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POLISH CIRCULAR MIGRATION AND MARGINALITY: A LIVELIHOOD STRATEGY APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

The conference is devoted to the topic of ‘Euromigrants’, so it seems appropriate to ask: who are the Euromigrants? They can be described using various typologies. Here, I am particularly interested in migrants’ parental status. According to this criterion, there are three groups of post-2004 Polish migrants working in EU countries today:

- people who were childless when they went abroad, but who in many cases have since formed families
- parents living abroad with children, some or all of whom were born in Poland
- parents who have left their children in Poland but who support their household in Poland financially and return to Poland fairly often

The latter group was definitely the most numerous before 2004 and its existence was well-documented in ethno-surveys conducted by the University of Warsaw Centre of Migration Research (Jaźwińska and Okólski 2001, Kaczmarczyk 2002). Marek Okólski coined the term ‘incomplete migration’ to denote a situation in which the household is only partially uprooted – typically with one parent remaining to look after children in Poland (Okólski 2012).

Incomplete migration before 2004 led to a much heartache and family break-up; moreover, its practitioners often did not make much money and spent most of their earnings on everyday consumption in Poland (Jaźwińska and Okólski 2001). After 2004, it became possible to find better, more secure and longer-term employment abroad as well as to invite one’s family to live there legally. Moreover, there seems to have been a reaction against solo parent migration in parts of Poland such as Podkarpacie where this had developed into common practice, and was causing concern about broken families and the impact on children.

Hence conditions in both Western Europe and Poland promoted a sense that families should and could live together abroad, and led to increased family reunification (White 2011).

Nonetheless, as illustrated by Kaczmarczyk 2008 and White 2011, incomplete migration continued. My underlying questions in this paper are: Why do some parents go on migrating without their families? Are the reasons partly different today than they were before West European labour markets fully opened up to Poles?

Before suggesting some answers to these questions, it is worth pointing out that two main types of migration are involved, although they can evolve and merge.

In some families, one or both parents – most commonly just the father – is working abroad most of the year. This scenario was neatly described by one of my interviewees in September 2013: ‘Usually the head of the family, the father, goes abroad, earns some money, comes back to Poland every few months, then goes off again’ (Katarzyna). Alternatively, the mother may work abroad as a carer, job-sharing with another Polish woman so that she can return to Poland on a regular basis.

In other families, one or both parents migrate seasonally. Typically they spend less than half the year abroad. Of course single people also often engage in seasonal migration, for example students during the university vacation, but additionally there are many older seasonal migrants. Three-quarters of Kępińska’s large sample of seasonal migrants to Germany were married people and about 70% had children (Kępińska 2013: 547). Although gender norms strongly influence patterns of seasonal migration, wives as well as husbands do seasonal labour, since they can leave their households if they are not away too long (Kępińska 2013: 551).

Little about this incomplete migration is specifically Polish. Incomplete migration is a sub-set of circular migration, which is practised widely across the globe and is said to be ‘an increasingly common feature of international population movements’ (Duany 2002: 356). Although ‘circular migration’ is hard to define precisely (Skeldon 2012: 47) the term begs to be used because it is so common in the scholarly and policy literature. Skeldon (2012: 43-4) describes it as ‘a seductive term that ... seems to be a win-win-win scenario’. Sending and receiving countries both benefit, as usually does the individual migrant. Furthermore, the metaphor of the circle implies regularity and even perfection, enhancing the positive connotations. Michał Garapich’s labelling of seasonal migrants as ‘storks’ (Eade, Drinkwater

and Garapich 2006) has been widely used in the literature and enhances the impression of purposeful and regular migration. In real life, however, migration back and forth can consist of sporadic ‘hole-patching’ (Gruszka et al 2012: 55-8). It can represent failure to achieve a satisfactory livelihood in either country, with the migrant buffeted to and fro at irregular intervals. ‘Repeated migration’ might therefore be a more appropriate term.¹

HYPOTHESES ABOUT CAUSES OF REPEATED MIGRATION FROM POLAND

My interviews (see below) suggest that some reasons for incomplete migration definitely remain unchanged. These include, for example, the unwillingness of many spouses to leave Poland, despite the pain of separation from their migrant husbands/wives; the conviction of many Polish people that it is more expensive to relocate the entire household abroad; and a residual sense in some conservative locations – for example some villages in Małopolska - that wives and children ‘should’ remain in the Polish family home. However, it would be strange if nothing had altered over the past ten years. The EU has surely changed considerably in many respects, as has Poland in particular. Moreover, migration processes have their own dynamics, as networks evolve. The following four factors may be relevant in explaining the continuation of repeated migration.

