Project: PREMUM_EU

31.07.2025

Deliverable 5.3

Report on determinants and consequences of intra-EU mobility with special attention for Polish immigrants

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PREMIUM_EU BENEFITS OF MOBILITY

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Title: *Policy REcommendations to Maximise the beneficial Impact of Unexplored Mobilities in and beyond the European Union*

Project acronym: *PREMIUM_EU*

Grant Agreement number: *101094345*

Revision history:

Revision	Date	Contributor(s)	Description

Document type: *Report*

Submission date: *31-07-2025*

Lead parties for deliverable: UEK

Dissemination level:

Co-funded by the Horizon Europe of the European Union Research and Innovation Programme

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Acknowledgement

PREMIUM_EU is a Horizon EUROPE project funded by the European Commission under Grant Agreement no. *101094345*

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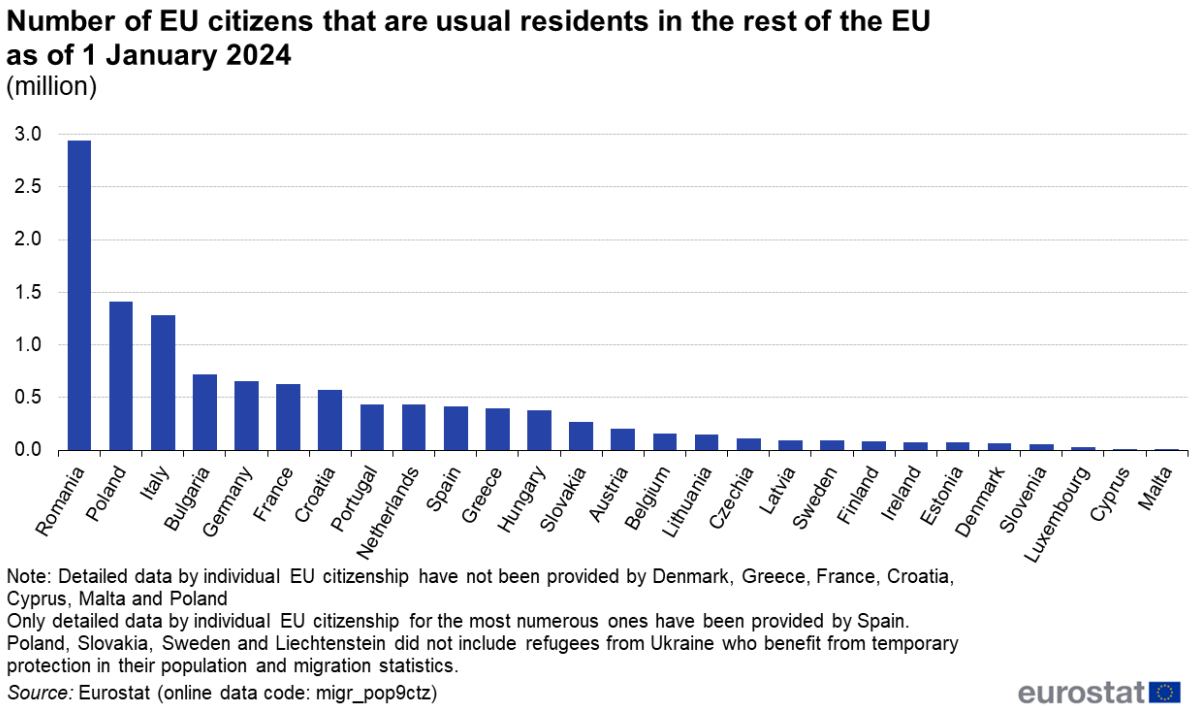
1. Intra-EU mobility: introduction

Freedom of movement is one of the fundamental rights within the European Union. It was first mentioned in the Treaty of Paris (which established the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951), reiterated in the Treaty of Rome (which created the European Economic Community in 1957), and fully integrated into the acquis communautaire in 1968.

Yet paradoxically, EU citizens have not been particularly eager to exercise this right in practice. In 2015, only 11.3 million working-age EU-28 citizens were residing in an EU member state other than their country of citizenship—just 2.2% of the EU population at the time (Kmiotek-Meier et al., 2019). As of 1 January 2024, 17.9 million people of all ages

living in the EU were born in another member state, accounting for 4% of the total EU population (Europa.eu, 2025).

Figure 1. Intra-European mobility: stock of EU citizens in other EU countries (2024)



Source: EUROSTAT (2025).

To place this in a global context, there were 304 million international migrants worldwide in 2024, representing 3.7% of the global population (IOM, 2024). This means that the intensity of global labor mobility is comparable to intra-European mobility—despite growing international migration barriers in the former and the absence of mobility restrictions in the latter.

The EU enlargements of 2004, 2007, and 2013 triggered a new wave of intense intra-European mobility, particularly from the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans (Salamońska, 2025). Among them, Romania (3.1 million persons in 2024) and Poland (1.46 million; see Figure 1) were the largest sending countries within the EU.

Consequently, this report focuses specifically on Polish emigration to other EU member states as a case study of intra-European mobility.

1.1 Polish migration as a significant case of intra-European mobility

The path to Polish accession to the European Union in 2004 was not easy. The country proved to be a quite problematic candidate country and the accession negotiations were difficult (Gruszczak, 2006). One of the most challenging issues was actually the freedom of movement. The pre-accession forecasts of migration flows from Poland to the EU estimated the migration potential between 4 and 5 million persons, including the inflow to Germany alone between 1.8 and 3.2 million, depending on scenarios. In spite of some methodological criticism and more realistic adjustments of these projections (Kupiszewski, 2002), they have profoundly influenced the policies of the member states. Therefore, many EU member states – including the neighboring Germany – have imposed temporary restrictions on Polish access to their labor markets, up to 1st May 2011. Initially in May 2004 only three EU Members (at that time) opened for Poles: the United Kingdom, Ireland and Sweden. Between 2004 and 2011, the net migration from Poland to the EU-15 countries stood at 1.2 million, yet many persons moved for shorter periods (up to 1 year) and the return rates were estimated between 40 to 50 per cent (Brzozowski et al., 2015). This relatively large outward migration from Poland resulting from the opening of the borders and labor markets in the EU was subsequently called as post-accession migration. In Polish case, the emigration to the Western Europe and beyond was nothing new, as Poles were the traditional nation of emigrants. The current Polish diaspora worldwide is estimated at 20 million by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, yet most of this group is composed by the fourth, third or second generation of immigrants or persons with ethnic Polish origin, very often with limited Polish identity and knowledge of Polish language. Poles started to migrate in larger numbers during the 19th century: initially for seasonal migration in Germany during the harvest period, then as miners and workers in heavy industries. Then transatlantic migrations followed: predominantly to the US, then Canada, Brazil and Argentina. Emigration continued after the 1918 when Poland as a state regained independence, also within Europe with particular focus on Germany, France and Belgium. Only after 1945, with the installment of communism and the establishment of “iron curtain” the mobility from Poland but also the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe has been heavily regulated and mostly restricted, with some concession made mostly for “unwanted individuals”, i.e. members of ethnic minorities or the persons opposing communist regime in those countries (Stola, 2010).

Therefore, the most recent flow of Polish migrants after 2004 is also described in literature as "last migration", due to the fact that the authors anticipated that this might be the last massive outflow of Poles in a process of transition from migrant-sending to migrant-receiving country (Grabowska-Lusińska & Okólski, 2009). This economically-driven migration from Poland was comprised predominantly by younger, better-educated persons originating from the less-developed regions, medium-size and small cities or towns. In this aspect, this emigration was supposed to have important development prospects: the effect described by Polish researchers as "crowding-out" hypothesis (Okólski, 2012; Grabowska, 2021). In this view, the "last migration" enabled the completion of the modernization process in Poland, initially started during the communist, post-war period. After 1945, Poland indeed has transferred from a predominantly rural economy into the industrial one, but with the reservations for the urbanization period. Due to scarcity of resources in communist, centrally-planned economy, the housing in the cities remained limited for many, thus the population in rural areas and in small towns during the 1945-1989 period was forced to commute to work in larger cities. The lifting of the migration restrictions in 2004 enabled then to migrate to the West, leading to a better allocation of labor assets, so far trapped in the peripheral regions. The "crowding-out" hypothesis included also the expectation that many of the post-accession migrants would return to Poland, but as productive individuals whose new skills would be placed at use in more developed regions (Okólski, 2012). The existing empirical evidence supports this hypothesis: the few studies on return migration to Poland demonstrate that returnees are usually successful in socio-economic re-integration (Coniglio & Brzozowski, 2018) and could play a role of "actors of change" in the development process, especially in the local communities (Dzięglewski, 2016). Yet, still little is known about the impact of emigrants on the left-behind peripheral regions in Poland. Consequently, our project and field research contributes to fill in this knowledge gap.

1.2 East-West migration through aspiration-capabilities framework

In our empirical investigation of the post-accession migration from Central and Eastern to North-West and Western Europe, we recur to the seminal aspiration-capabilities model developed by Hein de Haas (2021), which elaborates on the former conceptual paper of Carling (2002). This model combines the individual agency of migrants and stayers with the structural opportunities and constraints that affect their capabilities to

move. Agency is here defined as the individual's ability to make autonomous decisions, whereas the structures are understood as patterns of social relations that form opportunities available for humans. Structures also influence which ideas or knowledge is available to individuals. Yet, in spite of the limited agency, people through they decisions also could shape the structures around them. De Haas indicates, that the access to migration resources is unequally distributed across communities in sending countries, but also the life aspirations of future movers (or stayers) can be highly heterogenous depending on the socio-cultural context. Additionally, albeit the human agency is limited, it is visible both in the case of voluntary, but also involuntary migration. Finally, the motivations to move should be extended beyond the simple economic factors, and include the willingness to explore new opportunities, curiosity and adventure-seeking behaviors (De Haas, 2021).

All of these factors and dimensions included in the aforementioned model make sense, when we take a closer look on the respondents of our qualitative survey: both stayers and movers. Poland entering the EU in 2004 was rather a poor economy, with GDP per capita PPC reaching 51 per cent of the EU mean, and the unemployment rate of almost 20 per cent. In last 21 years, Polish economy has experienced an impressive growth, substantial inflow of foreign direct investments (FDIs), European structural and cohesion funds – as the result the GDP per capita per head has reached the 80 per cent of the EU average. However, it is important to note that these economic benefits were not equally distributed throughout the country: the bigger winners were the largest metropoles, while population living in smaller towns and rural areas in peripheral regions benefited less. On the other hand, the dynamic growth of Polish economy combined with the political change – opening of the borders – contributed to the expansion of migration opportunities. Also Poles confronted (through movies, Tv auditions and TV series, but also during touristic visits) with the lifestyle and level of wealth of the average Western European neighbors have increased their aspirations.

Another important extension of the aspiration-capabilities model is the concept of bounded rationality proposed by Brunarska (2019): the access to information about the possibilities even in the case of European citizens, who have unrestricted freedom to move within the EU, is limited. This is also due to the fact that many individuals cannot fully process all the necessary information due to their limited cognitive skills (Brzozowski & Coniglio, 2021). Consequently, the decision to move, but also the choice of the destination might be suboptimal, second-best option. This is also the case of many

of our respondents, for whom the choice of Denmark as a destination country was very often a mix of personal networks, the lack of language skills and simple luck.

1.3 Transnational and trans-local living

A key theoretical framework underpinning our empirical research is transnational migration theory. Emerging in the 1990s through the work of social anthropologists (Schiller et al., 1992), this concept challenged the traditional view of immigrant assimilation in host societies. Transnational theory emphasizes the agency of migrants in renegotiating their identities while maintaining strong connections to their countries of origin (Vertovec, 2001). It posits that migrants can be simultaneously embedded in two social spheres—those of the host country and the homeland. The increasing affordability and accessibility of transportation, such as low-cost airlines and high-speed trains, along with the proliferation of the Internet, have significantly facilitated these cross-border connections, enabling migrants to lead transnational lives (Brzozowski et al., 2017). Research on transnationalism has demonstrated that such practices are widespread among immigrant groups from diverse ethnic backgrounds and across various geographic contexts (Kabbara & Zucchella, 2023). These practices manifest in cultural, social, economic (Solano et al., 2022), and political domains (Guarnizo et al., 2003) and may represent an alternative form of socio-economic adaptation in the host country (Portes et al., 2002), with growing evidence supporting their long-term continuity (Brzozowski & Cucculelli, 2020).

From the perspective of our research project, the most inspiring is the strand of research on transnational (migrant) families (Merla et al., 2021). The growing number of studies clearly demonstrate that transnational families can successfully manage financial, parental, care, and other emotional ties and obligations across international borders and sustain them over a longer period of time (Brandhorst, 2023). This implies that “traditional” forms of pendular mobility, are easier and more widespread than they had been previously. For instance, Polish construction workers in Denmark, one of our case studies in this report, are often pursuing a long-term strategy of circulation between country of work (Denmark) and their home country (Poland), where most of family members stay. Such (predominantly) male migrants leave usually for 4-6 week of intensive work (i.e. 10 hours per day, often even on Saturdays), and then return for 2-week brakes in Poland. Also the female caregivers from Poland often realize such migration strategies as badante in Italy (Legut, 2022): they often leave for 3 months of intensive

work, during which thanks to Internet communication are able to supervise the family situation at home and keep it under control until they come back.

Such forms of mobility have also serious implications for development at home and host country. Transnationality of migrants assumes an active involvement in the country of origin, often connected with some assets left behind or even investments (for instance purchase of land, construction of a house). On the other hand, strategies such as the one of construction workers outlined above, means that they only come for work in host country, and are not actively engaged in integration with the host society.

1.4 Social remittances

Transnational paradigm is very much connected to transfers of norms, modes of behavior and cultural practices – a phenomenon described by Peggy Levitt as "social remittances" (1998). Indeed, migrants are often perceived as "heroes" in their local community in the country of origin, therefore they role as the agents of change can be significant. For instance, the recent study of Brzozowski and Coniglio (2024) demonstrates that migrants from Poland had substantial positive role on the attitudes of their family members who stayed in relation to the public goods: in migrant's households individuals exhibited lower tolerance to tax fraud, freeriding of public transport and getting unfair social contributions. Also the study of Grabowska and Garapich (2016) shows the transfers of know-how, business models, management schemes and many others in the local communities of return migrants.

While much of the early literature emphasized their potentially beneficial effects—such as the diffusion of democratic values, gender equality, or entrepreneurial attitudes—scholars have increasingly pointed to their possible negative impacts, referred to as negative social remittances**.** Some of the negative social remittances may manifest itself in transmitting of racialized views (e.g. Islamophobic – Gawlewicz et al 2015, Pędziwiatr 2015) on certain communities, reinforcing patriarchal structures or disrupting established gender roles; lowering educational and occupational aspirations.

Consequently, in our study we are paying a special attention to potential avenues of social remittances, various types of them but also the barriers in such transfers between host and home country.

1.5 Return migrations

Finally, the case of returnees is becoming increasingly important for Central and Eastern Europe and Poland in particular. As mentioned before, the rate of return among post-accession migrants from Poland varied between 40 and 50 per cent (Brzozowski et al., 2015). Moreover, the returnees are usually successful in their socio-economic reintegration at home: the study of Coniglio and Brzozowski (2018) on return migrants in Silesia voivodeship (województwo Śląskie) outlines that the homecoming in economic aspect is usually more a "sweet" than a "bitter" experience, as persons with former migration experience are able to attain meaningful employment, and more important – put at use the skills acquired during the international stay. Consequently, in this project we also try to investigate whether the returnees are – like in the classical typology of return migration proposed by Cerase (1974) – the true innovators, willing to creatively contribute to the development of their local communities in the country of origin. The last chapter of the report is devoted to return migrants in vulnerable regions in Poland.

2. Premium_EU cases: Poles in Denmark, Netherlands and Spain

In this part, we study the EU mobility, focusing on Polish migrants. As demonstrated in the previous sections, Poles are indeed one of the largest groups of EU-born foreigners in many EU countries. By focusing on this group, we are able to investigate the consequences of their migration both in the origin and at the destination, including also the synergies between these places caused by mobility. As migration takes various forms, we analyze different patterns of mobility including circular migration, chained, short term and long-term mobility of this group as well as immobility in Poland.

In the following chapters we analyze the situation of Polish immigrants in Denmark, Netherlands and Spain, as well as, Polish return-shuttle/circulating migrants and immobility in selected vulnerable regions in Poland.

3. Polish immigrants in Denmark

Konrad Pędziwiatr (UEK), Jan Brzozowski (UJ), Marcin Stonawski (DSK)

3.1 Introduction: Polish immigration to Denmark

The selection of Denmark as a case study for a destination country for Polish migrants is motivated by both current migration statistics and historical context. In fact, Polish workers were the first significant group of immigrants to arrive in Denmark, beginning with the so-called “beetroot girls”—seasonal agricultural laborers who came primarily for the beet harvest between 1893 and 1914. It is estimated that around 100 thousand individuals, approximately 75% of whom were women, migrated to Denmark during this period—many of them multiple times. They were drawn by abundant job opportunities in the Lolland and Falster regions, particularly in the sugar industry.

Following the outbreak of the First World War, many of these workers were unable to return to Poland, resulting in prolonged stays that, for some, led to permanent settlement in Denmark. This initial wave of migration also sparked significant public debate, which culminated in the introduction of the 1908 “Polish Act” (Polakloven). This legislation established minimum labor standards, required written employment contracts in both Danish and Polish, set minimum wages, and mandated acceptable housing and access to healthcare (Nellemann, 1970).

Although this early wave of migration did not continue beyond 1914, and the “beetroot girls” gradually assimilated into Danish society, the historical parallels with contemporary migration trends are notable. Interestingly, the same regions that attracted Polish migrants over a century ago—Lolland and Falster—are once again key destinations, this time mainly due to the large infrastructure projects such as for example construction of the Fehmarnbelt Tunnel linking Puttgarden in Germany with Rødbyhavn in Denmark. Polish workers now make up the majority of the workforce involved in this major infrastructure project, and local authorities are actively encouraging their settlement in the sparsely populated Lolland region.

After the war ended, the vast majority of Polish women decided to settle in Denmark. At this time, the network of Polish diaspora institutions began to develop rapidly – not only in the form of new churches and chapels, but primarily in the form of secular organizations. The first of these was the Polish Workers' Union, founded in Nakskov in 1925. It quickly gained new members, leading to the establishment of branches in other centers with large Polish populations – Nykøbing Falster, Maribo, Næstved, and Copenhagen. Polish Houses were also established in Nakskov (1933), Nykøbing Falster (1934), and Maribo (1936), which, in addition to serving as headquarters for the organization, served as a center of social and cultural life (Śmigielski, 2022).

During World War II, neutral Denmark was attacked by Germany and occupied by it until the end of the conflict. During this time, the Danish authorities adopted a policy of collaboration, which meant constantly balancing between maintaining partial sovereignty and submission to the occupiers. For this reason, the Polish government in London initially instructed the Polish diaspora in Denmark not to engage in sabotage or subversive activities. However, the situation changed in 1940, when, as part of an initiative by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in London, an organization of Poles in Scandinavian countries, codenamed Felicja, was established. This organization later became the Secret Polish Organization in Denmark. Its primary activities were gathering information for the government in London and transferring people from occupied Poland. In 1944, the organization was crushed by the Gestapo, and its leaders – Lieutenant Lucjan Masłocha and his wife Anna Mogensen – were murdered. After the war, they were buried with military honors at the Danish Resistance Cemetery near Copenhagen (Kruszewski, 2016).

After 1945, Polish immigration to Denmark declined. Immediately after the conflict, a small number of war refugees (DPs) arrived, primarily Polish soldiers liberated from German camps, and some forced laborers deported to Germany. Practically immediately after 1945, the small Danish Polish community fragmented and split organizationally into two factions: one loyal to the London government, and another group collaborating with the Polish People's Republic authorities and the Polish embassy in Copenhagen. The next wave of immigration consisted of Poles of Jewish descent, forced to leave the country after the March 1968 uprising. Their number is estimated at three thousand, at most four thousand. Finally, the last wave before Poland's democratic transformation was the so-called Solidarity emigration of the 1980s, estimated at another two thousand. Although small in number, this represented a significant qualitative change – many of its representatives actively engaged in Polish diaspora activities and became leaders of Polish organizations and associations. Roman Śmigielski estimates the total immigration between 1945 and 1989 at approximately 10,000 people (Śmigielski, 2022).

In the period after 1989, Denmark did not attract much interest from Poles in terms of emigration. The situation did not change significantly after accession to the European Union, due to the fact that the Danish government initially maintained temporary restrictions on access to the domestic labor market for new EU citizens from A8 countries (including Poland). A certain exception and exception was Polish youth, due to the relatively attractive conditions for studying in Denmark: the number of students from Poland in 2006 was estimated at 1,900 (Money.pl, 2006). These restrictions were

lifted only on 1 May 2009, but there was no revolution in arrivals – a year later (2010) the number of temporary emigrants from Poland in Denmark was estimated at 19,000 (GUS, 2021), while according to official statistics, there were more Danish Poles – just under 30,000 people, 20% of whom were the "old" Polish diaspora, i.e. people born in Poland with Danish citizenship, or their offspring (see figure 1).

The situation began to change with the expansion of the Copenhagen metro to include the M3 and M4 lines and increased investment in the construction sector. Demand for construction labor increased from 145,000 positions at the end of 2012 to 195,000 by the end of 2022 (Overgård et al., 2023). As a result, numerous Polish workers began to arrive in the country. These new immigrants also attracted the attention of local researchers, who attempted to analyze their working conditions. A report by a team from the Center for Research and the Labor Market (CARMA) at Aalborg University found that immigrants from the new member states (including Poland) work in the most difficult and dangerous jobs, including demolition, and are often exposed to exploitation by employers (Overgård et al., 2023). This is also related to the fact that many Polish employees work not directly for Danish companies but for Polish subcontractors and intermediaries, which means that working conditions do not always meet Danish standards (Arnholtz, 2021). This issue also gained significance during the Covid-19 pandemic, due to the fact that many Polish workers were housed in workers' hostels without maintaining adequate sanitary standards, which resulted in a significant increase in infections.

Before we elaborate further on different aspects of the current Polish migration to Denmark it is necessary to present key features of the methodology of this study and profile the community according the Danish register data.

