



Centrum Stosunków Międzynarodowych
Center for International Relations

Reports & Analyses

3/06

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Social and Cultural Aspects of Transnational Migration

The Report was written in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, within the framework of the project 'Transatlantic Security Challenges and Dilemmas for the European Migration Policy', sponsored by the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

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This paper indicates a few social aspects of transnational migration viewed from the perspective of sending society. They are illustrated here by Polish examples only. However, first of all the term “transnational migration” demands a commentary.

It could be approached in a wide or narrow manner. The first approach defines it as a circular transnational labour mobility, which is undertaken by migrants who carry out the strategy of minimizing their household risks. This movement is held between social peripheries of the sending country and peripheries of higher economically developed and wealthier receiving countries.¹

According to the second approach transnational migration refers to people who live dual lives. They speak two languages, have homes in two countries and make a living through continues regular contact across national borders.²

I presume that a question of an aspiration to the receiving country culture is crucial for indicating these wider and narrower approaches. Considering the wider approach, transnational migrant does not have to aspire to hosting country culture. The temporary character of his/her stays and a vision of returning home, which is definitely situated in the sending country, where his/her family lives, slow down integration with the hosting society. Of course, he/she must adopt to it in terms of capacity for reaching acceptance, avoiding harmful conflicts and antipathy from the receiving society.

However, a well-adopted migrant does not need to share or to recognize receiving country values and norms of behaviors as his/her own. In this case adaptation process does not mean essential changes in migrant system of basic values or his/her general world concept. The change concerns rather instrumental level – the way of functioning in formal and informal relationships in the hosting society in order to achieve migrant’s aim. On psychological level adaptation means good feeling and satisfaction with the receiving society.³ As for the narrow understanding, a profound change in migrant’s system of values, norms and behaviors leads to dual sense of belonging – both to the sending and the receiving country.

¹ See Okólski, M., *Mobilność przestrzenna z perspektywy koncepcji migracji niepełnej*, in: E. Jaźwińska, M. Okólski (ed.), „Ludzie na huśtawce. Migracje między peryferiami Polski i Zachodu”, Scholar, 2001, p. 60.

² See Pries, L., (Ed.), 2001: *New Transnational Social Spaces. International Migration and Transnational Companies*. London [u.a.]: Routledge.

³ To read more about adaptation and the difference between assimilation/acculturation and adaptation, see Halik, T., Nowicka, E., *Wietnamczycy w Polsce. Integracja czy izolacja?*, Instytut Orientalistyczny, Wydział Neofilologii, Uniwersytet Warszawski, Warszawa, 2002, pp.13-17.

In this paper the wider approach to transnational migration is used. Referring to that definition, I claim that in Poland we deal with two types of circular transnational labour mobility. The first one could be described as a strategy for household survival. It is a result of economic underdevelopment and high unemployment rate in the sending community. Another type could be described as a strategy of enhancing household living standards. It involves mainly people with dual Polish/German citizenship. An easy access to foreign labour market accompanied by difference in earnings between Poland and the receiving country makes circular migration more profitable than working in Poland.

The strategy for household survival is observed for example in Podlasie – the region situated in northern-eastern Poland.⁴ In historical perspective, before 1989 labour migration was a factor of family income and social status increase. It was a synonym of success. Today, however, due to economic underdevelopment and high unemployment rate circular migration is a way to stop family pauperization. Thanks to well-organized transport facilities between Poland and Belgium, which is the most popular destination, working abroad is perceived rather as commuting than as labour migration. There are some kinds of informal enterprises, run by relatives, which are based on circular employees-relatives exchange. Because of the temporary character of migrants' stays in Belgium and due to often irregular status of employment, followed by well organized ethnic institutions and numerous numbers of Poles, they are not open to immigration country culture and society. They also do not show motivation for investing in gaining new skills and knowledge. How does this mobility influence enterprise? Those undertaking circular migrations tend to run their own businesses more often than those living in their community, who do not have migratory experience. However, it is not a reason for optimism. Transnational migrations in this case do not promote modernization strategies; they do not involve entrepreneurial individuals. On the contrary, rather small scale, unstable and low profitable businesses enable their owners to undertake circular migrations, without a risk of losing a job.⁵

Viewed from the sending community perspective, Podlasie generates circular migration which is a strategy for survival. Working abroad is a question of their household existence. Research indicated that due to labour market glut in Belgium (the receiving country) relationships among Polish migrants have been changed from ethnic cooperation to inner

⁴ This region is profoundly examined by the Center of Migration Researches (Warsaw University) team. See www.iss.uw.edu.pl and Jaźwińska, E., Okólski, M., (ed.), *Ludzie na huśtawce. Migracje między peryferiami Polski i Zachodu*, Scholar, 2001.