(1) There is now a huge variety of seasonal work legally available to Poles. The end of transitional periods of restricted labour market access – culminating in free access to Germany and Austria from 2011 – makes seasonal migration ever more accessible. My interviewees in just one location in Poland in 2013 had worked across Europe, packing plants in an English garden centre, farming mink in Sweden, putting together Christmas garlands in Germany, etc.

(2) Insecure work continues to be a cause of repeated migration and may be becoming increasingly significant. Poor working conditions in the shadow economy (both in Poland and abroad) are nothing new (Anderson 2013). However, in the 21st century the increased propensity of employers legally to impose short-term contracts and the casualisation of labour means that there is a pool of people experiencing periodic spells of unemployment or working on such poor terms that they cannot always make ends meet. Meardi (2012:6) argues that ‘not

¹ This term is used – among others - by Fihel and Grabowska-Lusińska 2013 and Kępińska 2013, although neither article explicitly criticises the term ‘circular migration’.

only do new member states generally provide employers with more “freedom” than the old ones (except the UK) but they have increased this “freedom” particularly generously between 2000 and 2007.’ In both Poland and the UK the process seems to have accelerated in recent years and is a topic of public concern (notably about ‘junk’ and ‘zero-hour’ contracts respectively). One might suppose that involuntary back and forth migration could result: someone would migrate from Poland to the UK because they came to the end of their contract in Poland, but if they could find only very precarious work in the UK, they might return to Poland.

(3) As noted by Massey and other migration scholars, as migration networks proliferate, migration becomes less selective. ‘When migrant networks are well-developed, they put a destination job within easy reach of most community members, making emigration a reliable and relatively risk-free resource’ (Massey *et al* cited in Palloni *et al*: 1266-7). Since 2004 Poles in Poland have become linked to Poles in other EU countries by millions of ties criss-crossing the continent. Given this density of networks, one would expect to find that poorer, less confident and less competent Poles were increasingly migrating too. I do not want to suggest that migration by particularly disadvantaged people is something novel in Poland: Osipowicz, for example, has written about marginalisation among Podlasie migrants in the 1990s (Osipowicz 2002). However, thanks to networks it is quite probable that more people on the margins today consider the option of international migration.

(4) Return migration to Poland is often followed by further trips abroad. Since the first wave of westward migration after 2004, many individual migrants have returned to Poland. However, most survey evidence suggests that around half of returnees consider or plan further migration abroad (Frelak and Roguska 2008, CDS 2010a, CDS 2010b, Iglicka 2010, Gruszka *et al* 2012). Returnees adopt a variety of different strategies: some return abroad for the long term (White 2013) while others go abroad for shorter periods, with or without giving up employment in Poland (Fihel and Grabowska-Lusińska 2013:7-8).

METHODOLOGY AND FIELDWORK SITES

This paper draws on research in 2006-9 for my book *Polish Families and Migration since EU Accession* (White 2011) and on my interviews with return migrants in 2010-12

(White 2013). However, the paper is based mostly on 49 semi-structured interviews which I conducted in the small towns of Grajewo (Podlasie) and Limanowa (Małopolska) in 2012 and 2013 respectively. Limanowa was selected because, like Grajewo, it had high levels of both long-term unemployment and migration and was somewhat distant from towns and cities with better opportunities. The 13 interviewees in Grajewo were all return migrants, six women and seven men. In Limanowa (where my project was funded by the Polish Research Centre of the Jagiellonian University in London) the 36 interviewees were long-term unemployed people, eight men and 28 women.² I conducted 48 interviews in Polish and one in English.