3.2 Data sources and Methodology

The key sources of contextual data for the report on Polish immigration to Denmark come from desk research and analysis of the existing materials. This date was crucial to draw the aforementioned historical profile of the Polish community in Denmark. Furthermore the analysis below is mainly a result of the thorough analysis of the register data on Poles and employment of qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The analysed qualitative material consists of the data collected during the fieldwork research carried out in March and April 2024. In this period the authors interviewed 27 Polish immigrants and 5 experts in different locations in Denmark (e.g. Kopenhagen,

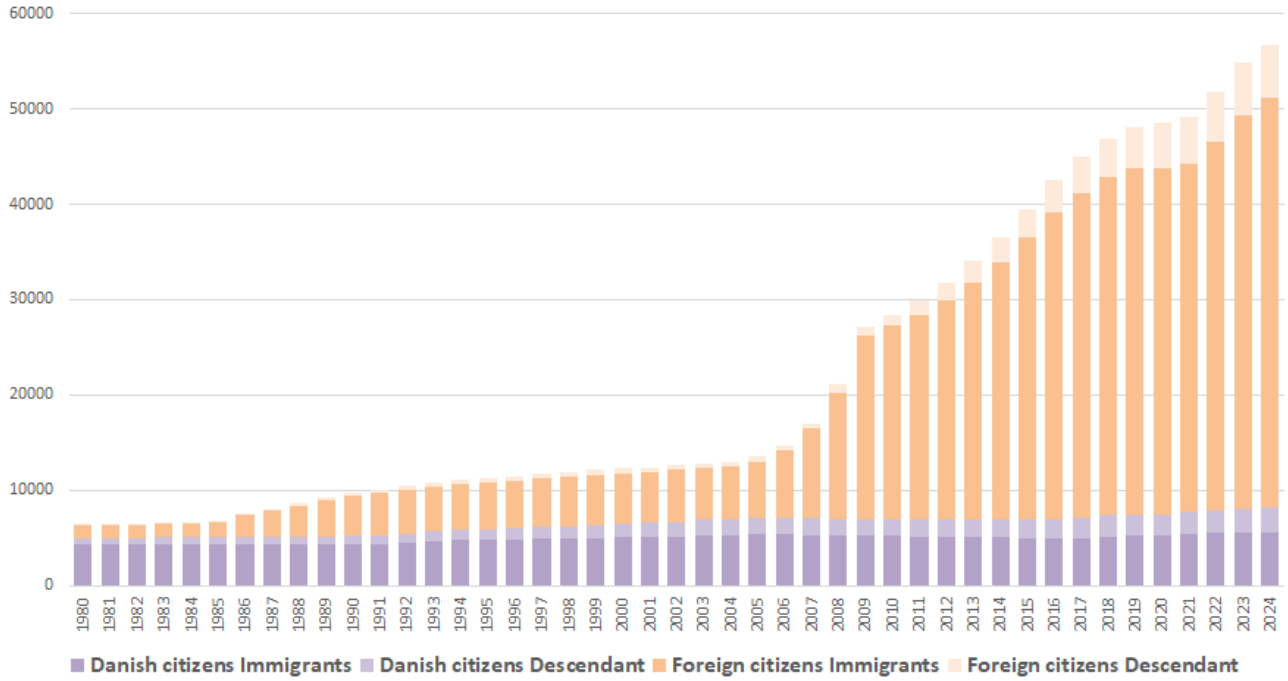
Rodby, Nakskov, Haslev, Næstved i Rodbyhavn). The recruitment of the interviewees was carried out using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling strategy commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who possess specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research question. Key inclusion criteria required were Polish citizenship, age over the age of 18, and residence in Denmark for at least one year. The vast majority of the interviews were collected during face-to-face meetings with the interviewees. If it was impossible to reach a given interviewee then exceptionally the interview was carried out via Zoom or Teams. We also took part in the community events including "Polish mass" and meeting of Polish Builders club. The interviews were conducted in Polish or English depending on participant's preference and lasted between 50 and 120 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The research received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Krakow University of Economics. All participants were informed of the study's objectives, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consents were obtained before each interview. All interviews were anonymized during transcription and codes were assigned to each interviewee to protect their identities. All collected data was meticulously transcribed and coded with the help of the Atlas.ti software using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The Atlas.ti was employed to manage, code, and visualize qualitative data.

3.3 Key features of the Polish population in Denmark

Population size and ancestral structure

According to the latest registers on 1 January 2024, there were 56.7 thousand persons of Polish origin in Denmark. Of these, 8.1 thousand had Danish citizenship (5.6 thousand immigrants and 2.5 thousand descendants), i.e. 14 per cent of Poles (Figure 1). Those without Danish citizenship numbered 48.6 thousand (43 thousand immigrants and 5.6 descendants). The size of the population has increased considerably after the Poland' accession to the European Union. The population in 2024 was thus 8.7 times higher than in 1980 (then around 6.5 thousand).

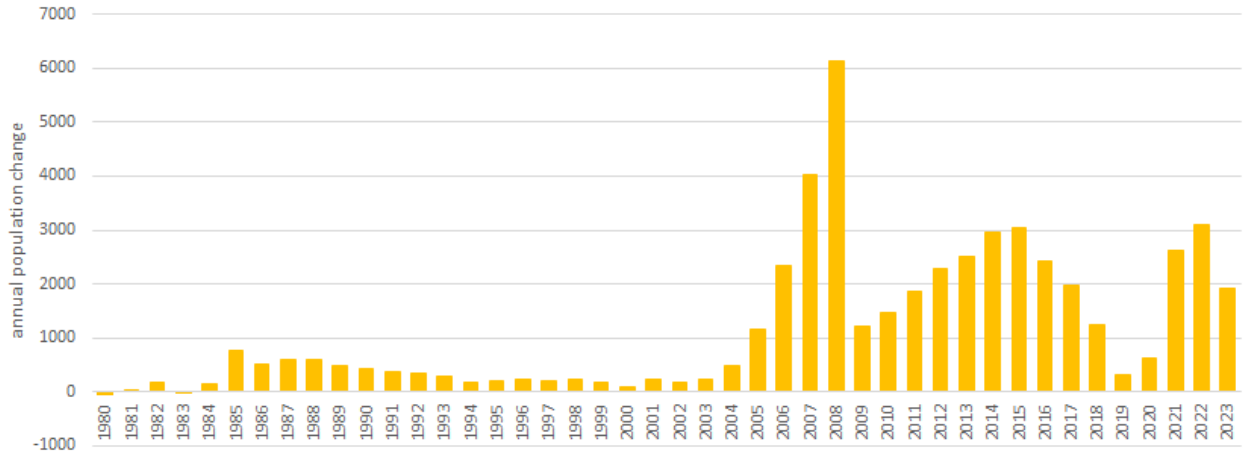
Figure 1. Population of Polish origin by citizenship and ancestry in Denmark in 1980-2024



Source: Danish population register (DST 2024).

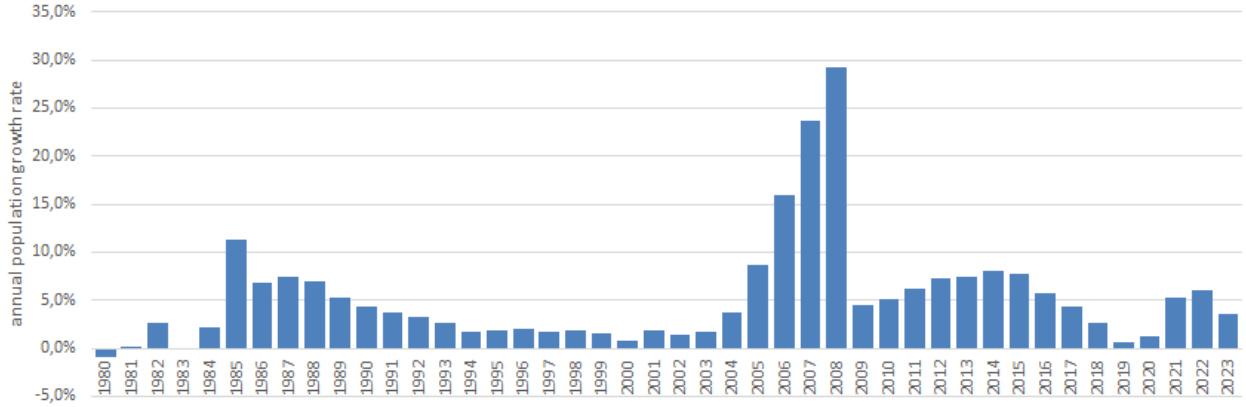
The population of Poles grew throughout the period 1980-2024, with the exception of two years, 1981 and 1984, when it fell slightly. However, the dynamics of change varied considerably. The highest annual growth was observed in the period immediately following Poland's accession to the European Union, with a peak in 2008 - just before Denmark fully opened its labour market to citizens from the new member states (1 May 2009). In that year the number of Poles increased by 6.1 thousand (29%) (Figures 2 and 3). After that, another peak was observed in 2015-2016 by about 3 thousand (8%) and in 2023 by 3 thousand (6%). During the COVID pandemic, the growth was reduced to a very low level. But after that, in 2023, there was an increase of 3 thousand (6%).

Figure 2 Annual population change of Polish origin population in Denmark in 1980-2024.



Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

Figure 3 Annual population growth rate of Polish origin population in Denmark in 1980-2024.

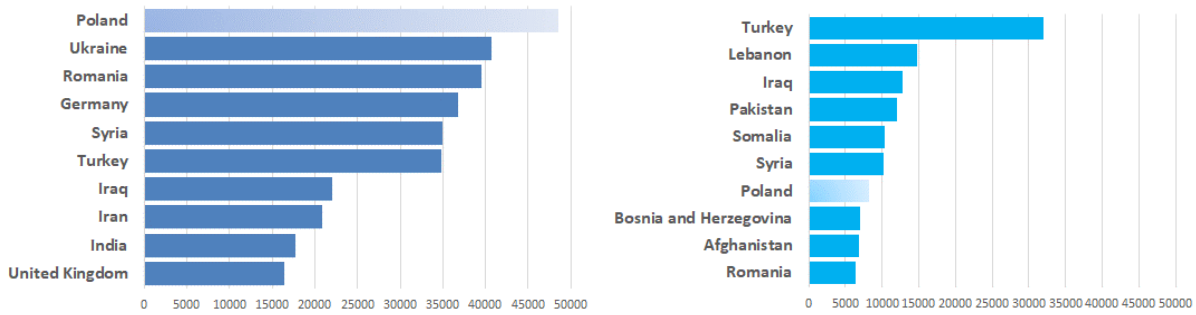


Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

In 2024, there were 48.6 thousand Polish immigrants in Denmark. Poles were the largest group of immigrants in Denmark (Figure 4). The next groups were Ukrainians - 40.7 thousand, Romanians - 39.6 thousand and Germans - 36.8 thousand. Immigrants from non-Western countries such as Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran followed.

Figure 4. Ten largest foreign origin immigrant and descendant groups in Denmark in 2024

a) *Immigrants* b) *Descendants*

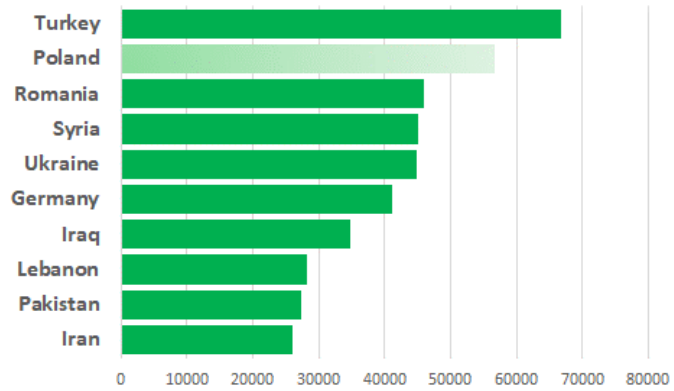


Source: Danish population register (DST 2024).

If exclude the so-called “beetroot migration” mentioned earlier the Polish diaspora has a relatively short period of residence in Denmark compared to many diasporas of non-Western origin. As a result, there are not many descendants of Polish immigrants. In 2024 there were 8.1 thousand people - about 14% of the Polish diaspora. Among the descendants, this group ranked seventh after Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia and Syria. In comparison, the number of descendants of Turkish origin was almost 32 thousand, only slightly less than the number of first-generation immigrants.

Taking immigrants and descendants together, the Polish population was second only to the Turkish diaspora (Figure 5).

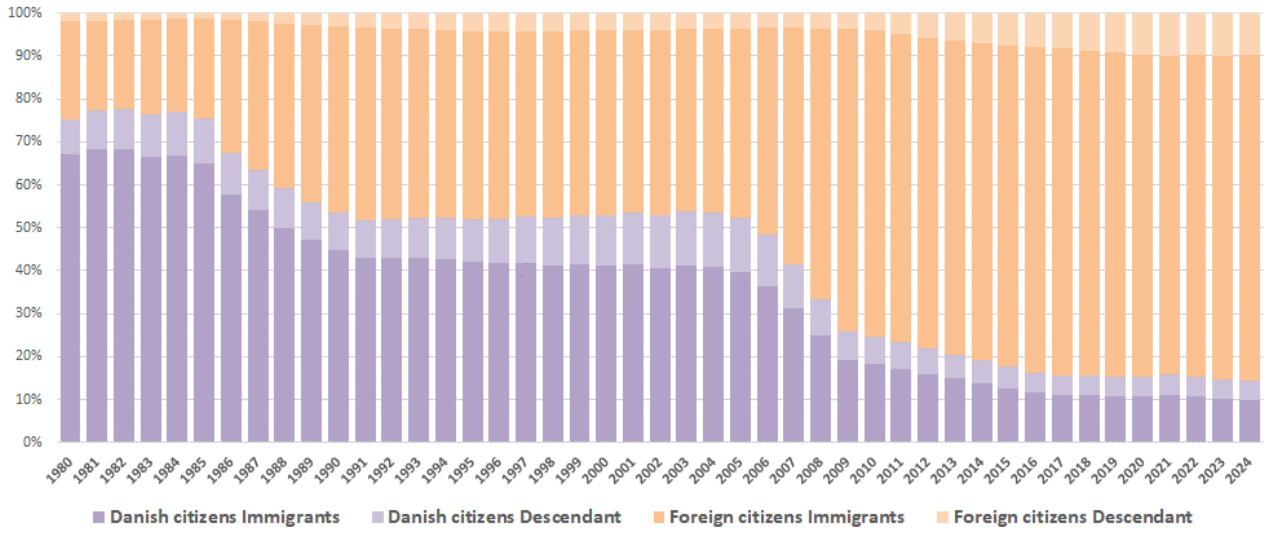
Figure 5. Ten largest foreign-born populations in Denmark in 2024



Source: Danish population register (DST 2024).

During the period 1980-2024 there was a major shift in the composition by origin and citizenship (Figure 6). In the 1980s, the dominant group in the Polish diaspora was people of Polish origin with Danish citizenship (naturalised immigrants and descendants) with a share of 75% (immigrants and descendants). This share decreased throughout the period and the group lost its majority in 2006 and reached its lowest share in 2024 - 14%. At the end of the period, immigrants with foreign citizenship had a share of 76% and descendants without a Danish passport had a share of 10% of the population.

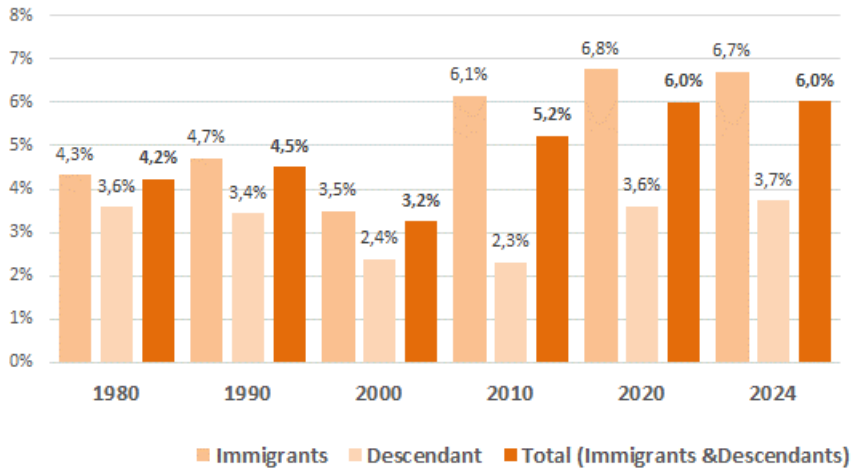
Figure 6. Population structure of Polish origin by citizenship and ancestry in 1980-2024



Source: Danish population register (DST 2024).

Despite the large increase in the size of the Polish population, their share in the Danish population of foreign origin increased only from 4.2% in 1980 to 6% in 2024. This was mainly due to the increase in the immigrant population from 4.3 per cent to 6.7 per cent, as the share of descendants was almost the same -3.6-3.7 per cent (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Share of Polish-origin persons among immigrants and descendants in Denmark in 1980-2024

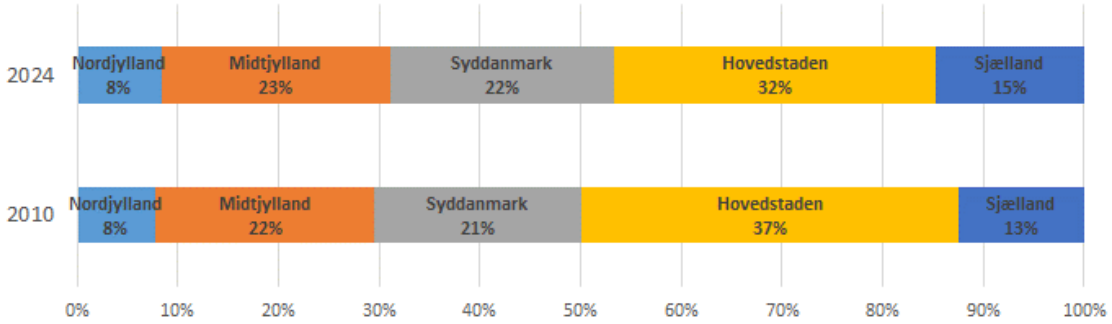


Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

Spatial allocation

The largest proportion of the population of Polish origin lives in the Capital Region of Denmark (Hovedstaden). In 2024 it was around 18 thousand people - 32 per cent of the Polish population in Denmark (Figure 8). In the Central Region (Midtjylland) and Southern Region (Syddanmark) around 12-13 thousand (22-23% of the Polish population) lived. In Zealand (Sjelland) there were 8 thousand (15%). The smallest population was in North Denmark (Nordjylland) - 4.7 thousand (8%). The most recent wave of migration after 2010 contributed more to the regions further away from the capital Copenhagen, so that the share of the Polish population in the Capital Region of Denmark decreased from 37% in 2010 to 32% in 2024. The highest relative increase was observed in Sjelland, where the population increased by 135% from 3.5 thousand. The population of Poles at least doubled in all regions except the Capital Region, where it increased by around 70% over the period.

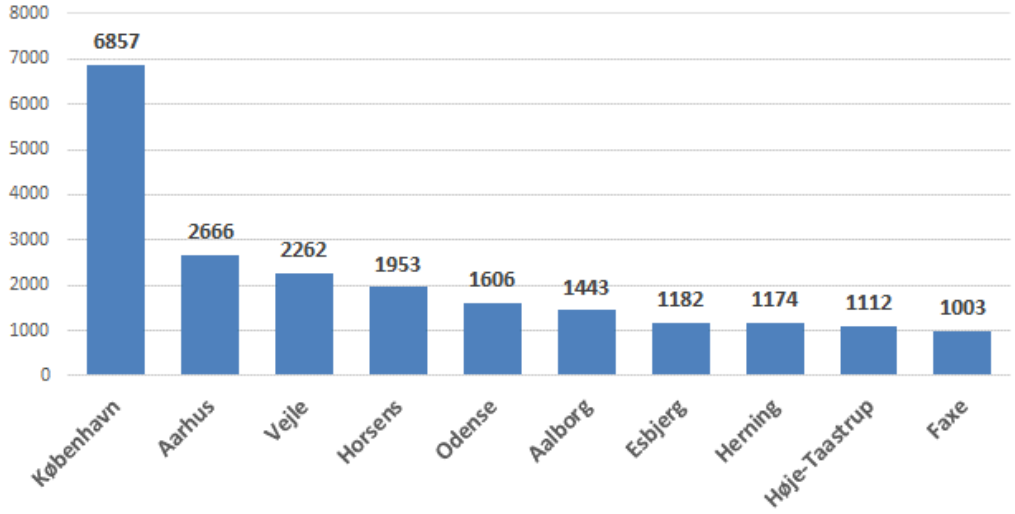
Figure 8. Distribution of Polish by regions in Denmark in 2010 and 2024



Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

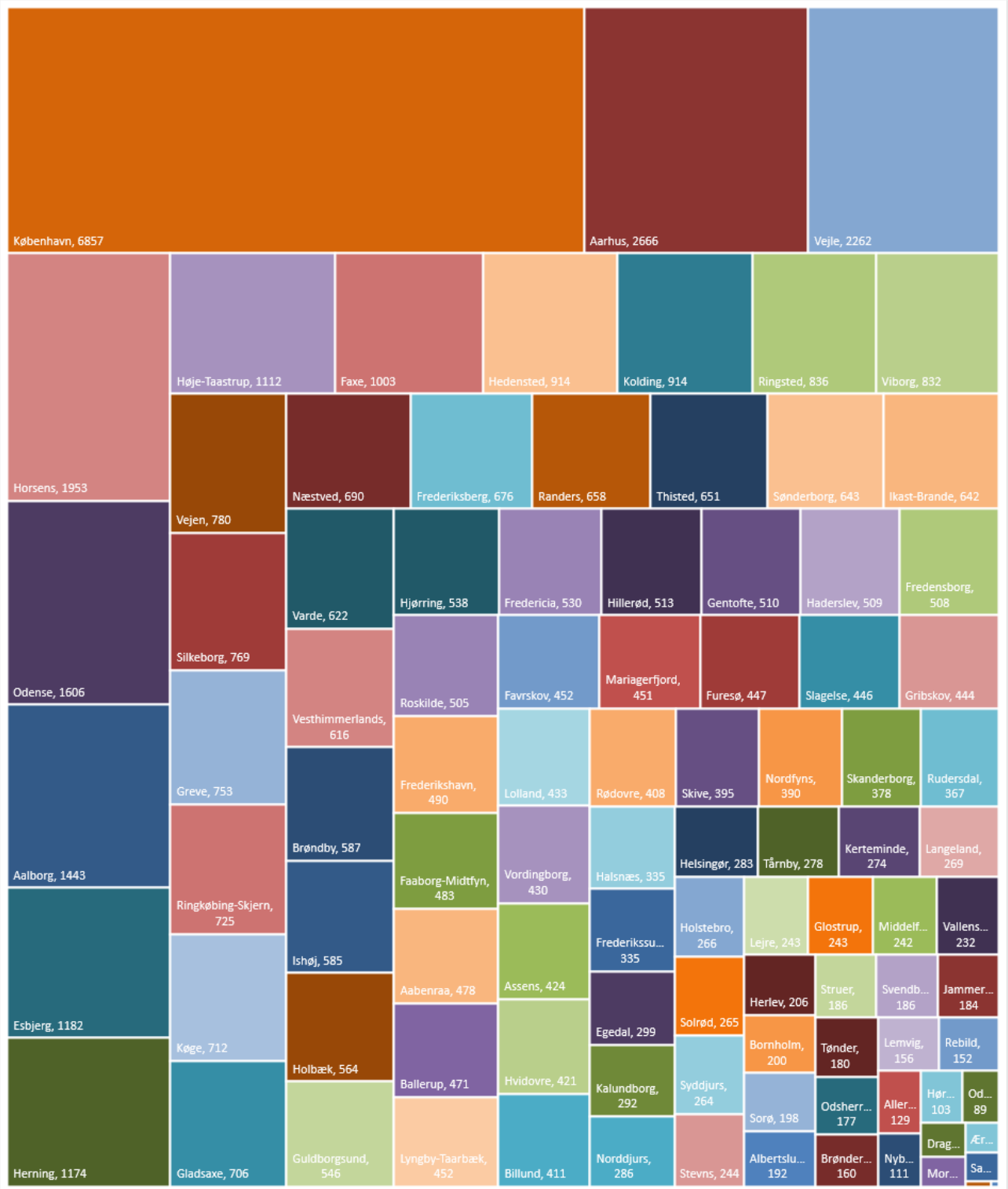
The largest community of the Polish diaspora lives in Denmark's largest cities. Not surprisingly, the largest population is in the municipality of Copenhagen (København) - about 6.9 thousand people (Figure 9 and 10). About 2.7 thousand live in Aarhus, 2.3 thousand in Vajle, about 2 thousand in Horsens, 1.6 thousand in Odense and 1.4 thousand in Aalborg. Among the top ten municipalities with a Polish population is Faxe - the project's case study municipality - where about a thousand Poles live.