⁵ Decision to work abroad is restrained by permanent employment on the posts requiring higher education and on other white-collar positions. See Łukowski, W., *Spółeczny sens ruchliwości niepełnej*, in: E. Jaźwińska, M. Okólski (ed.), „Ludzie na huśtawce. Migracje między peryferiami Polski i Zachodu”, Scholar, 2001.

group competition - limiting solidarity and cooperation circle only to family and close relatives. Heavy competition accompanied by expectation of immediate financial advantages- leads to disintegration, lack of trust and breaking the rules of social contract between labour migrants.⁶

The case of Opolskie voivodship (situated in southern-western Poland) provides an example of transnational migration, which is a strategy of enhancing household living standards (building operations and materials, food and house maintaining). Due to the dual Polish/German citizenship of autochthons living in Opolskie voivodship, they have unlimited access to German and other EU countries labour markets. The term "migratory professionalism" proposed by Brygida Solga (2002) is an accurate qualification in this case. For autochthons labour migration becomes a way of living. Giving up working abroad is perceived as wasting chances for better family wellbeing.⁷ An easy access accompanied by difference in earnings between Poland and receiving countries makes circular migration more profitable than working in Poland. Money earned abroad enhances household living standards in Poland. It was observed in the nineties and is still repeated in recent research findings.⁸ Thanks to this money Opolskie voivodship has the biggest income per capita in Poland, although official state statistics, which do not regard this additional money, situate Opolskie on the tenth position. In communities where autochthons prevail, where many of them work in Germany (and in the Netherlands) unemployment rate is a few times lower than in the other parts of the voivodship. Migrants' households are better equipped with kitchen and high-tech equipment. But there are also other less positive aspects of this phenomenon. Many people even with higher education agree on low-skilled jobs. After a few years of doing such work it is impossible to take up a job adequate to their education as they already lost their skills. Profitability of migration discourages young people in terms of their educational activities. It is observed that majority of them tends to shorten time of their education and tends to reduce their opportunities to vocational level in order to undertake an employment abroad. They are even not interested in looking for a job in Poland.⁹ In the communities where autochthons prevail labour migration, including circular one, is commonly accepted, it

⁶ Grzymała-Kazłowska, A., *Dynamika sieci migranckich: Polacy w Brukseli*, in: Jaźwińska, E., Okólski, M (ed.), „Ludzie na huśtawce. Migracje między peryferiami Polski i Zachodu”, Scholar, 2001.

⁷ Solga, B., *Migracje polsko-niemieckie i ich konsekwencje społeczno-ekonomiczne na obszarach wiejskich Śląska Opolskiego*, Opole: Instytut Śląski w Opolu, 2002.

⁸ Solga, B., *Migracje...*; Jończy, R., *Migracje zarobkowe ludności autochtonicznej z województwa opolskiego: studium ekonomicznych determinant i konsekwencji*, Uniwersytet Opolski, Opole, 2003. See also Szczepanik, M., *Gorzki kawałek chleba*, Rzeczpospolita, 26.10.2005; Internetowy Serwis Informacji Samorządowych PAP SA, <http://isis.pap.pl> access 6.12.2005; The whole report based on Romuald Jończy's team research (15 000 sample) is to be released soon.

⁹ Jończy, R., *Migracje zarobkowe...* pp.267-271; See also Szczepanik, M., *Gorzki kawałek chleba*, Rzeczpospolita, 26.10.2005; Internetowy Serwis Informacji Samorządowych PAP SA, <http://isis.pap.pl> access 6.12.2005. It is estimated that that among one milion of opolskie voivodship inhabitants, each tenth works abroad. 63 000 consists those with dual Polish/German citizenship.

is treated as an obvious choice – a lifestyle model. It becomes a part of local community culture.