I became interested in the topic of poorly-executed repeated migration when I discovered that a number of interviewees in Grajewo in 2012 had migrated despite possessing very little money or education and were living quite marginal lives on return to Poland. This alerted me to the possibility that – in keeping with migration network theory – migration might be occurring even among particularly disadvantaged sections of local society. This was despite the fact that many of my 2006-9 (slightly more prosperous) small-town interviewees claimed such people did *not* migrate. Not all participants in my 2012-3 projects were poor, many were skilled at migration and the research also provided information more generally about return migration and unemployment. However, in this particular conference paper I shall be focusing on poor migrants engaging in repeated migration. Unemployment is strongly associated with poverty in Poland, as elsewhere (Bieńkuńska 2013: 5).

As in previous projects, I applied a livelihood strategy approach (LSA) to understand the labour market options available to people living in small towns and surrounding villages. Although livelihood strategies are routinely studied in the context of international development (see Ellis 2000 for a classic exposition) people in all countries have livelihood strategies and the approach is equally applicable to the UK (Oxfam 2011), Poland and other European countries. I tried to understand residents' own perceptions about whether they had a choice of livelihood strategies, locally or within Poland in general. If not, did they feel 'forced' into international migration? In keeping with the LSA, I investigated how their

² My helper at the Powiat Job Centre (PUP), who found 20 of the interviewees, tried to provide equal numbers of men and women, but found men significantly less willing to be interviewed. 13 other interviewees were book-keeping students at an adult education college – a largely female group. The first group were officially registered as unemployed, the second were self-defined unemployed (though often officially registered as well). One interviewee responded to an advertisement posted by the local library and two were acquaintances of one of my gatekeepers.

options were shaped by their perceptions of the local economy and also by their household situation and assessment of their own social, financial and personal/human capital (including their age and sex, as well as education and skills).

Both Grajewo and Limanowa powiats have high levels of registered unemployment - around 22% and 18% respectively when I was doing the fieldwork.³ However, many interviewees considered that among people like them unemployment was 100%. Although Grajewo has two large factories, both local economies are dominated by small family businesses, especially in Limanowa (Zboś 2013). These second-hand clothes shops, pharmacies, etc., offer no job opportunities to non-family members or close friends. There is new employment on a slightly largely scale as more supermarkets move in, but unemployed women often cannot work here because they are unable to meet the demands for unsocial hours and flexible working weeks. Limanowa has an impressive amount of construction, partly because migrants are building houses, but despite the availability of building work interviewees criticised its quality: pay is usually low, contracts (if they exist) are short-term, and I heard several stories of people not being paid. Hence men who perceive themselves as breadwinners for their families may feel this is not an adequate livelihood. With regard to white-collar work, interviewees were convinced that jobs in local offices and institutions were attainable only through personal contacts and nepotism.

I know that I won't find a job in Limanowa... Everything is kept in the family I think. People just hang onto their jobs and retire once their son or daughter graduates, so they will get the job. But how am I supposed to manage? Everything is in the family and I don't have any relatives working in offices. So I won't get a job. (Oktawia, aged 21)

Older women (especially mothers who had been economically inactive for some years) were pessimistic even about finding a job as a shop assistant. In general, and despite a drop in registered unemployment over the last ten years, interviewees in both towns displayed considerable lack of faith in the future, typically characterising the local job market as 'worse and worse'. They blamed the system whereby the local job centre encouraged employers to hire workers on short-term placements, and also pointed to the existence of a large shadow

³ Unemployment statistics are available from local PUP websites <http://pupgrajewo.pl> and www.pup.limanowa.pl and also from GUS (the Polish national statistics agency) at http://www.stat.gov.pl/gus/5840_1446_PLK_HTML.htm?action=show_archive

economy. As Marzena (Limanowa) complained: 'It often happens that the employer just takes you for an open-ended trial period without any contract or insurance contributions... then they fire you and take on someone else.'