Figure 9. Municipalities with the largest Polish-origin population in 2024



Source: Danish population register (DST 2024).

Figure 10. Polish origin population in municipalities in Denmark in 2024

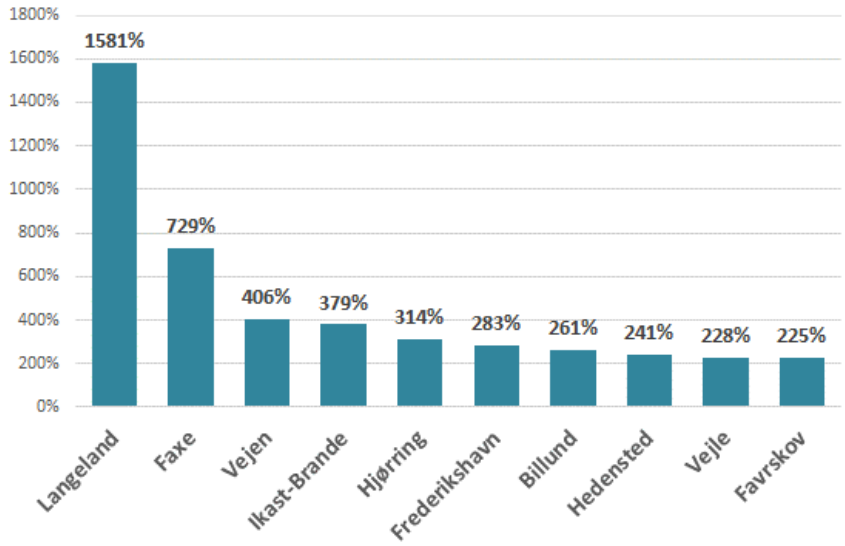


Source: Danish population register (DST 2024).

Faxe was also the municipality with the highest increase in the Polish population (Figure 11). The population grew from 121 to 1003 persons in fourteen years (increase of 729%).

Only in Langeland did the Polish population rise by a higher percentage - 1581% from 16 to 269 persons, due to the recruitment of Polish workers in a windmill turbine factory.

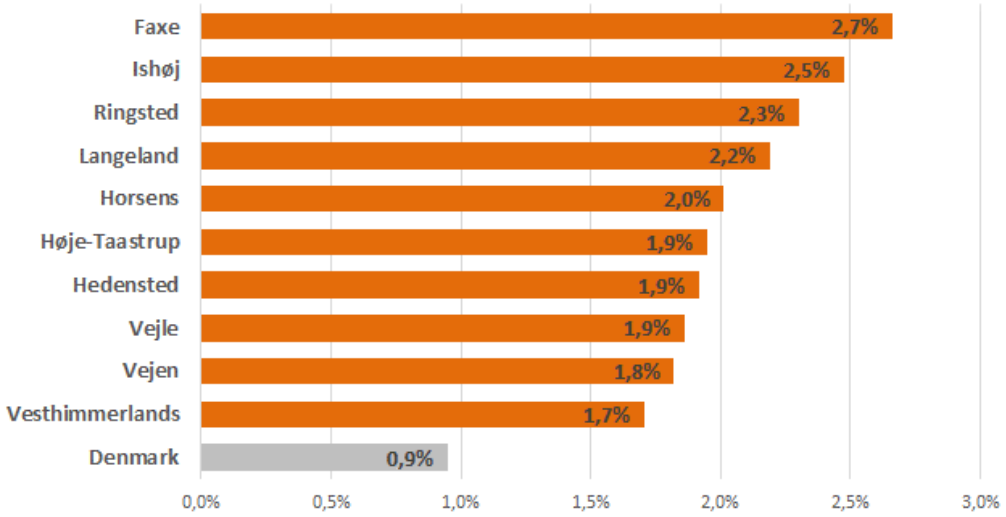
Figure 11. Municipalities with the largest increase of Polish-origin population in 2010-2024



Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

As shown above, the Polish population in Faxe municipality has grown rapidly over the last decade. This change put the municipality at the top of all Danish municipalities in terms of the share of persons of Polish origin in the total population, with a share of 2.7% at the beginning of 2024 (Figure 12). The next municipalities with a share of more than 2% are Ishøj - 2.5%, Ringsted - 2.3%, Langeland - 2.2% and Horsens - 2%.

Figure 12. Municipalities with the highest share of Polish origin population in 2024



Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

In our case study municipalities, Faxe and Lolland, there was a significant increase in the population of Polish origin between 2010 and 2024 (Table 1). In Faxe, the population increased from 121 to 1003 persons, an increase of about 730% in just 14 years. In Lolland - historically one of the first regions with organised migration from Poland in the XIX century - the population almost doubled from 234 in 2010 to 433 in 2024.

Table 1. Polish-origin population in chosen municipalities in 2010-2024

Kommune	Persons of Polish-origin				*Change*	Share in Total Population			
	2010	2015	2020	2024	*2010-24*	2010	2015	2020	2024
Faxe	121	277	597	1.003	728,9%	0,3%	0,8%	1,6%	2,7%
Lolland	234	287	356	433	85,0%	0,5%	0,7%	0,9%	1,1%
Denmark	**28.401**	**39.465**	**48.473**	**56.463**	**99%**	**0,5%**	**0,7%**	**0,8%**	**0,9%**

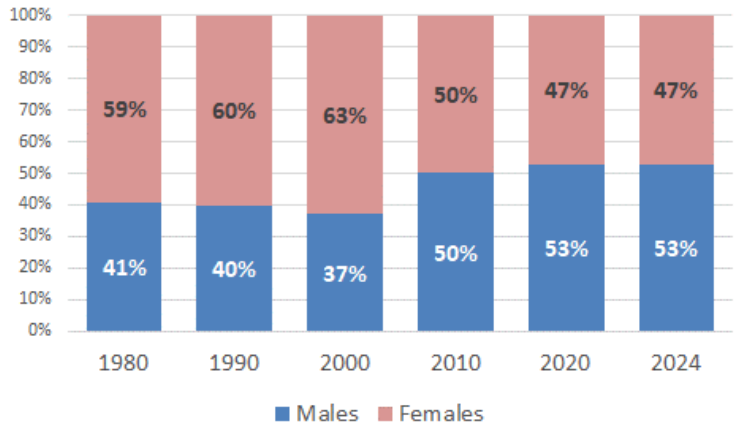
Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

Population by sex

In the period 1980-2024 there was a significant change in the sex composition of the Polish diaspora (Figure 13). In the 1980s and 1990s, the female population dominated with

a share of 60%. Then, in the 2000s, with the influx of Polish workers after the opening of the labour market in 2009, the population was balanced, reaching a 50-50 split in 2010. After that, males became the dominant group with a share of 53% in 2024.[1]

Figure 13. Population structure of Polish origin by sex in Denmark in 1980-2024



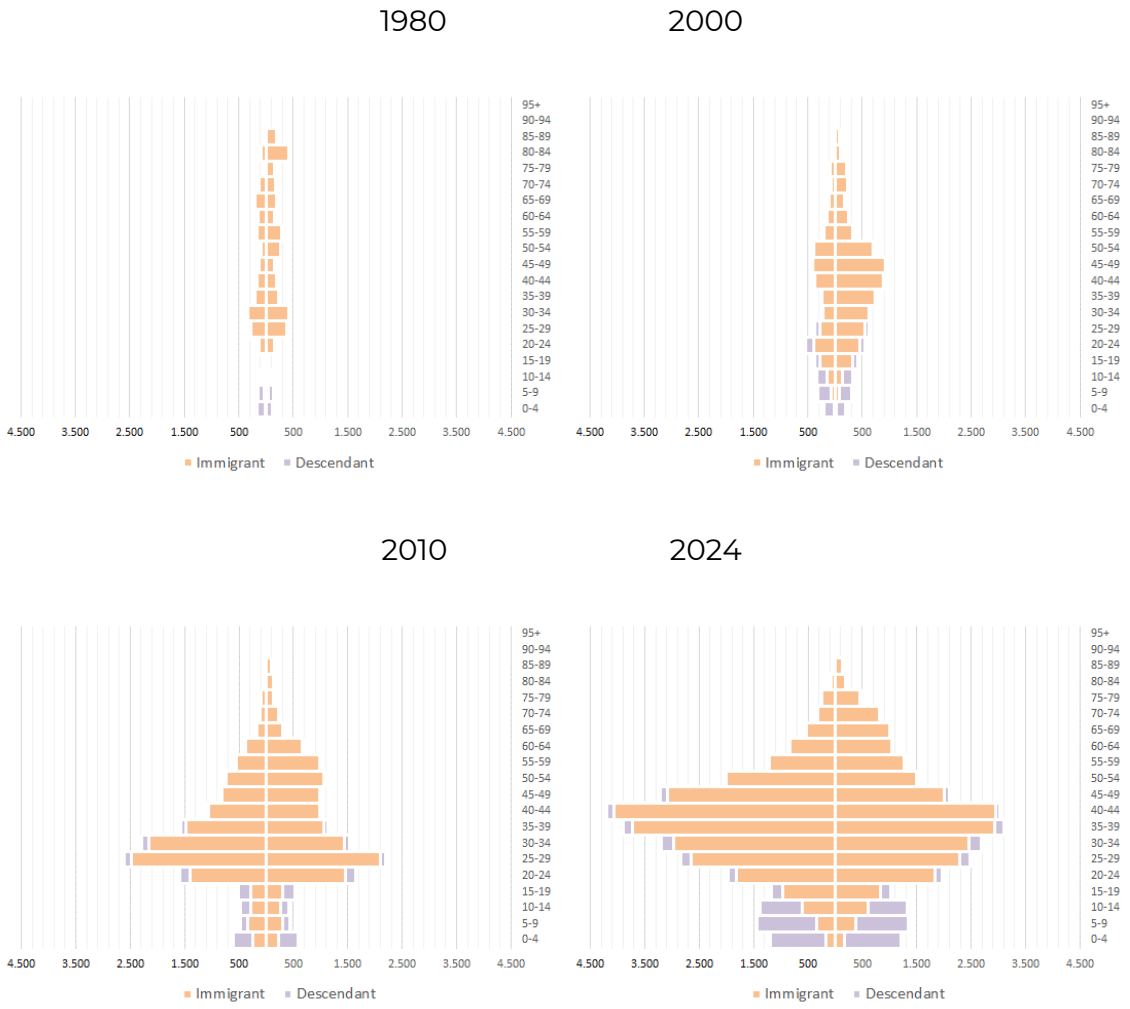
Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

Population by age and sex

The growth and structural change of the Polish diaspora is very visible when we look at the population pyramids in 1980, 2000, 2010 and 2024 (Figure 14). The population of Polish origin changed dramatically in 1980-2024, not only in terms of size, but also in terms of age and gender composition, forming a pyramid typical of recent economic migration, with a high proportion of working-age population and a relatively low proportion of descendants. As already mentioned, there are more men than women in the working age population.

[1] Similar situation one could observe in Poland with regards to Ukrainian citizens before Polish accession to the EU and after it.

Figure 14. Population pyramids of Poles by ancestry in 1980, 2000, 2010 and 2024

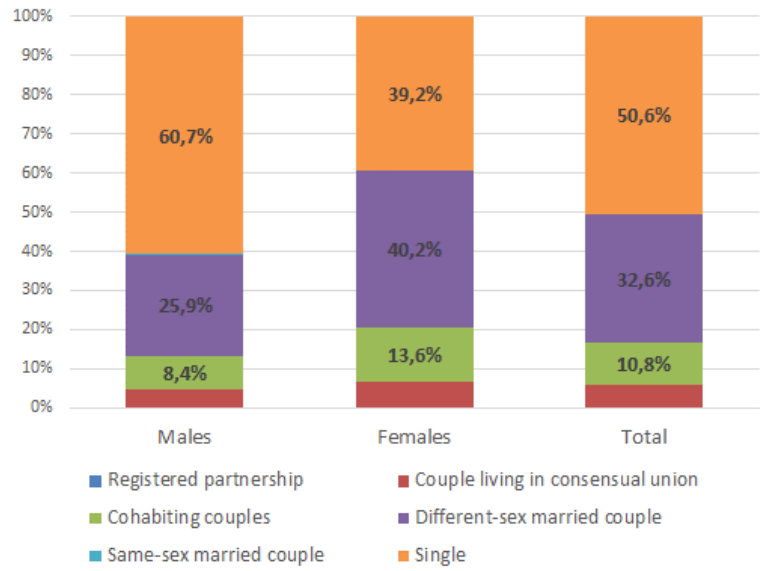


Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

Population by family type

In 2022, around half of the Polish population aged 18 and over was single (Figure 15). 32.6% were married and about 10.8% lived in a consensual union. There were significant differences in the structure of marital status by gender. Some 60.7% of men were single, compared with 39% of women. Among women, the highest proportions of married persons were 40.2% (compared with 25.9% for men) and of cohabiting persons 13.6% (compared with 8.4%).

Figure 15. Polish-origin population aged 18 years and over by sex and family type in Denmark in 2022



Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

In our case study municipalities, Poles in Lolland have a similar structure by marital status to that observed for the population of Polish origin as a whole, both for men and women (Table 2). While the majority of men in Faxe municipality are single - almost eight out of ten are not registered as partners.

Table 2. Share of Polish-origin population by sex and family type in chosen municipalities in 2022

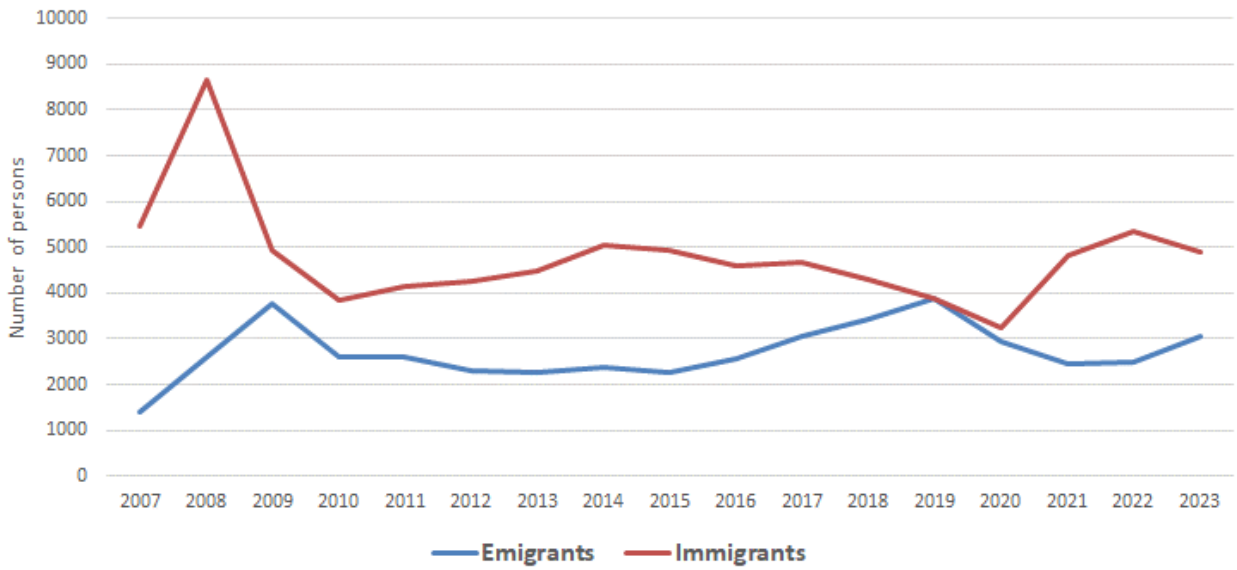
Family Type	Denmark		Faxe		Lolland	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Registered partnership	0,1%	0,0%	0,4%	0,0%	0%	0%
Couple living in consensual union	4,8%	6,8%	3,3%	8,4%	4%	6%
Cohabiting couples	8,4%	13,6%	3,7%	11,2%	6%	10%
Different-sex married couple	25,9%	40,2%	14,3%	48,3%	33%	47%
Same-sex married couple	0,1%	0,2%	0,4%	0,0%	0%	0%
Single	60,7%	39,2%	78,0%	32,0%	58%	37%

Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

Migration

Figure 16 shows the immigration and emigration of Polish citizens to Denmark in the period 2007-2023, which was relatively stable, creating a migration surplus in the country. There is only one period - around 2008, before Denmark's full opening of the labour market - when immigration peaked in the period considered, resulting in the highest positive net migration in the country.

Figure 16. Immigration and emigration of Polish citizens in Denmark in 2007-2023



Source: Danish population register (DST 2024).

According to the Danish registers, around 96 per cent of Polish citizens came to Denmark directly from Poland in the period 2010-2024 (Table 3). However, there were Poles who had previously resided in another country, such as United Kingdom - 544 persons (almost 1%), Germany - 302 (0.5%), Sweden - 151, USA - 129, Norway - 122, Netherlands - 104 and Ireland - 100.

Table 3. Immigration of Polish citizens by country of last residence in 2010-2024

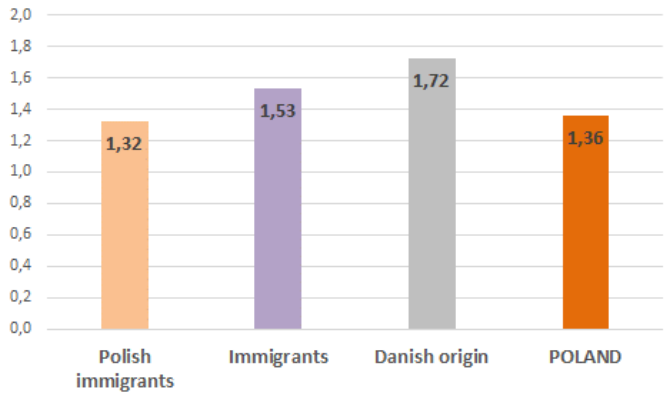
Country of last residence	Immigrants	Share
Poland	60076	96,1%
United Kingdom	544	0,9%
Germany	302	0,5%
Sweden	151	0,2%
USA	129	0,2%
Norway	122	0,2%
Netherlands	104	0,2%
Ireland	100	0,2%
Spain	88	0,1%
Italy	56	0,1%
Iceland	54	0,1%
Argentina	53	0,1%
France	50	0,1%
Israel	49	0,1%
Not stated	47	0,1%
Canada	37	0,1%
Australia	37	0,1%
Switzerland	36	0,1%
Peru	29	0,0%
Greece	28	0,0%
Other	403	0,6%
Total	62495	100,0%

Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

Fertility

The fertility of Polish immigrant women in Denmark is comparable to the level observed in Poland. In the period 2018-2022, the total fertility rate of this group was 1.32 children, while in Poland it was 1.36 children (Figure 17). This level is significantly lower than for all immigrants in Denmark - 1.53 children. At the same time, the total TFR in Denmark was 1.67 and for persons of Danish origin it was 1.72 children.

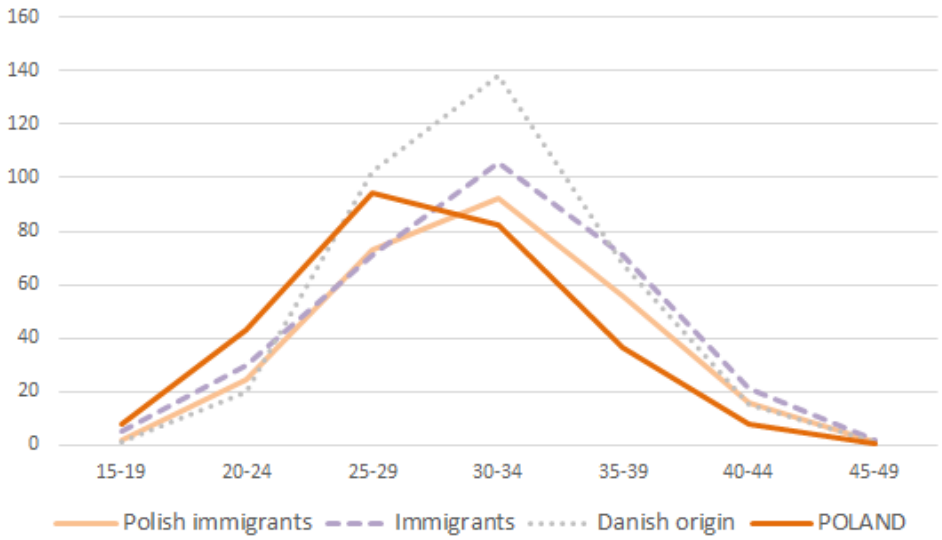
Figure 17. Total Fertility Rate among Polish-origin immigrants, immigrants and Danish-origin in Denmark and in Poland in 2018-2022



Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024) and Polish register (GUS 2024).