How does this influence Silesian enterprise? The answer is not optimistic. Those communities with low unemployment rate are also characterized by low labour and economic activity rates. Their inhabitants are not interested in running private businesses, which is a risky task, when they are offered well paid employment abroad. It could be concluded that migration used to involve the most entrepreneurial individuals, whereas today it involves unfortunately those with passive attitude to labour market (so we have the same conclusion as in case of transnational migrants from Podlasie). An outflow of working age people results in difficulties in finding well-qualified employees. It is a serious barrier for regional economic development of Opolskie voivodship.¹⁰

Another big concern is not of economic nature. Since some time, in Poland more attention has been given to the influence of migration on family condition and relationships. Not only researchers are concerned by this issue, it is a subject of wider discourse. Pastoral letter by Archbishop Alfons Nosol¹¹ was a crucial point in this discourse. Yet in 2001 archbishop appreciating migrants' devotion, at the same time pointed out dangerous consequences: spouses' separation leading to divorces; children without father's sometimes even both parents' attention, left under grandparents' supervision. In my opinion, it is not clear whether labour migration is a cause or an effect of family life driving apart. We may assume that it depends on the individual family case – relationships between migration and family condition may be positive or negative. I would agree with Krystyna Romaniszyn that in many cases labour migration is a result of the change in the hierarchy of values: consumption aspirations are often situated higher than unity of family.¹² Incomes from migration help to supply consumption needs when the situation on local labour market does not allow people to achieve expected standards. As a consequence, labour migrants contribute to confirm hedonistic values in sending communities – their example encourages others to undertake jobs abroad.

Long term absence of family members results in redefinition of the role division in the family. On the one hand, female migrant, providing financial resources for household maintenance becomes the head of the family. But on the other hand, women's role in the family is also influenced by husband absence. In this case she is forced to bring up children without the husband's support, deal with more duties and loneliness at home, which for many of women is overwhelming. Krystyna Wojaczek (Opole University) is convinced that Silesian families

¹⁰ Jończy, R., *Migracje zarobkowe...*pp.267-271

¹¹ List biskupa Alfonsa Nossola w sprawie pastoralnych problemów związanych z pracą zarobkową zagranicą, <http://www.kuria.gliwice.pl>, access 25.11.2005

¹² Romaniszyn, K., *Kulturowe implikacje międzynarodowych migracji*, Lublin 2003.

(we may assume that not only Silesian) are not aware of dangers connected with circular labour migration and family separation, which makes difficulties in prophylaxis or therapy.¹³

Referring once again to female migrants, financial independence strengthened by example of women in receiving country encourages them to take care of their looks and health. They face difficulties being far away from their homeland and they can cope with them, they work very hard. As a consequence their self-esteem increases. It may happen that after their visits at home they feel like strangers, who do not suite there any longer. As a result they can tend to become “professional migrants” or to divorce. Of course, the term refers not only to women. “Professional migrant” is a person who travels between the sending and the receiving country and is not able to lead a settled life – to have a permanent job and live in one country- due to long stay abroad. Economic incentive is not the only or even the main one. “Professional” migrant is addicted to migration. He or she is continuously finding new reasons for next trips. Of course, we could agree that migrant’s consumption aspirations are increasing but there is also deeper social background: returns abroad are some kind of need, which is a consequence of weakened bonds with the sending community and creating ties with the receiving country habitat. The sending community is too tight. “Professional migrant” belongs to two societies at the same time.¹⁴

In conclusion, I would like to notice that in Polish case circular migrations lead to permanent social marginalization of migrant both in the sending and in the receiving country. Temporary character of mobility and family left in the sending community slow down integration with the hosting society. On the other hand, long-lasting absence from home weakens social and emotional ties in the sending community.¹⁵ In postmodern times connection to territory were supposed to lose their importance, but I believe that this statement is not appropriate in the case of circular labour migrants who as I have presented are rather passive and driven apart between two countries, between family life and a job, which is far away from home.

¹³B. Zaremba, *Drogi bilet do raju*, Tygodnik Powszechny, nr 9, 27.02.2005
<http://tygodnik.onet.pl/0,1216852,druk.html>

¹⁴ Romaniszyn, K, *Kulturowe implikacje międzynarodowych migracji*, Lublin 2003, pp.111-113.

¹⁵ Osipowicz, D, *Marginalizacja społeczna migrantów*, in: Jaźwińska, E., Okólski, M., (ed.), „Ludzie na huśtawce...”

Center for International Relations

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A number of projects implemented by the Center have been sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland and Ministry of Defence.

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