An alternative option would be to seek employment elsewhere, and some local residents do commute to larger towns, Nowy Sącz and Ełk. However, opinion was divided as to whether this was feasible or worthwhile. Several interviewees in Limanowa had worked in Zakopane hotels and restaurants, but considered wages in Zakopane extremely low. Both Grajewo and Limanowa are fairly distant from big cities and most interviewees felt that only a really well-paid job would justify commuting to Białystok or Kraków. In general, and in keeping with the findings of both my own and other people's research (Kowalczyk 2010), compared to the populations of other countries Poles rather rarely move house within Poland. It is seen as too complicated to find housing and not financially worthwhile. Iwona, for example, an unemployed lone parent who had returned from Italy to Grajewo, and was now planning to work in the UK, commented: 'I don't have any possibility of moving somewhere else [in Poland], without work, without contacts. There's no possibility even if you wanted to. Where would you go? Even Warsaw. The prices are extraordinary. To find work – even graduates can't find work.'

No account of the Limanowa and Grajewo job markets would be complete without surveying local residents' employment abroad. However, work abroad is an elephant in the room which is not discussed in Polish official reports on local labour markets. This is despite the fact that people are working across Europe; in addition, many Grajewans work in the USA. Being a builder in Oslo or a cleaner in Chicago is seen as a 'normal' occupation, so an accurate depiction of the range of employment among inhabitants of Limanowa or Grajewo should include these jobs too. Although it is obviously impossible on the basis of a small qualitative survey to say whether more very poor Poles have been migrating in recent years (Hypothesis 3), it is indicative that poorer interviewees within my sample – some of whom were in quite desperate circumstances – had not ruled out the migration option and in some cases were actively pursuing it. In particular, mothers who had been unemployed in Limanowa for many years tended to agree with Marzena that the 'only' option for them was seasonal work abroad.

With mass migration comes a certain ‘migration culture’ (White 2011: Chs 4-5) or conventions about why, how and where to migrate. For the purposes of this paper, the important conventions concern use of migration networks, in particular how far people feel they need to rely on personal contacts. A 2004-6 government survey suggested considerable variety across Poland in the use of agencies to find jobs abroad (Anon 2008). My 2008-13 interviews in Grajewo, Sanok and Limanowa tend to confirm that in such locations - all with well-established migration cultures - there is still a strong conviction that migration should be done through families and friends. In other words, informal networks consisting of ‘strong’ ties retain pre-eminent importance, and responding to advertisements or placing trust in an agency tends to be viewed either as out of the question or as a last resort.

DEFICIENT MIGRATION NETWORKS

Official statistics such as UK and Polish census data indicate that mass migration has continued in recent years, despite the economic crisis in Western Europe. Not surprisingly, therefore, interviewees in Grajewo and Limanowa in 2012-3 had plenty of stories to tell about people they knew who had recently gone abroad, indicating that networks spreading out from the two towns are expanding and becoming denser. As indicated above, theory suggests (Hypothesis 3) that the spread of migration networks could lead to more migration by poorer, less confident and less competent Poles. However, since poor people often lack good social capital in addition to other resources (Grotowska-Ledler and Kudlińska 2011), one might suppose they could find it harder than their neighbours to benefit from the proliferation of networks. Problems might include: accessing informal migration networks; not having money for the ticket once they had secured an invitation from a friend in a foreign country; not being supported by the friend upon arrival abroad; lacking confidence to leave the network and strike out on their own in search of a better (or any) job. The following section will consider these problems in turn.

Even though everybody in Limanowa and Grajewo knows migrants, some people are nonetheless held back from migrating by not knowing anyone helpful abroad. For example, Celina, a cleaner and lone parent interviewed in Grajewo in 2009, had complained: ‘It’s really strange here in Poland that people don’t know how to help each other, or don’t want to help.

Some people go abroad, for example my friends, and sometimes you say, “When you get there, look out for something for me.” Then suddenly the link between us breaks, as if they didn’t want me to have a better life, just for them to have it better.... I used to ask sometimes, and it turned out to be a non-starter, they didn’t want to hear what I was saying, so I came to feel that it wasn’t worth asking, humiliating myself or something.’ It is hardly surprising if people who have been unlucky in life are mistrustful of others: surveys regularly show that poorer areas have low social trust (Laurence 2011). The expectation that people abroad will not help can be therefore become a generalised one. In Limanowa in 2013, Zofia commented ‘Sometimes it’s better to depend on strangers than on your own family. Different [i.e. bad] things can happen, you can have a bad experience. If someone finds a job abroad he’s not going to be so quick to help, though it depends on the person.’ Helena, also in Limanowa, commented that sometimes migrants refused to help friends in Poland because people they had helped in the past had proved ungrateful.