Despite the similarity in the fertility level of Polish women in Denmark and Poland, there is a significant difference in the fertility age profile between these groups. It appears that Polish immigrants are more likely to have children in older age groups than those living in Poland. Figure 18 shows that the age-specific fertility rates in the 15-29 age group are higher in Poland than among the Poles in Denmark, but lower after the age of 30. The general shape of the profiles among women of Danish origin, immigrants and Polish immigrants is similar, with the highest rates at age 30-34, but the levels are insignificantly different and the highest fertility intensity is observed among the Danish population - around 140 births per 1000 women in 2018-2022. For all immigrants it was around 100 births and for Polish women around 90 births.

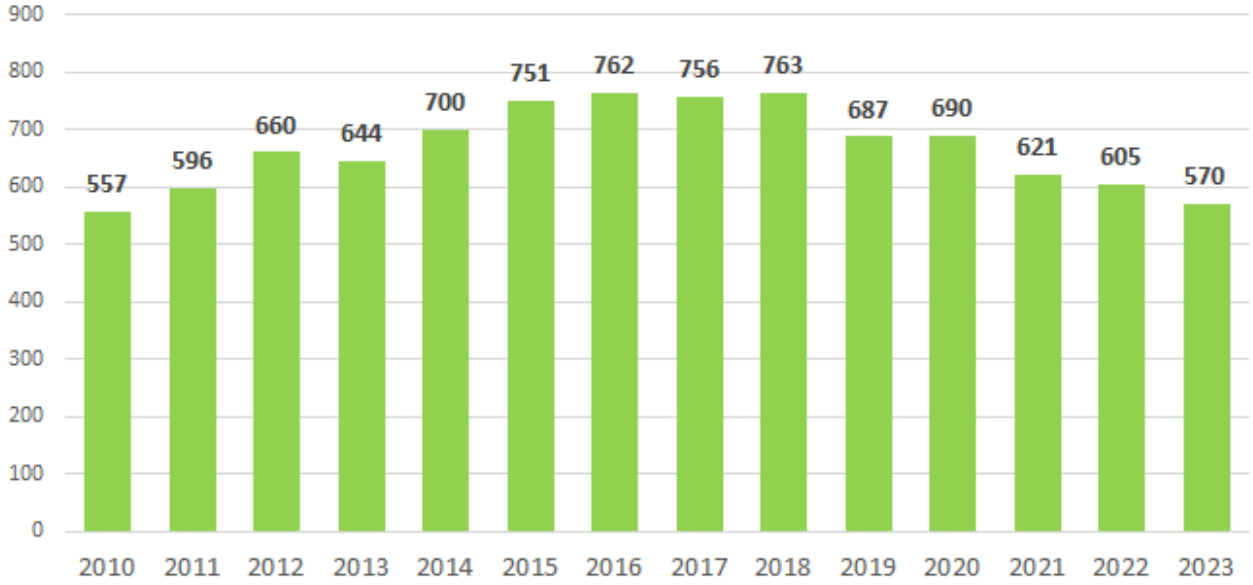
Figure 18. Age-specific fertility age by origin in Denmark and Poland in 2018-2022



Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024) and Polish register (GUS 2024).

Figure 19 shows the number of children born in Denmark to mothers of Polish origin between 2010 and 2023. Despite a significant increase in the number of immigrants from Poland during this period, the number of children did not show an upward trend. There was an increase in the number of births from 557 to 763 between 2010 and 2018, but a decrease to 570 in 2023. This is a result of the decline in fertility among Polish women in Denmark, which fell from 1.59 children in 2010-2014 to 1.32 in 2018-2023 (Figure 20).

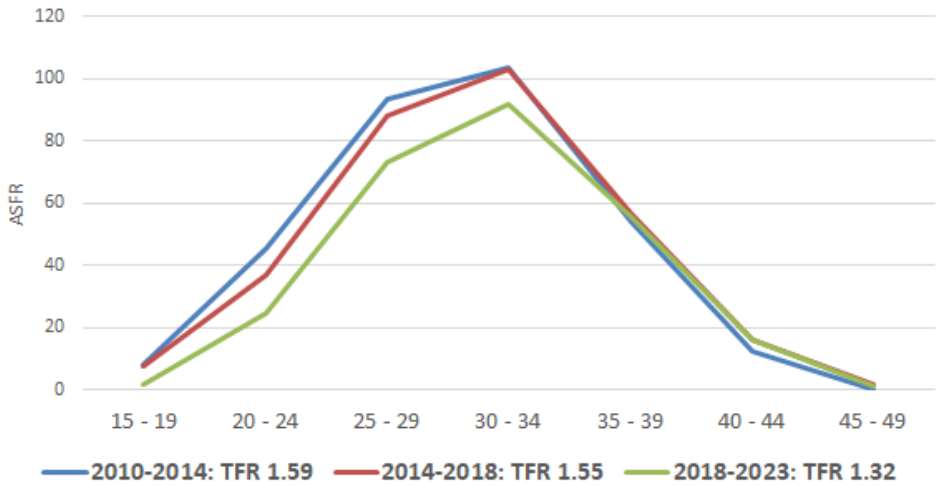
Figure 19. Number of births to Polish-origin mothers in Denmark in 2010-2023



Source: Danish population register (DST 2024).

Total fertility has declined because of a significant reduction in the intensity of events in the age groups below 35. This is particularly evident in the most recent period (Figure 20).

Figure 20. Total fertility rate among Polish immigrants in Denmark in 2010-2023

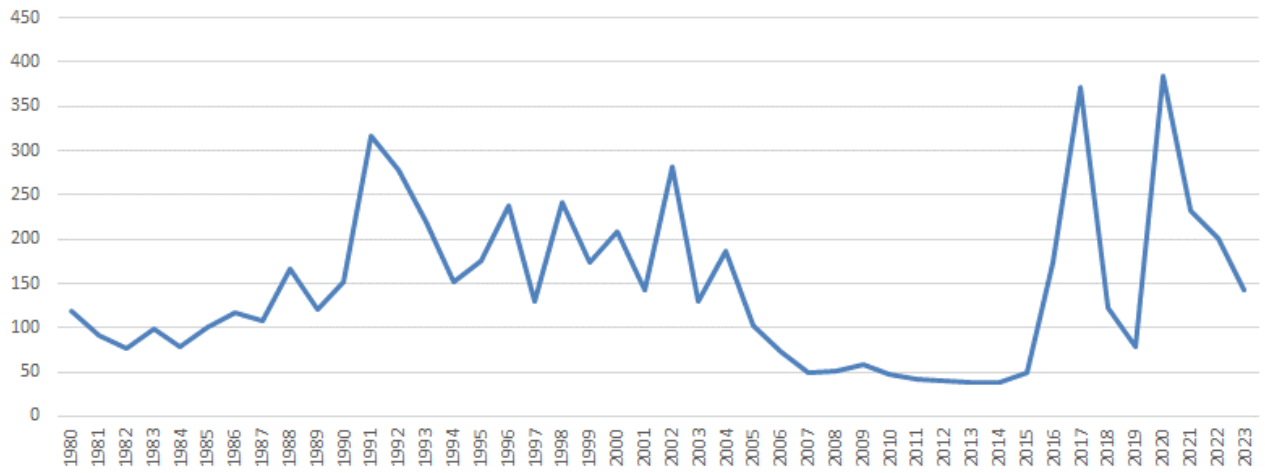


Source: own calculations based on Danish population register (DST 2024).

Naturalization

The naturalisation of Polish citizens in Denmark is a rather small phenomenon, counted in hundreds. The numbers fluctuate considerably in the period 1980-2023. Figure 21 shows local peaks of naturalisation events in 1991 - 317 cases, 2002 - 282 cases, and in the most recent period in 2017 - 372 and 2020 - 384 cases. Thus, the rate of naturalisation decreased significantly with the growth of the Polish population and the number of naturalisations remained at a more or less similar level. It can be seen that the importance of Danish citizenship decreases with Poland's accession to the European Union. It is clearly visible that after 2004 the number of naturalisations per year dropped to the level of 50 cases. It is only in recent years, with the longer stay of Polish migrants and the increase in the number of descendants, that the number of naturalisations has increased significantly.

Figure 21. Number of persons who acquired Danish citizenship having former Polish citizenship in Denmark in 1980-2023



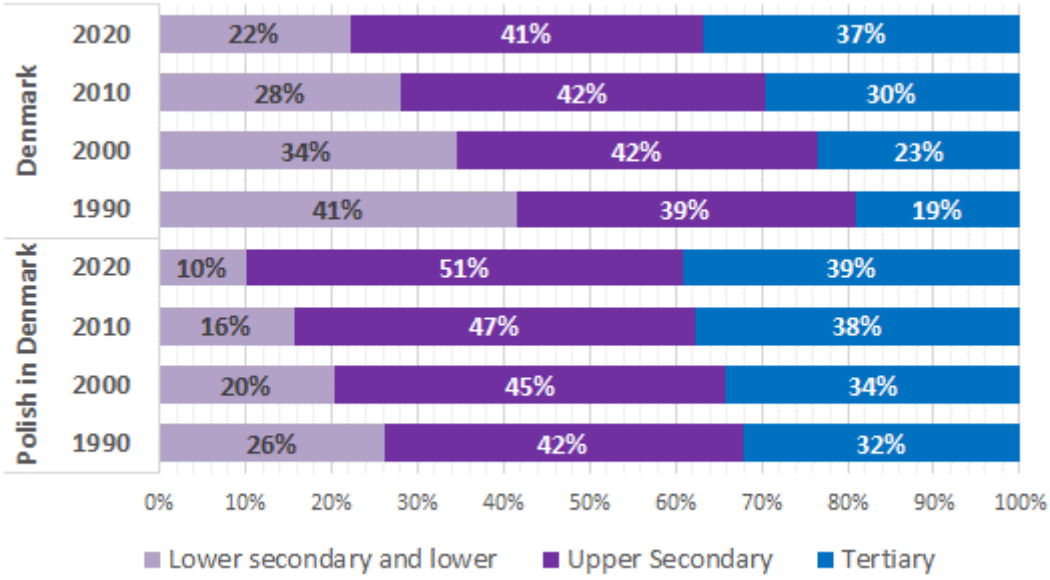
Source: Danish population register (DST 2024).

Education and labour market

Population by education

The Polish population in Denmark is well educated, and this has been the case throughout the period 1990-2020 (Figure 22). In 2020, four out of ten Poles aged 25 and more declared that they had completed tertiary education (ISCED 5-8), half had completed upper secondary education and only 10% had completed lower secondary education or less. The share of the highly educated increased from 32% to 39% over the period. In Denmark as a whole, the proportion of those with tertiary education was similar, but there were fewer with upper secondary education - 41% - and more with lower secondary education - 22%.

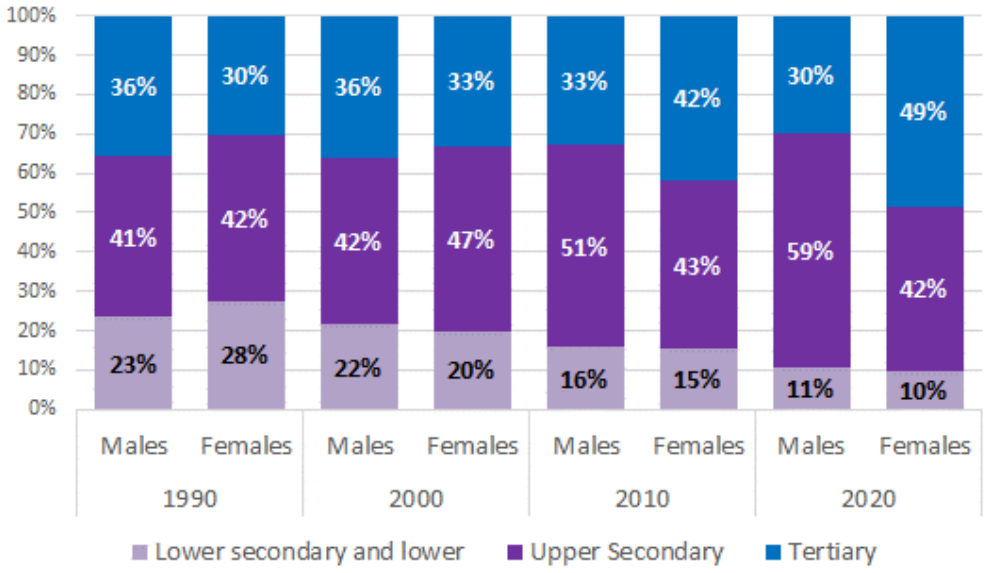
Figure 22. Population at age 25+ by highest educational attainment in Denmark in 1990-2020



Source: own calculations based on Danish population and education registers (DST 2024).

There is a large difference in the level of education between Polish men and women. In 2020, the latter were much better educated (Figure 23). Almost half of them had the highest level of education - almost 20 percentage points more than in the male population. The dominant group among males is those with upper secondary education, with a share of 59%. However, there was a shift in the educational composition by sex between 1990 and 2020. In 1990, 36% of males and 30% of females had tertiary education. In addition, 23% of males and 28% of females had the lowest level of education.

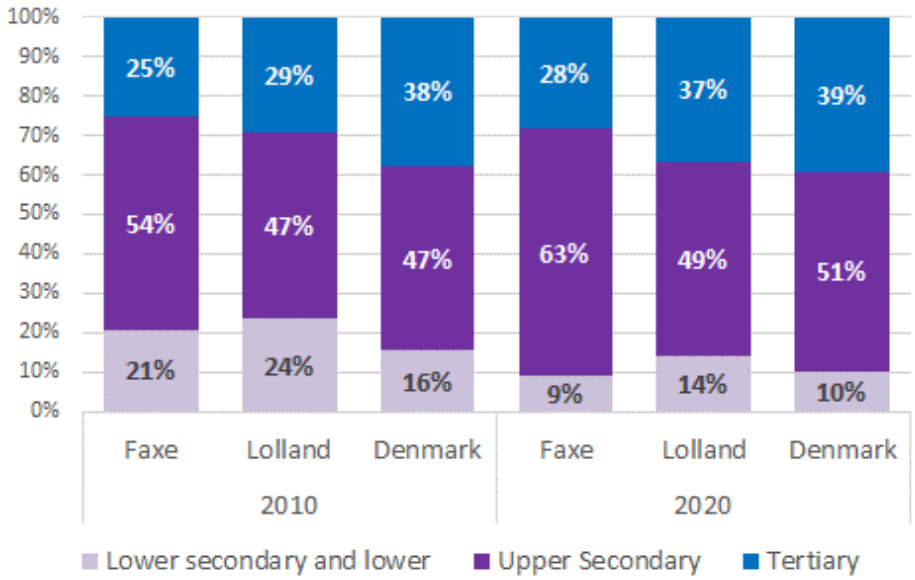
Figure 23. Polish population at age 25+ by sex and highest educational attainment in Denmark in 1990-2020



Source: own calculations based on Danish population and education registers (DST 2024).

The Polish origin people living in the municipalities of Faxe and Lolland are less educated than the diaspora as a whole. In 2020, the share of those with a tertiary education was 28% in Faxe and 37% in Lolland, compared to 39% in the total population of Poles aged 25 and over (Figure 24). However, progress in education was observed in both municipalities between 2010 and 2020. This is particularly evident in the decrease in the proportion of people with the lowest level of education. Their share fell from 21% to 9% in Faxe and from 24% to 14% in Lolland.

Figure 24. Educational attainment among Polish origin at age 25+ in chosen municipalities in 2010 and 2020

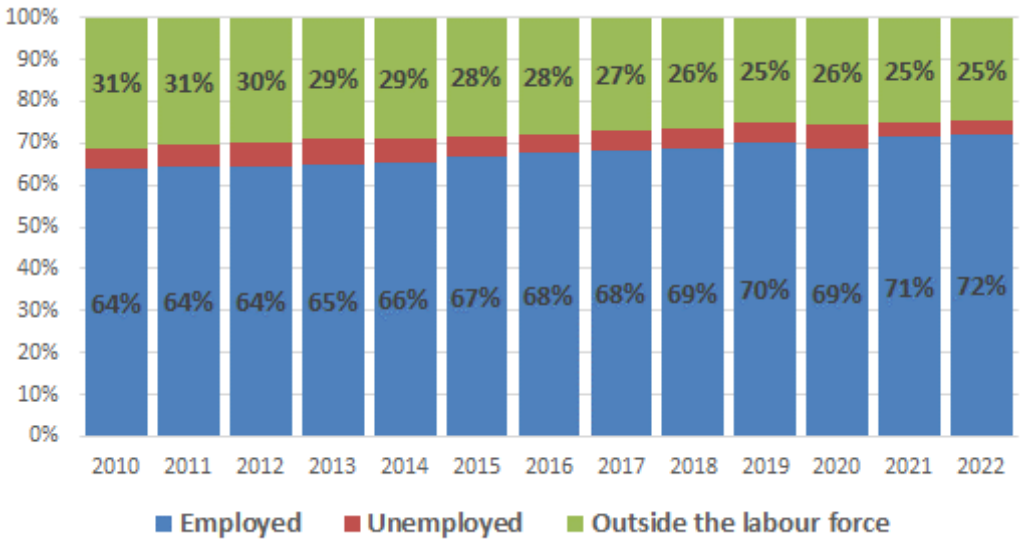


Source: own calculations based on Danish population and education registers (DST 2024).

Employment status

Around seven out of ten people of Polish origin aged 15 and over are employed in the Danish labour market (Figure 25). In 2022, the figure was 72 per cent, while around 25 per cent were inactive due to education or other reasons. The proportion of the population who were unemployed was very low. In the period 2010-2022, the share of employed persons increased from 54% in 2010 to 72% in 2024, mainly due to the migration of Polish workers employed in construction and manufacturing.

Figure 25. Employment status among Polish origin at age 15+ in Denmark in 2010-2022

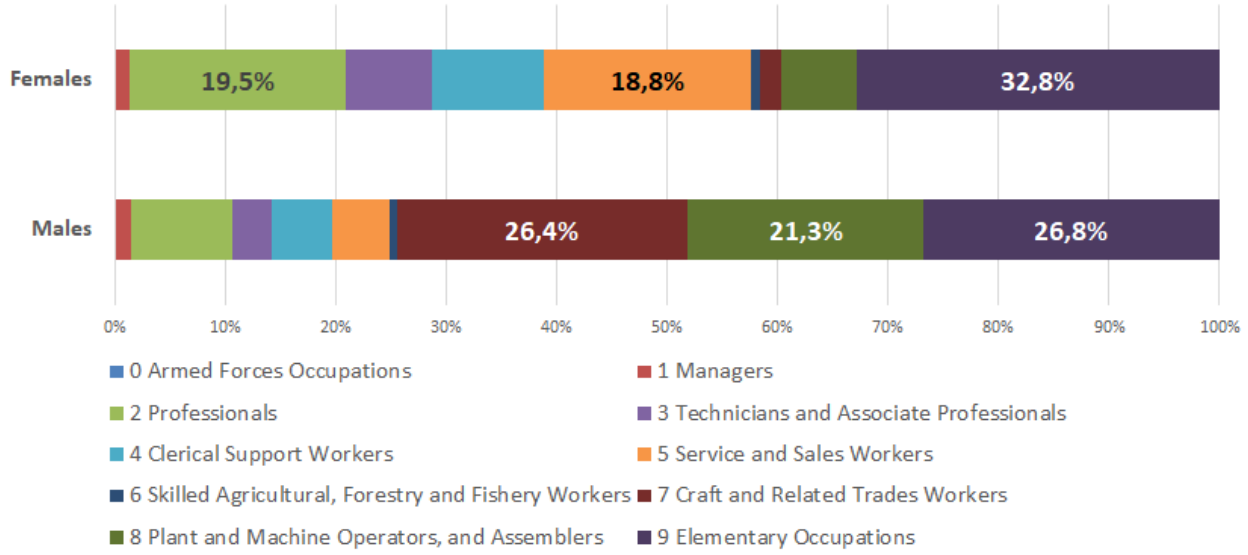


Source: own calculations based on Danish population and labour market registers (DST 2024).

Occupation

There are significant sex differences in the occupations of the population of Polish origin (Figure 26). In 2022, among 16-64 year olds, men were mainly employed in *elementary occupations* (ISCO 9) - 26.8% of the employed - or were *craft and related trades workers* (ISCO 7) - 26.4%. The third group were *plant and machine operators and assemblers* (ISCO 8) - 21.3%. Thus, around 75% of the Polish labour force was employed in three ISCO sections. In the case of females, the largest groups were also those in *elementary occupations* - 32.8%, but the other two groups were significantly different from those of males. 18.8% worked as *service and sales workers*. However, the third group were females with the highest qualifications working as *professionals* (ISCO 2) - 19.5% of all Polish females.

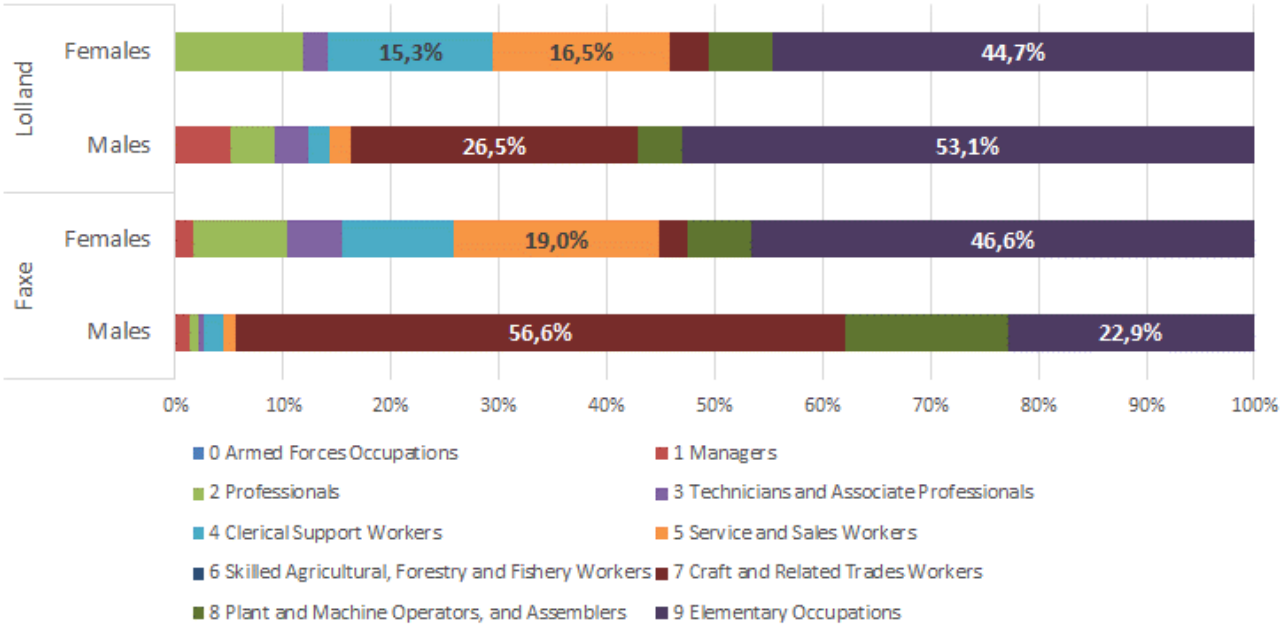
Figure 26. Population structure of Polish-origin at age 16-64 in Denmark by sex and occupation in 2022



Source: own calculations based on Danish population and labour market registers (DST 2024).

