay in the country of origin are not paid special attention. It is approached almost exclusively in the context of childcare provision. The situation of migrating and returning women is quite recognized, mainly through qualitative studies. They show that women-migrants often take low-paid jobs (as care-givers, cleaning ladies) and they are usually fairly satisfied with coming-back. Upon return they face more problems than men in finding a job, they have less chance to use social security benefits (including those based on the co-ordination), they are more prone to financial failures, etc. So far, attention has been paid to make women-migrants work legal.

Problems of the elderly left behind are the least known. Their role as caregivers and sometimes as legal guardians of children is acknowledged but seniors residing in the country of origin who themselves need care and support are not that much noticed.

Policies targeted at the vulnerable groups are scarce. Elderly left behind are not covered by any specific programme which would allow at least recognizing their needs. Women are also almost completely abandoned. Children issues are approached mainly through the projects related to education (special training of teachers, for instance). Policies for returnees have been developed both at the central and local levels but they are neither exhaustive (central level) nor very common (local levels). Despite a widespread opinion that reinforcement of the labour market is crucial for preventing massive emigration and for making returns more attractive, the most recognized policies and programmes have been focused on information campaigns and counselling (government programme and the portal) rather than on the labour related issues. But some activities are worth noticing, such as the establishment of consultative desks for returnees by local institutions or a privately funded programme for the homeless immigrants living in London, encouraging them to return and offering support after the return.

Whereas many activities aimed at the development of economically underprivileged regions were launched (in particular after the EU accession), only few of those activities directly addressed the high-loss regions and in general pertained to the outflow of people as such. Migration-related developmental projects usually attempted to identify the volume and structure of the outflow and assess its underlying factors and socio-economic consequences as a basis for the improvement of future-oriented regional strategies. Since those projects are relatively new, it is too early to evaluate their usefulness.

Key challenges related to emigration concern the need for better recognition and developing policies targeted at the elderly, more attention paid to the health related problems of the left behind and to the issue of return migration. Policies that might be suggested include: (i) establishment of the government agency at the central level responsible for emigration programmes, (ii) development of more active labour market policies promoting mobility in selected high-loss regions, (iii) putting in practice the idea of "one-stop-shop" for families of emigrants and returnees, (iv) strengthening involvement of the local governments and the non-government sector in supporting / taking care of families left behind, and (v) strengthening programmes aimed at reinforcement of the ties of emigrants with their country of origin.