Helena was a mother of five who urgently needed to find work given that her husband was also unemployed, but ‘knew no one abroad’. In the absence of strong ties abroad, she and her husband were looking for jobs on the internet. However, for some interviewees the sense of not having anyone to pull them out of their predicament had induced passivity. In 2012 I interviewed Lech, a semi-employed builder with six children who had worked abroad three times, on the invitation of different friends and relatives. Now, however, the invitations had dried up – a fact Lech attributed to the crisis in the construction sector in Western Europe.

You earn some money, come back to Poland and spend money on all sorts of things, including helping someone out and you end up without a penny and there’s no work here, so you wait for a lucky chance to go abroad. That’s how it works.

In other words, Lech was a typical ‘hole-patcher’, to use Gruszka et al’s terminology, but he could only patch the holes in his budget if someone invited him to join them abroad. He stated bluntly: ‘you don’t go into the unknown’ (*w ciemno się nie jeździ*). My book (White 2011: 7) posed the question ‘Can the network be seen as a climbing frame, onto which the migrant can scramble, or is it more like a net, where the potential migrant hopes to be “pulled in” by someone else?’ The evidence suggested that the latter was often the case. Perhaps passive waiting for an invitation is not surprising given that long-term unemployed people

often become depressed and apathetic. Several interviewees complained about this, describing their decreased sense of self-worth and sense of living in a lethargy.

For those who do have willing friends and family abroad, financial obstacles can hinder migration. Poor people often tend to know other poor people and even in the age of 'cheap' flights, unless the person abroad can afford to send money for the ticket, it may be impossible for the would-be migrant in Poland to travel, as illustrated in the following exchange.

Anne: Does your sister invite you to Ireland?

Marta (Limanowa): Yes, yes, yes, she invites me, but it's hard for me to go, honestly.

The ticket costs a bit! And if you don't have a job it's hard to manage that.

When someone manages to make the journey, they may not encounter much support on arrival. For example, Janusz, aged 37, lived in Grajewo with his elderly mother and disabled brother. Although he had no family of his own, as the household breadwinner he was in a similar position to many fathers. In 2007 he had gone to a small town in England but returned early without savings, because he could not find more than a few days' work a week.

My friend invited me, my friend and his girlfriend. There was supposed to be a job. It was simply that I didn't know there were agencies there. I thought it was like in America. I'd fly in and go straight to work [fixed up by a friend in advance]. He explained that I'd go to an agency and they'd have a job but it wasn't like that at all!

In this situation it would have been helpful, in addition to maintaining his close ties with his friends, if Janusz had been able to construct 'bridging ties' to strangers and find a job elsewhere. Gruszka et al (2012: 45) comment that the returned circular migrants in their study had 'incessantly exploited and reconstructed their migration networks' while abroad, and clearly this could be a recipe for success. However, when I asked why Janusz had not moved on to a city like Manchester with more opportunities, he replied 'But what about the contact? Who could I go to?' It was self-evident to him that he could not construct a new network. Similarly, Alicja (a 47-year old mother) whose short trips abroad were always to the same German employer, exclaimed: 'Oh, looking for something when I was abroad, no, I wouldn't. Well perhaps if I knew the language, well, I don't know.' Interviewee after interviewee complained about their financial problems, yet were seemingly inhibited from spending longer periods abroad because they lacked confidence to form new networks. (They often presented

the barriers as being afraid of the unknown, language competence or age, although they admitted that other middle-aged people without foreign languages did work abroad for longer periods.)