In the case study municipalities of Faxe and Lolland there were two dominant occupational groups among males - *craft and related trades workers* and *elementary occupations* (Figure 27). The first occupation was dominant in Faxe - 56.6% of the Polish labour force, the second in Lolland - 53.1%. Among women, *elementary occupations* were the largest group - 44.7% in Lolland and 46.6% in Faxe. This was followed by *service and sales workers* - about 2 in 10 females had this occupation. In the case of Lolland, there was a significant group of *office workers* - around 15% of employed women aged 16-64.

Figure 27. Population structure of Polish-origin at age 16-64 by sex and occupation in municipality of Faxe and Lolland in 2022



Source: own calculations based on Danish population and labour market registers (DST 2024).

Sector of employment

The main sectors in which people of Polish origin are employed are *Manufacturing* (NACE-2 C) - 22% of Poles aged 16-64 in 2022, *Administrative and support service activities* (N) - 15.4% and *Construction* (F) - 12.6%. Two other groups with a share of more than 10% are *Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles* (G) and *Human health and social work* (Q). There is a significant gender gap in sectoral employment, which was evident in the analysis of occupations: sectors C, F and G employ significantly more men, while sectors N and G employ more women.

Table 4. Structure of employment of Polish-origin population at age 16-64 by sector in Denmark, Faxe and Lolland in 2022

Branch (NACE2)	Faxe	Lolland	Denmark
A Agriculture, forestry and fishing	0,7%	6,3%	2,5%
B Mining and quarrying	0,0%	0,0%	0,1%
C Manufacturing	15,6%	20,9%	22,0%
D Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	0,0%	0,0%	0,2%
E Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	0,2%	0,0%	0,3%
F Construction	49,0%	25,2%	12,6%
G Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	6,0%	5,9%	10,8%
H Transportation and storage	5,1%	3,1%	4,8%
I Accommodation and food service activities	1,8%	2,0%	4,8%
J Information and communication	0,5%	0,8%	2,8%
K Financial and insurance activities	0,0%	0,4%	1,0%
L Real estate activities	0,4%	2,4%	1,4%
M Professional, scientific and technical activities	0,5%	1,2%	3,7%
N Administrative and support service activities	13,3%	11,8%	15,4%
O Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	0,2%	3,5%	2,2%
P Education	0,4%	2,8%	2,6%
Q Human health and social work activities	3,3%	11,0%	10,4%
R Arts, entertainment and recreation	0,5%	1,2%	1,0%
S Other service activities'	2,6%	1,6%	1,6%
T Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods- and services-produc	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
U Activities of extraterritorial organisations and bodies	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%

Source: own calculations based on Danish population and labour market registers (DST 2024).

There is a visible difference in the sector of employment in the case study municipalities compared to the situation in Denmark as a whole. Almost half of the Polish employees in Faxe are employed in *Construction* (49%). This is followed by *Manufacturing* (15.6%) and *Administrative and support services* (13.3%). Employment in Lolland is more diversified, but here too the largest group is employed in *Construction* (25.2%), *Manufacturing* (20.9%) and *Administrative and support services* (11.8%). It should be added that the numbers presented here do not include contract workers from Poland who do not reside in Denmark (commuters/pendlers). These workers are mainly officially recruited in other countries (e.g. Poland) and sent by their employers to work in Denmark. This status predominates, for example, among the Poles working on the Fehmarnbelt tunnel - major tunnel construction project between Denmark and Germany (about 1.4 thousand Poles work there).

We have also looked at the structure of the employment of Polish-origin population in Denmark which shows that there are many more than twice more women in

professional occupation and clerical support workers and over three times more women in service and sales jobs.

Table 5. Structure of employment of Polish-origin population by sex

Occupation	Males	Females
0 Armed Forces Occupations	0,2%	0,1%
1 Managers	1,3%	1,3%
2 Professionals	9,1%	19,5%
3 Technicians and Associate Professionals	3,5%	7,9%
4 Clerical Support Workers	5,5%	10,1%
5 Service and Sales Workers	5,2%	18,8%
6 Skilled Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Workers	0,6%	0,7%
7 Craft and Related Trades Workers	26,4%	1,9%
8 Plant and Machine Operators, and Assemblers	21,3%	6,9%
9 Elementary Occupations	26,8%	32,8%

As for the studied regions the situation is in many ways similar to the whole country. One of the immediately noticeable differences is the very high number of men in Faxe region in craft and related trade jobs (over 56%) and women in elementary occupations. When it comes to Lolland both men and women are highly present in elementary occupations.

Table 5. Structure of employment of Polish-origin population by sex and studied region

Occupation	Faxe		Lolland	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
0 Armed Forces Occupations	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
1 Managers	1,3%	1,7%	5,1%	0,0%
2 Professionals	0,8%	8,6%	4,1%	11,8%
3 Technicians and Associate Professionals	0,5%	5,2%	3,1%	2,4%
4 Clerical Support Workers	1,8%	10,3%	2,0%	15,3%
5 Service and Sales Workers	1,1%	19,0%	2,0%	16,5%
6 Skilled Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Workers	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
7 Craft and Related Trades Workers	56,6%	2,6%	26,5%	3,5%
8 Plant and Machine Operators, and Assemblers	15,0%	6,0%	4,1%	5,9%
9 Elementary Occupations	22,9%	46,6%	53,1%	44,7%

In the last table we present the change in the size of the Polish population between 2010-2024 by the region. One may see how the immigration situation evolved over the last 14 years.

Table 5. Change in the size of the Polish population between 2010-2024 by the region

Municipality	Region	Population size		Change	Share in Total Population	
		2010	2024	2010-24	2010	2024
Albertslund	Hovedstaden	124	192	54,8%	0,4%	0,7%
Allerød	Hovedstaden	70	129	84,3%	0,3%	0,5%
Assens	Syddanmark	145	424	192,4%	0,3%	1,0%
Ballerup	Hovedstaden	259	471	81,9%	0,5%	0,9%
Billund	Syddanmark	114	411	260,5%	0,4%	1,5%
Bornholm	Hovedstaden	118	200	69,5%	0,3%	0,5%
Brøndby	Hovedstaden	322	587	82,3%	1,0%	1,5%
Brønderslev	Nordjylland	55	160	190,9%	0,2%	0,4%
Christiansø	Hovedstaden	0	0	x	0,0%	0,0%
Dragør	Hovedstaden	30	73	143,3%	0,2%	0,5%
Egedal	Hovedstaden	137	299	118,2%	0,3%	0,7%
Esbjerg	Syddanmark	848	1182	39,4%	0,7%	1,0%
Fanø	Syddanmark	6	7	16,7%	0,2%	0,2%
Favrskov	Midtjylland	139	452	225,2%	0,3%	0,9%
Faxe	Sjælland	121	1003	728,9%	0,3%	2,7%
Fredensborg	Hovedstaden	212	508	139,6%	0,5%	1,2%
Fredericia	Syddanmark	181	530	192,8%	0,4%	1,0%
Frederiksberg	Hovedstaden	589	676	14,8%	0,6%	0,6%
Frederikshavn	Nordjylland	128	490	282,8%	0,2%	0,8%
Frederikssund	Hovedstaden	104	335	222,1%	0,2%	0,7%
Furesø	Hovedstaden	328	447	36,3%	0,9%	1,1%
Faaborg-Midtfyn	Syddanmark	193	483	150,3%	0,4%	0,9%
Gentofte	Hovedstaden	424	510	20,3%	0,6%	0,7%
Gladsaxe	Hovedstaden	387	706	82,4%	0,6%	1,0%
Glostrup	Hovedstaden	119	243	104,2%	0,6%	1,0%
Greve	Sjælland	426	753	76,8%	0,9%	1,5%
Gribskov	Hovedstaden	161	444	175,8%	0,4%	1,1%
Guldborgsund	Sjælland	359	546	52,1%	0,6%	0,9%
Haderslev	Syddanmark	290	509	75,5%	0,5%	0,9%
Halsnæs	Hovedstaden	139	335	141,0%	0,4%	1,1%
Hedensted	Midtjylland	268	914	241,0%	0,6%	1,9%
Helsingør	Hovedstaden	206	283	37,4%	0,3%	0,4%
Herlev	Hovedstaden	118	206	74,6%	0,4%	0,7%
Herning	Midtjylland	493	1174	138,1%	0,6%	1,3%
Hillerød	Hovedstaden	200	513	156,5%	0,4%	0,9%
Hjørring	Nordjylland	130	538	313,8%	0,2%	0,8%
Holbæk	Sjælland	217	564	159,9%	0,3%	0,8%
Holstebro	Midtjylland	197	266	35,0%	0,3%	0,5%
Horsens	Midtjylland	812	1953	140,5%	1,0%	2,0%
Hvidovre	Hovedstaden	251	421	67,7%	0,5%	0,8%
Høje-Taastrup	Hovedstaden	393	1112	183,0%	0,8%	1,9%
Hørsholm	Hovedstaden	72	103	43,1%	0,3%	0,4%
Ikast-Brande	Midtjylland	134	642	379,1%	0,3%	1,5%
Ishøj	Hovedstaden	227	585	157,7%	1,1%	2,5%
Jammerbugt	Nordjylland	86	184	114,0%	0,2%	0,5%
Kalundborg	Sjælland	125	292	133,6%	0,3%	0,6%
Kerteminde	Syddanmark	136	274	101,5%	0,6%	1,1%
Kolding	Syddanmark	446	914	104,9%	0,5%	1,0%
København	Hovedstaden	4627	6857	48,2%	0,9%	1,0%
Køge	Sjælland	259	712	174,9%	0,5%	1,1%
Langeland	Syddanmark	16	269	1581,3%	0,1%	2,2%
Lejre	Sjælland	89	243	173,0%	0,3%	0,8%
Lemvig	Midtjylland	51	156	205,9%	0,2%	0,8%
Lolland	Sjælland	234	433	85,0%	0,5%	1,1%
Lyngby-Taarbæk	Hovedstaden	284	452	59,2%	0,5%	0,8%
Læsø	Nordjylland	2	2	0,0%	0,1%	0,1%
Mariagerfjord	Nordjylland	270	451	67,0%	0,6%	1,1%
Middelfart	Syddanmark	98	242	146,9%	0,3%	0,6%
Morsø	Nordjylland	46	64	39,1%	0,2%	0,3%
Norddjurs	Midtjylland	115	286	148,7%	0,3%	0,8%
Nordfyns	Syddanmark	152	390	156,6%	0,5%	1,3%
Nyborg	Syddanmark	47	111	136,2%	0,1%	0,3%
Næstved	Sjælland	311	690	121,9%	0,4%	0,8%
Odder	Midtjylland	31	89	187,1%	0,1%	0,4%
Odense	Syddanmark	1268	1606	26,7%	0,7%	0,8%
Odsherred	Sjælland	82	177	115,9%	0,2%	0,5%
Randers	Midtjylland	274	658	140,1%	0,3%	0,7%
Rebild	Nordjylland	62	152	145,2%	0,2%	0,5%
Ringkøbing-Skjern	Midtjylland	375	725	93,3%	0,6%	1,3%
Ringsted	Sjælland	289	836	189,3%	0,9%	2,3%
Roskilde	Sjælland	371	505	36,1%	0,5%	0,6%
Rudersdal	Hovedstaden	301	367	21,9%	0,6%	0,6%
Rødovre	Hovedstaden	154	408	164,9%	0,4%	0,9%
Samsø	Midtjylland	36	46	27,8%	0,9%	1,2%
Silkeborg	Midtjylland	366	769	110,1%	0,4%	0,8%
Skanderborg	Midtjylland	186	378	103,2%	0,3%	0,6%
Skive	Midtjylland	123	395	221,1%	0,3%	0,9%
Slagelse	Sjælland	232	446	92,2%	0,3%	0,6%
Solrød	Sjælland	88	265	201,1%	0,4%	1,1%
Sorø	Sjælland	88	198	125,0%	0,3%	0,7%
Stevns	Sjælland	81	244	201,2%	0,4%	1,0%
Struer	Midtjylland	89	186	109,0%	0,4%	0,9%
Svendborg	Syddanmark	137	186	35,8%	0,2%	0,3%
Syddjurs	Midtjylland	126	264	109,5%	0,3%	0,6%
Sønderborg	Syddanmark	252	643	155,2%	0,3%	0,9%
Thisted	Nordjylland	249	651	161,4%	0,5%	1,5%
Tønder	Syddanmark	115	180	56,5%	0,3%	0,5%
Tårnby	Hovedstaden	151	278	84,1%	0,4%	0,6%
Vallensbæk	Hovedstaden	111	232	109,0%	0,8%	1,3%
Varde	Syddanmark	229	622	171,6%	0,5%	1,2%
Vejen	Syddanmark	154	780	406,5%	0,4%	1,8%
Vejle	Syddanmark	690	2262	227,8%	0,6%	1,9%
Vesthimmerlands	Nordjylland	381	616	61,7%	1,0%	1,7%
Viborg	Midtjylland	378	832	120,1%	0,4%	0,9%
Vordingborg	Sjælland	181	430	137,6%	0,4%	0,9%
Ærø	Syddanmark	52	49	-5,8%	0,8%	0,8%
Aabenraa	Syddanmark	263	478	81,7%	0,4%	0,8%
Aalborg	Nordjylland	814	1443	77,3%	0,4%	0,6%
Aarhus	Midtjylland	1982	2666	34,5%	0,6%	0,7%

3.4 Ethnographic Snapshot of Poles in Denmark

Polish migration to Denmark is driven by a variety of reasons however the most important seem to be the promise of better jobs, higher incomes, and superior social services**,** facilitated by legal EU residency rights and supported by strong diaspora ties. Very important role still play educational migrations as Danish universities continue to attract many Polish students. Temporary or long-term migration options both serve economic goals and personal development.

As shown above on the basis of the register data the Polish migration to Denmark and the analysed regions is in the last decade is more male than female dominated. The key sectors of economy in which Polish citizens work are manufacturing, administrative and support service activities and construction. In the Faxe region where large construction projects are carried out almost half of the Polish migrants work in construction. Many migrants who are employed in this sector continue to live in Poland while working in Denmark. It frequently happens in such a mode that a given person works 4-6 weeks in Denmark and returns to Poland for 2-4 weeks. As one of our interviewees from the largest construction project in Denmark said "*Employees who work on the tunnel project go for 4 weeks to Poland and return*" (MD19_M73). Thus, some members of the Polish diaspora in Denmark have only a few anchors that link them to receiving country.

Many Polish migrants who decided to come to Denmark had a very general understanding about the country or no knowledge about it at all. One of our interviewees who after more than a decade spent in Denmark is considering settling permanently in the country said:

> *I was one of those guys who always said I'd be the last one to leave the country. Everyone was leaving, and I said to myself - no, I'll manage,... I won't leave - but I was actually very young when I became a father. Uh, and I had a bit of a reality check. It was hard to make a living. You know, honestly, to make a decent living, we had to rely on help all the time, and finally I had to swallow my pride and decide... I'll leave somewhere. I spoke English quite well, so I didn't want to go somewhere with a lot of Poles. I wanted to choose a country, as they say ...'exotic' in quotation marks ... and for me, Denmark was extremely exotic because it seemed to me that it was... somewhere in the Arctic Circle, because I somehow didn't realize it was Scandinavia*". (MD1_PL_M40).

Another interviewee who knew much better the country where he decided to migrate verified negatively many of his social representation of the country after living in it for some time. He pointed out that:

> "*My idea of Denmark before I came to Denmark was completely different from... what I encountered in reality. Many people have this belief that Denmark is a perfect country, without any problems, that all social problems are sorted out because there are some benefits that solve all problems. I don't know, but that's not true. There are many issues that are very problematic. You know, one might wonder if there are, I don't know, ideal societies, but there aren't any, right? But every society, every country has its problems. There are certain things that function better in Poland than in Denmark, and vice versa. For example, in my opinion, when it comes to the police, the police in Denmark—unfortunately, there have been a lot of cuts—well, the police don't have much capacity, so to speak. In Poland, it functions much more efficiently; there's a certain greater respect for the police. In Denmark, there are often certain types of, I don't know, crimes that aren't, I don't know, investigated, they're not, like, the police don't deal with them at all because they don't have the capacity, they don't have the resources, they don't have them;*" (ED3_M34)

Many migrants (especially those from the construction sector) had extensive work experience in many other parts of Europe before coming to Denmark or in Poland. One of the them was the interviewee who said:

> "*I know Europe a bit, having worked for several large companies in Spain and Austria, as long as I could, and then these large companies went bankrupt. However, I decided to try working somewhere in Scandinavia, and after the first few moments, I decided that was the place I wanted to live*." (MD27_M54)

He also interestingly compared live in Denmark with the one in Sweden by saying:

> "*Sweden wasn't really my cup of tea, although it's more diverse and visually appealing. It would suit me better for fishing, as it's more developed there, with greater opportunities, for example, there are mountains and so on. Denmark is, as usual, flat, but the lifestyle is very different from Sweden. And now I only go to Sweden for a day trip for fishing"* (MD27_M54).

Polish migrants who temporarily or permanently settle in Denmark have also very diverse work experience from Poland. While persons who come to study to Denmark have usefully very scares work experience those who find employment in the receiving country have usually more substantial experience. One of the interviewees while asked about his work before coming to Denmark replied in the following way:

> *"Oh gosh, I did everything (...), I worked as a welder in a welding shop, and as a lathe operator, as a locksmith, and as a sawmill operator for a while somewhere in a sawmill. Well, some, you know, quite hard physical works"*. (MD3_M40).

Many other migrants spoke also about various employments (usually in manual work) they had in Poland before coming to Poland. One of the key reasons why they decided to move to Denmark was higher wages and other work conditions. Interviewees from the construction sector for example spoke a great deal about the safety measures. One of them for instance said:

> "*Work here is much easier. There's a greater emphasis on safety, so you don't overexert yourself or risk your life, as was often the case in Poland. Working here, you can plan to live to a ripe old age.*" (MD11_M47).

While asked about positive elements of life in Denmark many migrants gave us extensive replies. Some of the aspects of life in Denmark that were reoccurring most frequently in the in-depth interviews were the work-life balance, peacefulness, feeling of safety, lack of rush, rationality and order.

One of the interviewees pointed out for instance that: "*I just like the relaxed atmosphere here. It's more peaceful (...) There's no rush. It's just like here, people live differently than in Poland.*" (MD8_M32).

Another said that what he likes most about Denmark is:

"*the broadly understood peace. It's also financial peace – knowing that you can afford everything when you work, and that if you lose your job, you won't be left without funds, and they'll help you quickly find a new job." And that "the Danes are well-organized"*. (MD9_M30).

One of the experts interviewed in the course of the research working in the case study region was also pricing the Danish social security system. She argued that "*Everyone who lives in Denmark, even though they're unemployed, has a roof over their heads and has the opportunity to earn enough money to live on, so we don't have to worry about what to put in the pot, like in Poland, where we work three shifts and still have little money for utilities. The fees are, of course, very high, and you pay 50% tax on almost everything you earn, but those who can't afford energy or home insulation also receive benefits to survive and function*". (EDK2_F63).

Similar elements were mentioned by another expert who said "*You can spend your money on things other than just your house and car. Yeah. And then I think you stay because you really like this relaxed atmosphere. You have this flexible security in Denmark.*" (ED4_F35).

Not all of our interviewees found the question about positives of life in Denmark easy to answer. One of them - a Polish migrant who has lived in Denmark for over a decade – who at first found it hard to answer, after a short reflection said that he likes in the country "... some order, some kind of rationality and peace." (MD4_M60)

Many of our interviewees also spoke positively about the overall feeling of being accepted. One of them said: "*It is a common knowledge for a lot of Polish people that we are welcomed in this country.*" (MD14_ M44).

Yet others priced Danish democratic regulations by saying *"What I like most about Denmark is that it's democratic, that everyone has the opportunity to say what they think, there are no differences, that my manager comes in, I have to stand at attention, we're simply equals.*" (ED2_F63). This aspects of "more equal footing" were mentioned also by our interviewees involved with academia and research in Denmark. For instance, one of our interviewees working in the pharmaceutical sector between business and research spoke about it in the following way:

"The laboratories are more accessible, more engaged, and there's a network of specialists. I didn't experience that in Poland, but here I was surprised and interested. It's really great here in the scientific community, and the research they're doing makes sense. The research is conducted at various pharmaceutical companies, with us, the scientists, collaborating. It's not like they're doing something for the sake of it, but rather for some purpose and application. (MD6_F29)

Some migrants spoke also about more positive outlook on life which according to them is an important feature of life in the country that is one of the top three happiest places on Earth (according to the World Happiness Report). One of them said: *"Hmm, I don't want to sound harsh, but we're very used to complaining about everything. The Danes have a culture - from what I've observed at least over the years - they never complain about anything.*" (MD15_F36)

There were also numerous features of life in Denmark that our interviewees complained about. Probably the most commonly mentioned, often semi-anecdotally, was the weather conditions. One of our interviewees pointed out that: "*Hans Christian Andersen himself - and this is already in the nineteenth century - said: "Danes love the sun, but the sun doesn't love Danes." And "to live is to travel," he said, so he traveled to warm countries*" (MDK4_PL_M60)

Many said similiarly to the following interviewee that they got used it: "*As for the weather, everyone complains about it too, but it doesn't really bother me. It's not as hot in the summer as it is in Poland, and it's not as cold in the winter, although it can be a bit cooler. There's the sea, so I like it that way. So, yes, people complain, but it doesn't bother me.*" (MD7_M31)

What many find more difficult is the fact that Danes are "socially restrained". One of our interviewees for example compared Denmark with Spain arguing what bothers him is the Danish reticence. "*My circle of friends is mostly composed of foreigners, so I feel a bit out of place, but as for the downsides, I can give you the example of my current girlfriend, who's in Spain and really didn't like it here. She was bothered by the Danes' lack of social skills, the lack of interaction on the streets, and the casual conversations you get in Spain.*" (MD7_M31) He also said that there were not many things that bother him except the fact that "*Danes feel like they're on top, that they have the perfect country and are right about everything, but they don't show it right away; it's more in the back of my mind.*" (MD7_M31)

In the context of reticence some migrants also questioned the status of Denmark as the most happy country in the world. One of our interviewees for example said: "*The Danes aren't honest, they can't express themselves, and if someone has the problem, s/he won't talk to you about it. (...) From what I know, it's probably the second happiest country in the world, or even the first, but it's not honest. (...) There's this saying that your door is always open to guests, that you can always do anything for yourself. You know,*

you always greet them with a smile, and they—you're always smiling. But it's an artificial... just for a show." (MD15_F36)

Some of our interviewees living in the superdiverse Danish cities complained also about the security. One of them for example pointed out:

> *There are certain things that function better in Poland than in Denmark, and vice versa. For example, in my opinion, when it comes to the police, the police in Denmark—unfortunately, there have been a lot of cuts—well, the police don't have much capacity, so to speak. In Poland, it functions much more efficiently; there's a certain greater respect for the police. In Denmark, there are often certain types of, I don't know, crimes that aren't, I don't know, investigated, they're not, like, the police don't deal with them at all because they don't have the capacity, they don't have the resources, they don't have them;"* (ED3_M34)

Polish migrants were generally satisfied with the state of the Danish economy however some complained about the rising of the retirement age. One of them for instance said:

"*They raise the retirement age every year. I have to work until 69. And my colleague in the green jacket has to work until 71. It depends on the age. A university professor might still be a good fit, but a construction worker isn't the same. A construction worker – his spine is failing. My husband is 57. He went to the doctor – he had a spine X-ray. And the doctor said, "He's a construction worker, and he's Polish, so I don't even need to see the X-ray; I know what's going to be there."* (MD12_K53).

3.5 Contributions of Polish immigrants to the receiving regions in Denmark

The most obvious contribution mentioned by Poles is the economic one. They are fully aware of the job shortages in Denmark, their work is substantial to the economy of the host country and they pay taxes here:

Besides the fact that I pay taxes and all that, well, I don't know. The thing is, yes, I work here, I spend money here, and it's not like I bring jars from Poland and leave nothing in Denmark, you know? It's just that everything is, like, I live here—this is my place, my number one. [MD3_M40]

Well, economically, you know, I work, I pay taxes, rent, and bills—and that's basically it.[MD15_F36]

Most likely yes, because Poles are a major force—second on the list in terms of those who pay the most taxes.[MD13_M55].

Other, more established workers decided to buy real estate in Denmark. The choice of housing was guided usually by the job location, but some flexibility is usually needed as Poles are ready to commute to work:

I bought a house here with a mortgage, on the island of Funen. (…) At the beginning we had two workplaces. We had (…) in the south of Funen, and we were producing only hoofs. Later we decided that we needed to grow—there was demand for hoofs, so there would also be demand for molds. So we started producing molds as well, and those were made near Odense. So, to sum it up, whether I'd be traveling there or here, I bought a house in the middle. [ED5_M40]

Yes, yes, I also bought one [house] like that—Tomek did too, in Denmark—for renovation. In the end, it's now fully renovated; I just have a few small things left to finish outside, just a few little bits to polish off, so to speak. It's already fully renovated, more or less.[MD2_M35]

Fewer of our respondents were engaged in entrepreneurial activity. Most of Poles in Denmark explain, that running even small business in this country is not easy due to complicated bureaucracy and laws. One of our respondents, the leader of Polish diaspora who runs a small construction company [MD25_M66] is proud of being entrepreneur. He claims that most of Poles in Denmark are afraid to start a business, he learned all the procedures and laws and now he shares them with other Poles, helping them to open a firm.

Yet, the young owners of Polish ethnic restaurant emphasize that their business make a difference in their small city in southern Denmark:

People are noticing us—they recognized us, for example, with an award here for the fastest-growing company, something like that. [MD21&22]

The restaurant was not only awarded by city council for good food, but also for cultural contribution to community – the owners (sister and brother) organize regular concerts and other cultural events.

Another dimension of activity that contributes to local community is the socio-cultural one. This aspect is more visible in larger cities, especially in Copenhagen, and among group of young Polish expats: university students, freelancers and academics. One of our respondents works as a volunteer in non-profit organization who runs a small bookstore, organizes book festivals and movie screenings:

Every year we organize a summer festival called "Lizenetter"—I'm not exactly sure what it means, maybe "bright nights" or "reading nights." We do it together with another bookstore, a Danish one, on the same street. Local authors—women and men—go on stage and read from their books. (...) Yes, we organize film screenings. As for other events, I think cinemas in Denmark are terrible—they mostly show Hollywood blockbusters.[MD7_M31]

Most Poles are at the early phase of integration, therefore the political engagement is scarce. As the EU citizens, Poles are entitled to vote in the local elections, yet usually they are not interested in this opportunity:

I didn't say I can vote, but no. Speaker 2: But you can vote, and do you do it or not? Speaker 1: No, I don't—I don't vote. [MD1_M40]

One of our respondents, a well-integrated immigrant with long migration experience in the country works in public employment office and she feels happy for being able to support other immigrants who seek help:

I feel appreciated, and it gives me great satisfaction that... That you are someone who influences things, that you help people find jobs .[ED_F63]

As far as the cultural capital acquired in receiving country is concerned the main precondition for this is the proficiency of the host country language. In this aspect, Danish is not an easy language to learn.

But you probably speak Danish perfectly by now, right? After all these years. Speaker 1: Well, I speak it very well. I actually finished my studies here in Danish, and I also work in a large corporation where it's the main language. [MD1_M40]

3.6 Integration in Denmark

As already mentioned in the previous section, most of Poles who work in Denmark are not fluent in Danish language. This trend is visible in spite of the learning opportunities provided by public authorities:

So you basically have the first three years to get started — to learn Danish for free, and you can sign up for lessons, which are also available on weekends or in the afternoons.[MD1_M40]

I attended a Danish-language school. Denmark makes it very easy to learn Danish for free. I'm currently at level A2+, because when I arrived, I was very motivated to learn.[MD5_F21]

Yet, the Danish language is believed to be very difficult to learn:

At some point, it just became too hard, and I simply couldn't manage to devote so much time to Danish, especially since I don't use it in my daily life. [MD6_F29]

Ah, I tried to learn Danish, but it's not working. Even the factory boss hired a teacher specifically for me during work hours to teach me, but no, somehow my brain just doesn't grasp that language. It won't absorb it.[ED5_M40_45]

Also the problem with learning the language is that many respondents operate in the communities in which Danish language is not used at all. This is visible not only in the blue-collar occupations as construction, but also in higher education and academia:

No, I don't speak Danish, everyone speaks English. At the university, the classes I attended were in English. [MD7_M31]

Those who come here for work and already have a contract don't have to learn the language, and Danish is very difficult to master. [ED2_F63]

There are people I know who have lived here for 20 or 30 years and practically don't speak Danish.[MD13_M55]

One of our interviewees complained also that there are not big incentives to speak Danish as English is widely in many workplaces pointed out:

I speak it, but not that well, because at my workplace Danish generally isn't used. Everyone basically communicates in English, even the managers. And they're not Danish at all—my boss isn't either. [MD3_M40]

This creates a vicious circle: for most of our respondents the fluency in Danish was not important in the working environment, yet obviously it was expected from Danish society and obviously constituted an avenue not only to cultural, but also to economic assimilation and better jobs:

A Danish person once explained to me that they take pride in the idea that, since we've been working here for so many years, we should assimilate into their society — and learning the language is a key part of that. [MD2_M35]

*Those people are not interested in learning Danish. Those people are not interested in. I'm sorry, but that's our experience. (…) So without the language and I know myself from my own experience coming here, you will feel as a guest. So when you really put the effort in learning the language, your life can change. Yeah, because this is really a key to opening some gates before that. [*ED4_MMF35-55*]*

One of our respondents initially worked in a construction company that was not fair with their employees and was apparently not paying the full amount of salaries. Unsatisfied with the job conditions, he sought help from Danish colleagues who worked in the same construction site, but for another (more hones) company. This in turn enabled him to switch employment into a satisfactory one:

They hired me on a regular contract. I started working for a Danish company in February 2020. It was a good moment. Now that I speak Danish quite well and have no problems communicating, I tried asking them why they helped me. What they liked was, first of all, that I wasn't afraid. [MD27_M54]

Indeed, this deficiency in cultural capital resulted not only in limited upward mobility, but in many cases with direct or indirect exploitation. For instance, many construction workers who did not speak any foreign language had to rely mostly on employment agencies to find job in Denmark:

had to go through an agency. It was hard to get in just like that, directly (…) You basically had to already have a job lined up, meaning a contract, and it was hard to get a contract without actually going to Denmark and talking directly to the employer. It wasn't that simple, because you also had to get a special personal number in order to earn money, pay taxes, and receive your salary. So the company really helped sort everything out — including transportation to work and accommodation. [MD1_M40]

Usually such jobs were offered in the secondary sector, in so-called 3D-Jobs (meaning difficult, dirty and dangerous). Such occupations included cleaning the slaughterhouse after the animals have been killed (MD3_M40), or cutting the concrete elements with high-pressure water (MD8_M30 & MD9_M30). In our fieldwork, we have even visited a worker hostel in which the housing conditions were really rudimentary, and the

respondents complained about the costs of accommodation imposed upon them by the employer agency:

Well, you can see what the conditions are like — they're not great. We did get a raise, but what's the point of that raise if they just increased the rent now? (…) Paying 3,500 for that little room you see over there — that's just too much. [MD16_M41]

Yet, many of our respondents are ready to take such sacrifices, as they are an element of their migration strategy, which foresees short, yet very intensive working trips to Denmark for a few weeks, combined with subsequent returns to Poland. In such a case, the family usually stays at home, and the migrant seeks to cut the expenses in order to maximize the savings and/or remittances.

In this case, we can observe a dichotomy when it comes to employment of Polish immigrants. On one side, there are circular migrants who rely mostly on the temporary employment agencies, do not learn Danish as they treat their work in the country as a short-term economic strategy, and thus are in risk of exploitation. On the other side, there are more established migrants who learned the language, but also have a more long-term perspective of working in the country. Those individuals are usually more satisfied with their working conditions:

Well, the money is okay too. In Denmark, it's actually hard to earn so little that people would really complain. Generally, if someone wants to work honestly, they can earn a decent living there. [MD1_M40]

I still really enjoy this job! I'm happy with it — I go to work and I'm glad to. I've always aimed not to go to work as if it were a punishment. [MD24_F47]

Still, for immigrants who are not fluent in Danish the feeling of not being fully "here" and not belonging to the Danish culture is strong and prevents from fully integrating in a new country:

I don't think I'll ever truly feel at home here, you know? That's how it seems to me, because I still feel like I'm living in exile. And in Poland, I feel much better — even though I haven't lived there for a long time, it's different. I feel at home there, simply because I'm surrounded by… The language makes a big difference. The fact that everything is in Polish — it just somehow feels… right.[MD3_M40]

3.7 Contribution to the sending regions in Poland

Migrants could contribute to the socio-economic development of their sending regions through remittances, investments, return migration or through social remittances – transfers of new practices, modes of behavior or cultural patterns that enhance economic productivity or innovativeness. The most typical example is the support of parents or children who stayed behind in Poland:

My mom is very independent, so I quietly sponsor something now and then, buy something, or find out she wants something. My daughter also lives in Poland, so not much usually happens, but if needed, we'll buy her a new TV, fridge, or washing machine so she doesn't have to pay for it herself [MD27_M54].

In our empirical analysis, we have identified some sentiment towards the sending region, as for instance these citation of a young Polish student from Western Poland who quite often visits her parents and the hometown:

Świebodzin is changing. My friends from Poland laugh a lot because I speak very proudly about Świebodzin. Every time I introduce myself, I say I'm from Świebodzin, not from Poznań. I say, "small town – big Jesus. [explanation: Świebodzin in Lubiskie is a small town famous for a largest statue of Jesus Christ in Poland] (...) There are more and more foreigners; the city is becoming more multicultural. The first time I went to Biedronka [local supermarket], I was really surprised — I wondered whether I was still in Świebodzin or already in Copenhagen. The city is definitely changing. [MD5_F21]

An important anchor for homecoming are close friends, but also real estate which stayed in Poland. Here the respondent explains how often he comes back to home region Pokrarpackie and its capital Rzeszów:

So that's mainly where I go back to — or to Rzeszów. I also have an apartment in Rzeszów, I mean it's currently rented out, but I still go there often because I have friends there.(...) There were years when I spent about three months in Poland throughout the year — which is quite a long time, though not all at once, just a total of three months. So it was like nine months in Denmark and three months in Poland, split into many shorter trips — like five days here, a week there. [MD3_M40]

Other respondent is circulating between Denmark where he works in construction through employment agency and Poland, where he is rebuilding a house for his family:

At the moment, I'm expanding the house. I'm expanding it because it's small and cramped, and my wife and I decided to do it — the kids are growing, and we wanted to have a bit more comfort, you know? Our own space, the kids having their own space, and so on.[MD16_M41]

Some migrants could support the family businesses who stayed at home. This support is not always purely monetary, it might be about mentoring or sometimes even simple technical help:

One of my daughters now has her own large beauty salon in Wodzisław.(...) Every now and then they come up with something new, but I don't really know the details. I just know that they're constantly buying new machines (...) When we were there for Easter, my daughter bought a bed. I just helped carry it in — I brought it with the truck.[MD27_M54]

Still, sometimes the linkages with the home community erode over time. In this case, this disruption of ties occurred unexpectedly and in very emotional way:

And besides that, you know what, we lived with one foot in Poland for a long time. A really long time — maybe ten years, a good ten years. So here, you know, for example my husband — when there were promotions in stores for some equipment, if there was a good price on something, he'd buy it and take it to Poland, to the workshop, so that when we came, everything would be ready. Once we came home — there wasn't even a screwdriver left. [explanation: they have been robbed] They took everything. And not only that — a pipe along the wall was broken and the place was flooded. (...) I even, you know what, I'm 99% sure who did it. But I didn't catch them red-handed. [MD12_K53]

This dramatic event and the fact that the migrants were robbed by their neighbors resulted in disillusionment with the home village – the respondent is willing to sell her family house there.

Many Polish migrants who live in Denmark maintain strong interest with their regions of origin and the country as a whole. A good evidence of that is that significant proportion of them who registers and votes in the Polish elections. For example in the last presidential elections around 10 thousand migrants took part in the elections. In the first round Rafał Trzaskowski won (32% of votes) before Sławomir Mentzen (18%) and Adrian Zandberg (15%) who once grew up in Denmark. In the second round of the election Trzaskowski won in Denmark with almost 70% votes while slightly over 30% of

migrants voted for Karol Nawrocki (actual winner of the election). Over 11 thousand Poles living in Denmark went to cast their ballots in one of the polling stations.

3.8 Migration infrastructures and trajectories of migration

Many Polish respondents emphasize that Denmark is relatively close to Poland, which makes both migration and visits in home country easier. A substantial share of migrants, especially the construction workers that circulate between two countries use their own cars to travel. During our field observation in 2024 at FLC village in Rødbyhavn, we have identified only few (less than 10) cars with Romanian plates and almost none with Danish on workers parking lot. The remaining ones – ca. 99% of few hundred of cars – were registered in Poland. Many Poles also take advantage of various minibus companies which travel daily between Poland and Denmark. In both of these cases, the physical and mental costs of the long travel is compensated by economic advantage: many Poles bring local food from Poland, often handcrafted meals prepared by their families at home:

We buy our own food—either we bring it from Poland or we buy it here.[MD16_M41]

It is important to mention, that mostly construction workers miss traditional Polish food like “pierogi or gołąbki”, so bringing these from Poland is the most suitable option – as there are only few Polish restaurants and ethnic shops in Denmark, most of them in Copenhagen or other larger cities. Also during the ferry journey between Germany and Denmark an additional advantage is the possibility to acquire cheaper alcohol, especially beer.

There are two major routes through which migrants come to Denmark. The first quite obvious and well-known in migration literature are migration networks. Usually those who are successful in Denmark end up bringing their family members and friends:

Yes, I brought over a few people—some friends, some family. Altogether, there was my brother-in-law, my (former) one was here for a while, my sister, and I also brought over two good friends. They’re still here. So yeah, I kind of pulled a little string of people along with me.[MD1_M40]

The other pathway are the intermediaries – usually Polish firms who subcontract the services for Danish companies. These firms usually have better access to potential

candidates in Poland – their HR departments speaks Polish, moreover they arrange most of bureaucratic issues – including accommodation and transport:

I still commute an hour and a half to work at the moment. [Moderator: An hour and a half—but do they drive you? Are there any shuttles?] Yes, with the company transport. There's a coach bus and also some minibuses. [MD16_M41].

Obviously, the intermediaries charge for this service and often exploit workers by offering them a lower quality of transport and accommodation. Also there were claims about unfair treatment and the intermediaries that were breaking the law and cheating on employees:

Some agencies from Poland—there were stories, you know, about them exploiting people. For example, they would give only half of the actual wages, even though they were just intermediaries, basically taking half for themselves. [MD2_M35]

Yet, most of the respondents who migrate using this channel are unable to do it independently due to limited human and cultural capital.

In one case we have identified an intermediate solution: the Danish company (manufacturer of wind turbine components) relied for many years on Polish manager, who apart from supervising the work on site acted as HR officer, interviewing potential candidates online. The company at some point employed few hundreds of workers in quite remote and sparsely populated area, and a vast majority of employees were Polish. However, this system turned to be not sustainable on the long run:

I had—well, exactly, everything on my plate, but it just became too much to handle. That's why I hired a lady who now handles only HR. Before, that was also part of my duties—extra ones. When we were hiring just a few people, say five for two months, it was still manageable. But when there's a boom, like when we get a big order and need to hire, for example, 60 people within two months, it became too much—too exhausting, so to speak. [ED5_M40]

In this company, also the source of employees was highly concentrated – mostly due to the fact that Danish company took the advantage of the bankruptcy of another company in Poland, and they could hire workers from there:

West Pomerania, because, you know, there is—well, there was, and still is, but it's also going under now—that company, [Name of the company] in Goleniów, where they produced blades. So we have a lot of people who left that plant and came to us. So West

Pomerania, and I'd also say Pomerania—we have a lot of people from around Gdańsk and Tczew. .[ED5_M40]

3.9 Transnational relationships and networks

Due to relative geographical proximity Poles in Denmark make quite regular trips to Poland. Most of them are done during the summertime or for major holidays such as Easter or Christmas. Religious practices, thus play an important role in maintaining the flow of people, goods, ideas… between Poland and Denmark.

I go to Poland often—mainly in the summer, but sometimes at other times too, though mostly in the summer. (…) Over all these years, there have been different reasons, but mostly I wanted to visit family and friends—that was the main reason. But like I said, I've been here for many years, so it really depended. Sometimes it was just for a vacation, sometimes for a quick weekend trip, you know. I also used to have a girlfriend in Poland, so I'd go to visit her. All sorts of reasons. [MD3_M40]

Every few months. Sometimes more often, sometimes less, but on average I'd say I come every 3 months. (…) I don't really spend my vacations there, unless I have to—like for family events or holidays.[MD6_F29]

Whenever I have the opportunity, I try to go to Poland.[MD5_F21]

Of course, travels to Poland are complemented with more frequent, even daily contacts with family left at home. Most of these contacts are maintained through social media:

I usually communicate with my brother through social media, sending each other funny videos. I think it depends on age. I talk to my dad too, but it's hard to define what our relationship is like. I have the closest bond with my mom – we're in constant contact, sending each other photos every day. Mentally, I feel like we're together.[MD5_F21]

Many migrants are highly motivated to work hard in Denmark, hoping to buy an apartment in Poland or to build a house there. However, such dreams are becoming increasingly hard to realize with the fast increase of prices in Poland:

What's happening in Poland in general is a disaster—there's no denying it. I always wanted to buy an apartment in Poland, even if I lived here, just to rent it out. [MD6_F29]

Important aspect of socio-cultural transnationalism is language retention and cultural consumption in Polish. Many Polish parents speak to their children in Polish at home and some even enroll them in supplementary language schools to preserve linguistic heritage. Polish private businesses (eg. Polka Café) and diaspora organizations try to organize various events to maintain a shared identity and pass traditions to the next generation. Many migrants also regularly follow Polish news platforms and keep themselves updated about the situation in Poland.

One of our interviewees – long-term migrant – interestingly reflected on the news consumption in Polish:

"Now It is practically like living in Poland. I mean, I think about the first time, back in 1990, practically in Polish, it was just the first program on the radio, and newspapers that arrived a week later by mail. That was the only contact, let's say, with Poland. Later, however, there was a bit of contact, because back then it was through Telewizja Polonia, but now it's through all the programs in Polish: television, radio, the internet, and digital, whatever I could want, newspapers" (MD4_M60).

Very important role in this regard plays Catholic Church with services in Polish language provided by Polish priests who live in Denmark in the capital and outside of it. Many migrants attend regularly or least a few times a year St. Anna's Church in the capital city which serves as important community hub. Some migrants stay after the mass and socialize with cakes and tea/coffee. One of them for instance told us "*we often stayed after the Mass to bond, talk, eat cakes and tarts – it really builds unity.*" (MD5_F21)

3.10 Conclusions and recommendations

As our report demonstrates, Polish migration to Denmark is increasing, despite Poland's rapid economic development. This trend is driven by several factors, including a still significant wage gap—particularly relevant for blue-collar workers—as well as a higher standard of living and a multicultural environment that appeals to the expat community. However, based on recent trends in immigration and demographic potential, it is unlikely that the Polish diaspora in Denmark will exceed 100,000 people.