‘FORCED’ INTO REPEATED MIGRATION

Although some interviewees were proficient and regular circular migrants (perfect ‘storks’), with a well-worked out livelihood strategy, those discussed in this paper were hole-patchers. They went abroad if the opportunity presented itself, but often seemed reluctant to make new journeys. The most emphatic was Eugeniusz, a 45-year old father of five from near Grajewo: ‘How I looked at it, back then in 2008, was “I won’t - excuse the expression – xxxx return abroad again!” And how do I look at it now? I have to go to earn that extra money!’ Alicja (whose husband was also unemployed) expressed a similar sense of being forced: ‘Now my children are students so I have to go abroad and earn something, because there isn’t, there just isn’t any other way’. Alicja worked in a German factory ‘up to 15 hours a day’ in difficult conditions. ‘The conveyor belt keeps moving and you have to keep up with it. Quick, quick... After two months you’ve lost 10 kg in weight’. Olga, a 50-year old mother of five, had picked asparagus nine years in a row (for up to 12 hours a day) but then injured her back and been unable to go in 2013. When interviewed, she was desperate to find any job in Limanowa, but thought she would have to go back to Germany the following year.

Interviewees often seemed to make little money from temporary migration. Alicja explained: ‘When you come back from abroad you divide your savings month-by-month so you [know you] have enough to last [until you go abroad again]’. 55-year old Joanna worked in a British garden centre in three to four months a year, when they needed extra workers for the peak season, but then returned to her student children in Poland. She explained that this arrangement suited her because she earned as much in England as she would on the Polish minimum wage, working for a whole year. Her husband, the main breadwinner, was working full-time abroad ‘as long as his health lasted’ to support their children, but Joanna herself did not express a wish to earn more and improve her standard of living in Poland. Such migrants could not really capitalise on their migration experience after return. They had no savings to invest, and could only use the money earned in the West to tide them over until they went

back. Hence migration kept them afloat (unlike Lech or Janusz), but their marginalisation was often simply perpetuated. If they injured themselves at work - as had happened to several interviewees or their husbands - their position became more precarious still.

CONCLUSION

The research on which this paper was based discovered many returnees who had worked abroad successfully and were competent at constructing livelihood strategies based on migration. This is also apparent from my previous work and that of numerous other scholars. Visual proof – especially in Limanowa – is the hundreds of beautiful houses built with money earned abroad. Prejudices among certain Poles in Poland that people migrate because they are unsuccessful at home often do not correspond to reality.

That reality seems to be that since EU accession, even though some Poles are still more likely to migrate than others, Poles in *all* socio-demographic categories can be considered potential migrants. This is probably particularly true in locations with high rates of migration such as Limanowa and Grajewo. Here, work abroad is simply an extension of local labour markets – it is completely normal for people to consider living temporarily in foreign countries. According to migration theory, the proliferation of transnational migration networks which accompanies such mass migration explains why even people with little financial or human capital may find it possible to work abroad.

My research confirmed that even the poorest respondents in Limanowa and Grajewo knew migrants. However, it was not always true that having these contacts facilitated their migration. Their contacts abroad were not always in a position to help. Some interviewees waited for long periods in Poland hoping for an invitation; others had been invited, but not lent money for the ticket, and this had prevented their journey. Others had gone abroad but found that their friends were not much help after they arrived. In such situations migrants can become dependent on agency work, but this is not always sufficient to provide a living. People who migrate without the linguistic or other kinds of confidence needed to construct new, ‘bridging’ ties abroad have little choice in this situation but to return. Other migrants simply confine their visits abroad to seasonal work and do not attempt to find better-quality and longer term employment, which could potentially lead to family reunification and settlement

abroad. Instead, they return to Poland with modest savings – enough to ‘patch the holes’ in their household budget – but once this is spent they often feel forced to migrate again.

It seems, therefore, that expanding networks are only part of the explanation for decreasing migration selectivity. Push factors remain very significant in persuading poor people to try their luck abroad. Towns such as Limanowa and Grajewo suffer from chronic unemployment and, insofar as jobs are available, these are often short-term and insecure. Reasons for this include the presence of a substantial shadow economy; incentives for employers to offer short-term placements to people registered at the Job Centre; and the arrival of yet more supermarkets offering work which requires an unattainable degree of flexibility on the part of employees. It may well be that the problem of labour casualisation is becoming worse in reality; in the perceptions of interviewees, it is certainly increasing, and this makes them pessimistic about the chances of ever finding a ‘decent’ job in Poland.

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