Poles, as a relatively new immigrant group in Denmark, are integrating fairly successfully—primarily in the economic sphere. One persistent challenge, however, is acquiring the Danish language. As a result, many Poles are not deeply embedded in Danish society or culture. The issue is not solely on the migrants' side; according to our respondents, forming close friendships with Danes is extremely difficult. While this may be less of a concern in larger cities—where Poles can socialize with fellow nationals and other international migrants—it becomes a serious issue in more remote and vulnerable regions.

One example is Lolland, where the construction of the Fehmarn Belt tunnel presents a major opportunity to attract foreign construction workers and encourage them to settle permanently in this sparsely populated area. Yet so far, efforts to promote settlement have largely failed. Most Polish construction workers continue to circulate between the FLC village, nearby worker hostels around Rødbyhavn, and their hometowns in Poland. The workers remain highly segregated, with little effort from the local community to involve them in social life. A striking symbol of this situation is a football field built next to the FLC village. According to our respondents, it has never been used—neither by the tunnel workers nor by local residents.

If the Lolland region truly wants to persuade Polish construction workers that towns like Rødbyhavn, Holeby, Rødby, or Maribo are attractive places to buy a home and settle with their families, it must create a more welcoming and inclusive environment. An international school with instruction in English alone will not be enough.

In order to further facilitate Polish migrants contribution to various sectors of the economy (e.g. construction, agriculture, healthcare, and manufacturing) it is necessary to further address barriers to full integration — particularly with regards to language, community involvement, and long-term settlement. Facilitating their integration requires a combination of targeted policies, workplace initiatives, and community-based approaches.

One of the most important factors for integration . Many Polish migrants arrive with limited Danish skills and work schedules that make attending traditional

classes difficult. Expanding access to flexible Danish language courses — including evening and weekend lessons, workplace-based instruction, and online learning platforms with Polish-language support — would help overcome this barrier. For children of Polish families, bilingual support in schools and the presence of Polish-speaking mediators could ease communication between teachers and parents while ensuring that students thrive academically.

Employment is often the first step into Danish society for Polish migrants. To make this step more effective, Denmark could further simplify the recognition of Polish vocational qualifications, especially in skilled trades and healthcare. Workplace mentorship programs, where Danish colleagues guide new arrivals both professionally and culturally, can create a smoother transition into the work environment. Additionally, closer cooperation between Danish trade unions and Polish workers would help ensure that migrants are aware of their rights and protections. Union outreach materials in Polish, coupled with information sessions, could reduce the risk of exploitation and increase workplace satisfaction.

Beyond the workplace, community integration is essential for long-term settlement. Local integration centers could serve as welcoming hubs, offering legal advice, job counseling, and language practice groups, while also hosting social activities that bring Danes and Poles together (for example Polish picnics). Encouraging Polish migrants to participate in local volunteering — whether in sports clubs, cultural associations, or civic organizations — would provide meaningful opportunities for connection. Municipalities might also consider supporting Polish cultural events, such as festivals and food fairs, which invite Danes to experience Polish traditions and strengthen mutual understanding.

Equally important is ensuring that Polish migrants have easy access to reliable information about life in Denmark. Multilingual online platforms could provide clear guidance on essential topics such as healthcare, housing, taxation, and education. Making government websites like borger.dk more accessible with Polish-language guides would reduce confusion and help migrants navigate bureaucracy with confidence. At the same time, awareness campaigns

highlighting the contributions of Polish workers to Danish society could challenge stereotypes and foster more positive public perceptions.

Finally, integration requires strong policy and institutional cooperation. Many Poles fall outside of Denmark's traditional refugee-focused integration programs, so municipalities could design "light-touch" pathways tailored to EU labor migrants. Partnerships between Polish community organizations in Denmark and Danish NGOs would further enhance cultural exchange and ensure that local initiatives address real needs.

In essence, integrating Polish migrants in Denmark is not just about helping newcomers adapt — it is also about building bridges that allow them to thrive as active participants in Danish as well as Polish society. By combining flexible language education, workplace support, community engagement, and inclusive public messaging, Denmark can ensure that the Polish community continues to enrich the country socially, culturally, and economically.

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4. Polish immigrants in the Netherlands

Leo van Wissen (KNAW), Hans Elshof (KNOW)

4.1 Introduction A History of Polish Migration to the Netherlands

Although there have always been linkages between Poland and the Netherlands, historically, the number of Polish migrants has been low. During the Cold War, until 1989, migration between Eastern Bloc countries and Western Europe was heavily restricted. Poland, under communist rule, limited emigration, and few Poles were able to settle in the Netherlands during this period, with the exception of refugees and others who fled persecution or sought greater personal freedom in the West. The fall of communism in 1989 marked a turning point in Polish migration to the Netherlands. Many Poles sought opportunities in Western European countries. The econommic downturn as a result of the change to a market economy stimulated this movement even further. Still, the size of the Polish migrant community in the Netherlands remained small, but this changed after Poland joined the European Union in May 2004. While transitional arrangements initially restricted Polish workers from freely accessing Dutch labor markets, the Netherlands lifted these restrictions in 2007, opening the door to a substantial increase in Polish migration.

Polish workers were particularly attracted by the higher wages and greater job opportunities, especially in sectors such as agriculture, logistics, and construction. This not only resulted in rising numbers of officially recognized migration, but also in temporary labor migration, often facilitating short-term or seasonal contracts. Initially, many came with the intention of temporary work, but over time, a growing number chose to stay, bring families, and integrate more fully into Dutch society.

The rising inflow of of Polish migrants received quite significant public and political attention. Initially this was often cast with negative connotations, and opposition from extreme right political parties. Over time the attitude has changed, due, in part, to the favorable labor market situation in the Netherlands, where in many economic sectors job vacancies are hard to fulfil. For instance, Polish workers are generally seen as

hardworking and reliable. Currently, the discussion focuses more on exploitation and overcrowding in housing. The Dutch government introduced regulations to improve working conditions, ensure fair pay, and encourage integration. Various municipalities and other organizations have introduced language courses and other social and cultural integration programmes. Over time, a more settled second generation has emerged, participating in the broader society. Polish cultural centers, churches, and community organizations sprang up in various cities, helping to preserve cultural ties while aiding integration. . Nevertheless, many Polish migrants remain much more focused on Poland and do not anticipate to stay in the Netherlands permanently; an attitude reminiscent of many South-European migrants to Western Europe in the sixties.

In conclusion, Polish migration to the Netherlands after the accession of Poland to the EU has increased sharply. Initially this generated societal tensions and tensions, particularly regarding labor rights, housing shortages, and social integration, but over time Polish migrants have become an accepted subpopulation in the Netherlands, and their contributions to the economy are recognized,especially in agriculture, logistics and construction.

4.2 Population

Population size and ancestral structure[2]

On the first of January 2023 the Netherlands counted 232 thousand inhabitants with a Polish migration background[3]. Of these, 183 thousand were born in Poland, and 50 thousand were ancestors (2nd generation), although the second generation is growing in size (Figure 1). The number of inhabitants with Polish citizenship on January 2022 was 176 thousand. Irrespective of the definition, the trend in the size of the population is upwards, especially since 2007, when Poland entered the EU. The current size is about 4

[2] Unless stated otherwise, all data in this section are taken from the official website of Statistics Netherlands, Statline.

[3] Defined as anyone either born in Poland (first generation migrants), or born outside Poland but with at least one Polish parent (scond generation)

times as high as that in 2007, when there were 51 thousand Polish migrants in the country. The growth in the population has been above 10 thousand ever since 2011, with a peak in 2015. The growth has slowed down somewhat during the covid pandemics but not a lot (Figure 2).

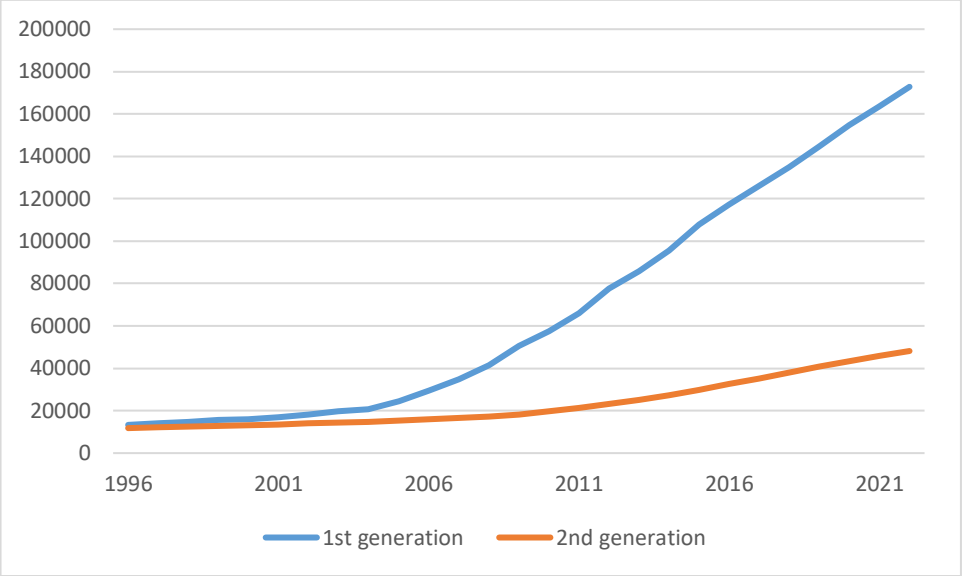

Figure 1 Polish residents in the Netherlands by generation

Polish are one of the largest groups of immigrants in the Netherlands (Figure 3). The relative size of the first generation is larger than in most other migrant populations, except the Syrian population. Both populations are among the more recent immigrant groups. In contrast, Turkish and Morroccans are among the older immigrant groups, with a large group of descendants. In relative terms, the Polish migrant population amounts to 1.26 percent of the Dutch population, up from less than 0.5 percent in 2010. In the immigrant population, their share increased from 1.28 percent in 2005 to 4.98 percent in 2022, which is almost four times as large.

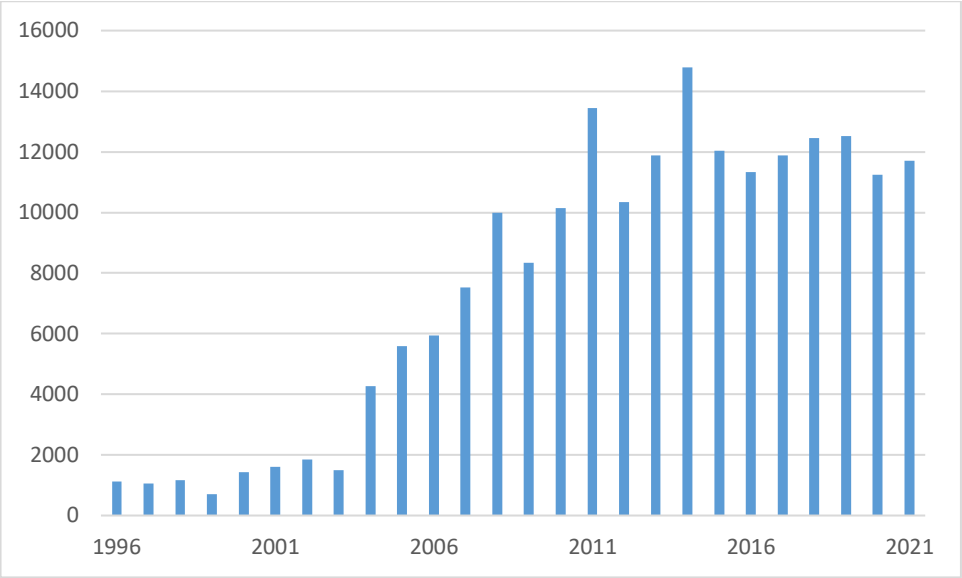

Figure 2 Growth in the size of the population with Polish migration background in the Netherlands

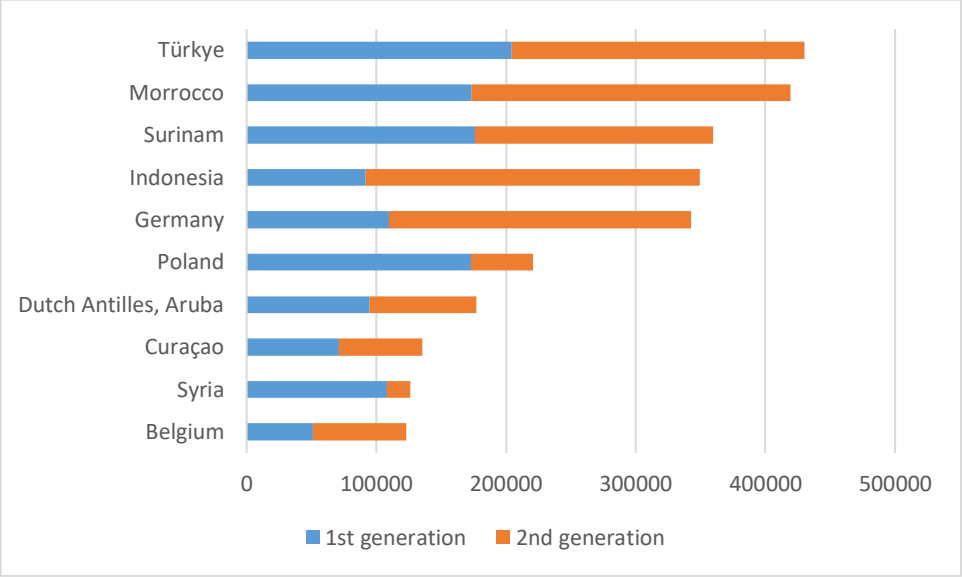

Figure 3 Top 10 of immigrant populations in the Netherlands, 2022

Spatial distribution

By far most of the Polish migrant population live in the bigger cities. The largest concentrations are in The Hague (15 thousand in 2022) and Rotterdam (12.7 thousand). Interestingly, the largest city in the Netherlands, Amsterdam, is only in fourth place, with a Polish population of about half of that of Rotterdam (6.6 thousand). Figure 4 shows that relatively speaking, the highest concentrations of Polish migrants in terms of percentages of the total population, are found in the municipalities in the South of the country (Limburg and Noord-Brabant), with other concentrations in the agricultural regions in Flevoland (the large polders in the Ijsselmeer) and the northern municipalities of Noord-Holland. Clearly this is related to the agricultural character of these municipalities. This finding is confirmed in Figure 5, which shows the 15 municipalities with the highest shares of Polish migrants in 2022. Many are agricultural municipalities, and the larger cities Oss, Tilburg, Venlo, are southern cities close to agricultural land.

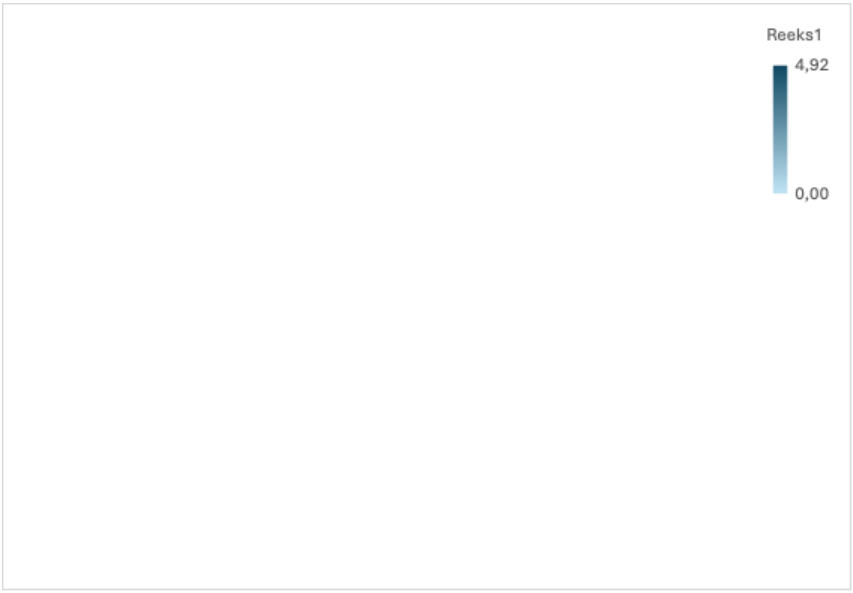

Figure 4 Percentage of Polish migrants per municipality, 2022

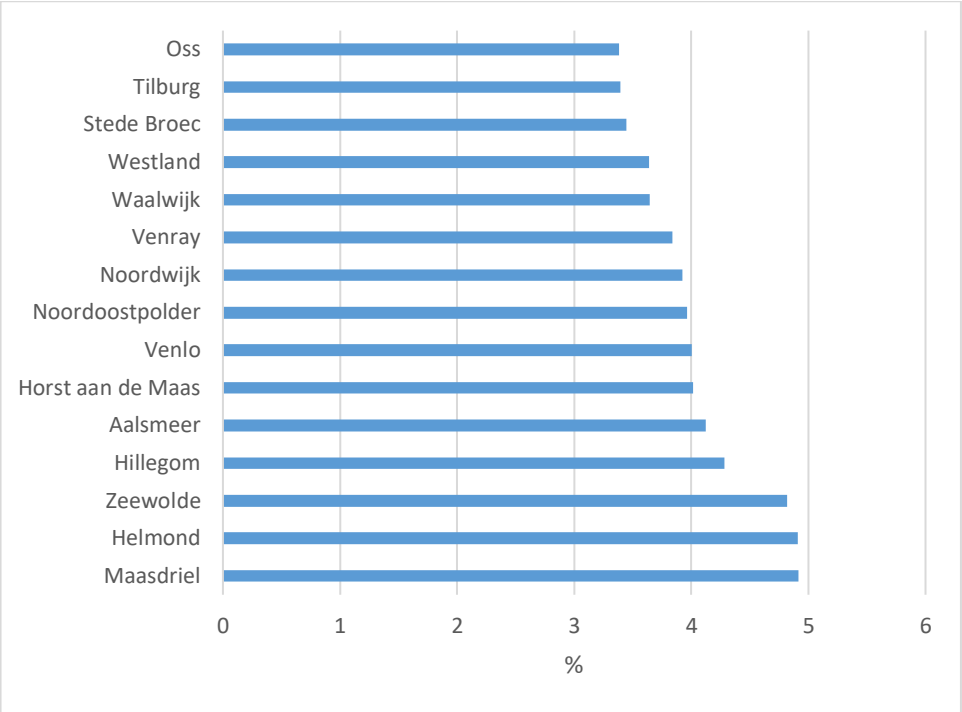

Figure 5 The 15 municipalities with the highest percentages of Polish migrants, 2022

Age and sex-structure

The share of women in the Polish immigrant population has steadily decreased from 57 percent in 2010 to 52 now. The second generation share of women is stable at around 49.4 percent, which is what can be expected with a sex ratio at birth of 1.023; a value slightly lower than the current SRB of either Poland or the Netherlands of 1.06.

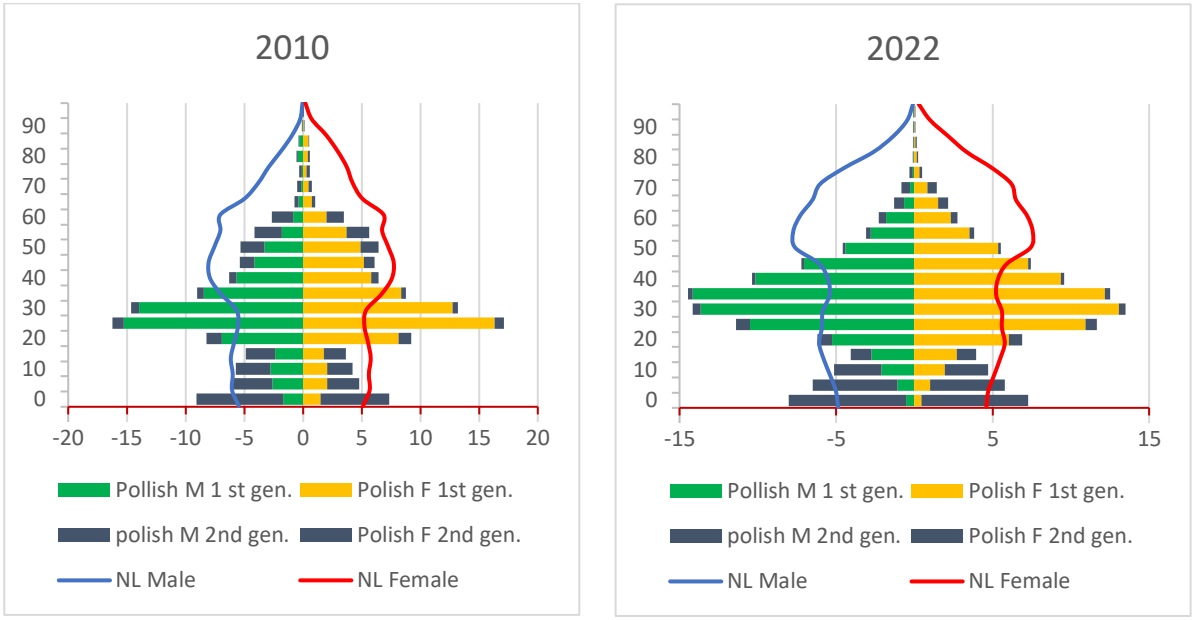

Figure 6 Age- and sex-structure, by generation, of the Polish migrant population in the Netherlands in 2010 and 2022

Figure 6 shows that the Polish migrant population in the Netherlands is much younger on average than the population with Dutch background,although much more so in 2010 than in 2022. The largest age categories are 25-35 in 2010 and 30-40 in 2022. In 2022 the share of the second generation is larger, as to be expected.

Household structure

Figure 7 shows the development of the household structure of Polish migrants in the Netherlands in the period 2001-2022. The number of singles and the number of married couples are very close in size in 2019, although initially the married couples were by far the largest household category. Unmarried cohabitation and other forms (single parents and multiperson households) remain very small categories. Especially the share of unmarried cohabitation is very small in comparison to the total number of Polish households: only about 13 percent, against 22 percent of the Dutch couples (2019).

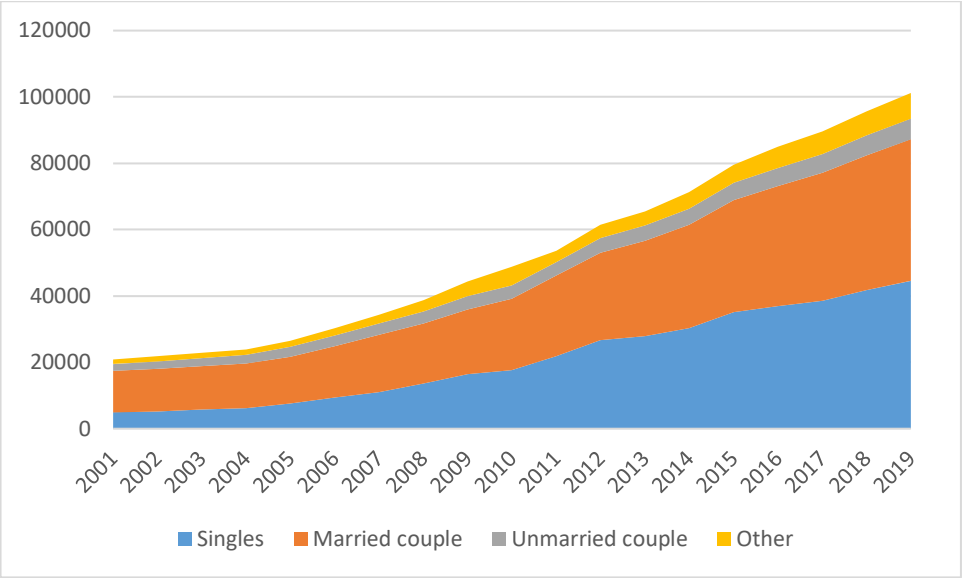

Figure 7 Household structure of population with Polish migrant background 2001-2019

Migration

Poplish immigration and emigration (as defined by country of birth) has developed since 2010 as pictured in Figure 8. From 15 thousand annual immigrants in 2010 it has grown to 25 thousand in 2023, altough the peak was in 2019 with 27 thousand immigrants. Emigration has also steadily increased, from 6 thousand in 2010 to 18 thousand in 2023. Net migration, as a result, has remained more or less stable in this period, around 10 thousand per year.

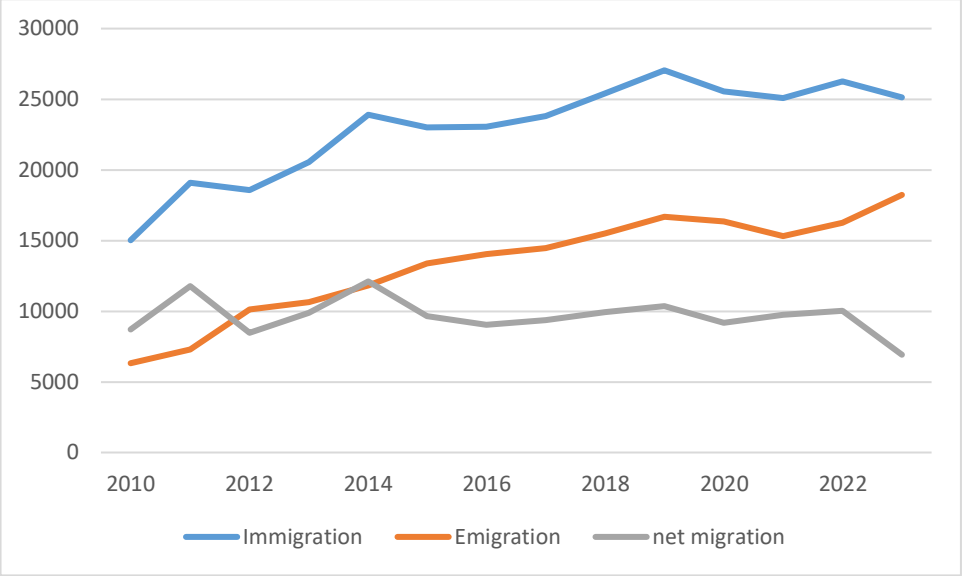

Figure 8 Immigration, emigration and net migration by Polish country of birth 2010-2023

Fertility

Fertility of Polish born mothers is below the Dutch level (Figure 9). Those born in Poland have on average 1.12 children per woman, which is much below the value for the Netherlands of 1.475, but close to the value for Polish women in 2023 in Poland around 1.1 (Eurostat).

The mean age at childbirh is not largely different between the populations: 31.7 years for Dutch women against 32.5 for Polish born in the Netherlands, or 31.4 for other Polish women.

		TFR	Mean age at childbirth
Dutch background		1.48	31.7

Polish migration background	Born in the Netherlands	1.38	32.5
	Born elsewhere	1.12	31.4

Table 1 Total Fertiity Rate and mean age at childbirth in 2023 of women with Dutch and Polish migrant background in the Netherlands

The age patterns of fertility are depicted in Figure 9. For all populations the peak in fertility is in the age category 30 to 35. For Polish mothers born in the Netherlands the age pattern is a little more skewed to older ages, for Polish women born elsewhere (most likely Poland) the distrubution is more skewed to younger ages. Based on these calculated rates from pooled numbers of 2022 and 2023 the corresponding TFRs are 1.51 for Dutch, 1.49 for Polish born in the Netherlands, and 1.30 for Polish born elsewhere.

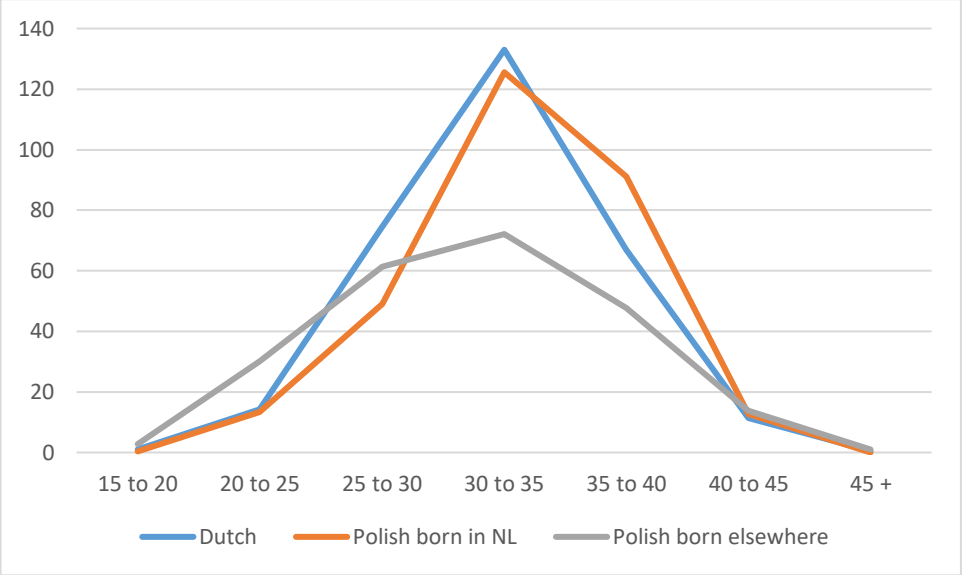

Figure 9 Age-specific fertility rates of Dutch women, and women with a Polish migration background 2022-2023.

Naturalizations

Not many Polish migrants change their citizenship. In 2022-2023 there were only slightly more than 600 persons making that choice, which is only 3.5 promille of the Polish nationals in the Netherlands.

5. Education and the labour market

Employment status

Table 2 shows the net labor participation (the percentage of the population between 15 and 75 years with paid work) by migration background. Whereas Polish born in the Netherlands have a slightly lower net participation rate, Polish immigrant workers have a higher net participation rate than native Dutch workers.

%	Netherlands		Polish	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Born in the Netherlands	77	70	65	63
Born elsewhere			83	76

Table 2 Net labour force participation of population with Dutch and Polish origin in 2023

Net labor force participation by educational status

If the net participation rates are broken down by level of education, the following conclusions may be drawn:

0. The higher the level of education, the higher the net participation. This applies equally well to Polish as Dutch workers. With the biggest differences between low and middle educated.
1. Net labor force participation of males is higher than for females, for Polish and Dutch alike. The biggest difference is to be seen for the low educated.
2. Net labor force participation of 1st generation Polish workers is higher than of workers with a Dutch background. The differences are primarily observed among the low educated (Polish/Dutch males 82/64 percent, females 70/45 percent), whereas for middle and high educed there are very small to no differences.

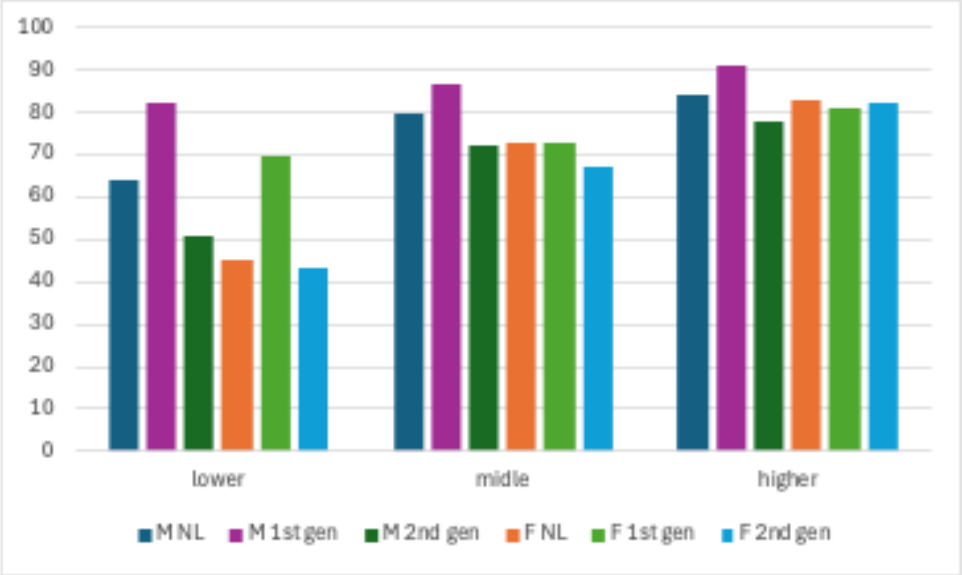

Figure 9 Net labor market participation by level of education

4.3 Some demographic aspects of the study area South-East Drenthe

The NUTS 3 region Southeast Drenthe is located in the province of Drenthe, in the northeast of the Netherlands. It it is among the regions with the highest vulnerability among the NUTS 3 regions in the Netherlands (Figure 10), according to the vulnerability index created in PREMIUM_EU (see PREMIUM_EU, 2025). Historically, the region was among the poorest in the country, but started to develop as a result of the extraction of peat since the 19th century. Many canals, roads and villages originate from this period.

Southeast-Drenthe is a highly agricultural region, but at the same time it has a strong industrial as well as logistical basis. Tourism is another source of economic development. The region borders Germany.

The total population of the region was 169 thousand in 2022, of which 19 thousand with a migration background, of which in turn 864 had a Polish background, or 0.5 percent of the total population. Between 2010 and 2022 the total population of the region declined from 171 thousand to 169 thousand (-2630), although the population with a migration background increased from 16.4 to 19.1 thousand (Figure 11). This includes the Polish regional population, who incresed from 507 to 864 inhabitants in this period. The pattern has not been stable however. Total population growth formed a U-shaped pattern since 2001, and is positive since 2018. Natural population change developed from positive to structural negative since 2010 (Figure 12). Net international migration has been positive since 2007, and net internal migration further contributed positively since 2017.

The main municipality is Emmen, with 107 thousand inhabitants, which comprises more than half of the total regional population and area. Al interviews were held in this municipality.

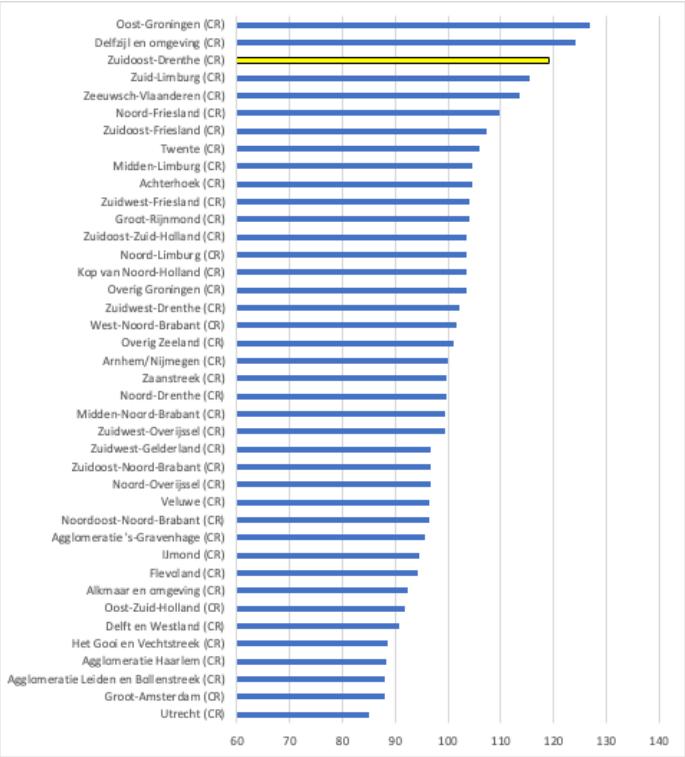

Figure 10 Regional development indicators NUTS 3 regions in the Netherlands. Source: (PREMIUM_EU, 2025).

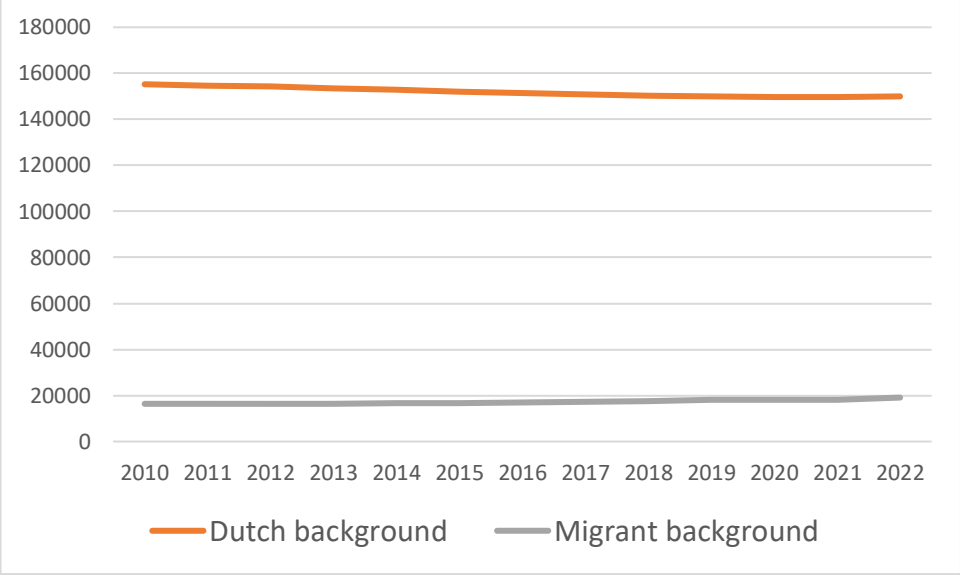

Figure 11 Population with Dutch and migrant background in Southeast-Drenthe 2010-2024

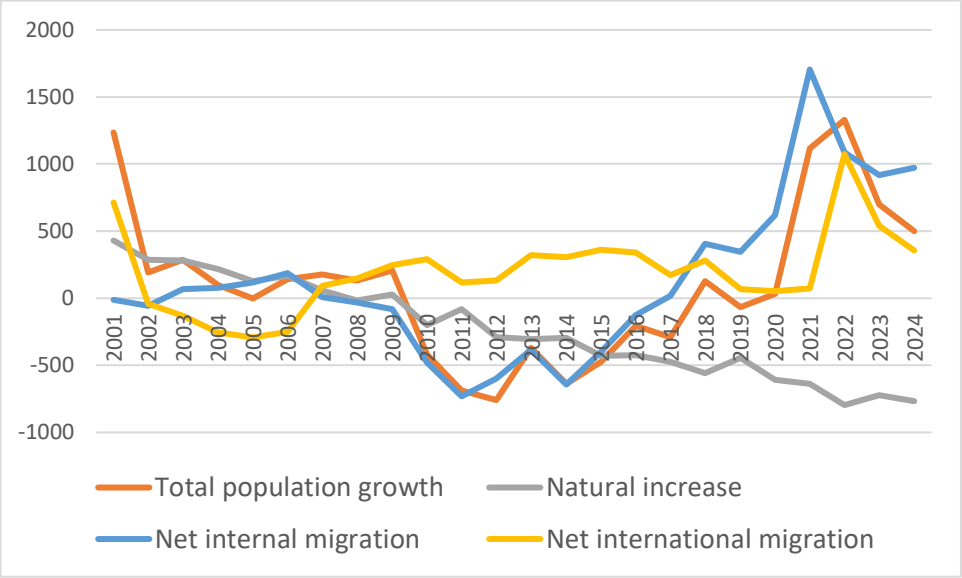

Figure 12 Components of population change of Southeast-Drenthe

4.4 Ethnographic snapshot - life of Poles in the Netherlands

Polish people have been migrating to The Netherlands for many decades. Polish migration to The Netherlands is mostly associated with low-skilled labour migration of people who move on a temporary basis to increase the quality of their future lives back home. Many of these Poles can be considered circular migrants as they are for example in a 2-month cycle of working for six weeks in the Netherlands and going back to their houses in Poland for two weeks after which the cycle repeats itself. The presence of this type of Polish migrants is acknowledged by stakeholders of government institutions and employers, but surprisingly there does not seem to be a clear picture of the size of this group in Emmen region.

Many Polish migrants take life one step at a time, without having detailed future plans. This is already observed in the motivations for moving to The Netherlands. Some people are indeed attracted by higher wages, which cannot be described better as by the following participant in the study who answers the question why he moved to The Netherlands: *"well for the money, of course. Because that's basically the main argument*

why people leave their country, it seems to me". Others however, have migrated to run away from problems in Poland, because they fell in love with a Dutch person, were offered an apprenticeship in The Netherlands, were fed up with being unemployed in Poland, or were looking for adventure during the summer holidays.

Most Polish people in The Netherlands move to the West of the country where most employment can be found. Nevertheless, there is also a significant group of Polish people in the Emmen region. Polish people end up in Emmen region because they can find jobs which pay better than the ones in Poland, just like in other parts of The Netherlands. For example, and quite typically, Emmen region hosts quite a few greenhouses, in which Polish people have been hired for decades by Dutch employers. However, this stereotypical image distracts attention from the fact that many Polish people are attracted to Emmen for different reasons than providing employment that 'fits' Polish migrants.

First of all, many Polish migrants made several moves within The Netherlands before they moved to Emmen region. For some people this meant they ended up in relationships with Dutch people who originated in the region, but other Polish people made more conscious choices. The housing prices in Emmen region were for instance lower than in other parts of The Netherlands, but another reason is that people in Emmen region are less prejudiced about foreigners because there are fewer around. As is explained by this couple: *"Our feeling was that this area is more friendly to foreigners or Poles than where we were, because there were a lot of us there [in the other part of The Netherland. And there was already an overabundance. And you could feel it [...] And it's a well-known fact that when it comes to opinions it's always those who behave the worst that work for opinions. And that then flies all over the place."*

Most Polish migrants appear to be happy to live in Emmen. Although Emmen is a large town, most migrants see the Emmen region as a rural area. It therefore makes sense that many migrants appreciate the rural qualities of the area such as clean air, the absence of busy traffic and knowing the neighbours. The latter part is exemplified by the experience of a Polish woman who was settling in the Emmen region: *"On the plus side, it was in the countryside, you know each other, people are very helpful, friendly and the children are friendly too."* As Emmen has green, but flat and mostly agricultural surroundings some of the migrants (those from big cities in Poland) appreciate the

natural surroundings, while others actually miss true natural elements such as large woods and mountains.

Other evaluations of the region are also tied to Emmen being a town in a rural region. Although Emmen is a rather large town, people experience the absence of big cities nearby. Connected to this is the transportation issue, there is no problem when you have a car, but if one is reliant on public transportation things can become more difficult. Both aspects become clear from the following quote: "*My daughter was recently at a concert in Amsterdam, they had to leave probably 20 minutes before the end to catch the train to Zwolle. From Zwolle to Emmen there's no more trains from 12. So the connection is that if you arrive in Zwolle after 12 you're stuck in Zwolle, because you can't get to Emmen. So that's the downside of living here. […] The only thing I really miss is that there are no more major cities here in close proximity. There's Groningen, there's Zwolle and that's where it ends. We have no shops.*"

4.5 Work is a central part of the lives of Polish migrants

Polish people in The Netherlands, and Emmen region for that matter, often work in physically demanding jobs. They can frequently be found in greenhouses, distribution centers, factory work and construction. Although it appears that the nature of the work that Polish migrants do is "shifting upwards" on average, as they have been coming to The Netherlands for a few decades already and "lower jobs" are done by newer migrant groups such as Bulgarians, Romanians and Ukrainians. Notwithstanding these changes, Polish migrants work hard, and many hours a day, often 6 or 7 days a week.

In general, the tough working circumstances do not give rise to complaints about the job. Polish migrants know what they sign up for and often appear to be satisfied with working hard. It is considered a part of life if you want to achieve something: *"I'm not afraid of any job, I've done various jobs here, […] you have to work. We're still of that generation that if you want to achieve something you know that […] you have to give something of yourself. It won't come for free*.

Dutch employers are satisfied with a flexible labour force for jobs for which Dutch employees are hard to find. In that sense there appears to be a mutual understanding between employers and foreign workers (as labour migrants can also be called). However, when things can turn out quite bad when the demands of the employers cannot be met because of illness for instance: *"As long as you are fit and able to work then everything is great. When your health starts to fail then the problems and*

pressures start. And we didn't want those pressures, and ran away from the subject. We said we wouldn't let ourselves be treated like that and [...] resigned." Luckily not all employers are like this as this person explains: *"If you're sick you write to your boss there, someone will just pass it on. You can't today, because you can't. I, for example, was playing on the pitch here recently and I bent my toe and it started to swell. I couldn't put a shoe on, so I couldn't go to work. So I told my partner to tell the boss and it was ok.".*

- Living and working in the same place does not work out well sometimes

"it seems that such places built for employees by employers are cool, because it's close, you don't need to spend money on commuting, you get on your bike, you're practically 300m away, you don't have to get up an hour earlier, waste time and money on commuting. But when it comes to functioning in such a small community, where we are together practically all the time at work and we also see these people after work, it's not exactly fun."

- People are underemployed

Not only low-skilled labour migration. There also people working in jobs that require higher education.

There can be quite some potential for the destination region because there are Polish migrants underemployed/overeducated

"I work with people who have finished university here, so it's like them too, the Dutch also see that they treat us a bit as if we're a bit more stupid, and in fact they don't realise that when someone finishes their baccalaureate, they already have a higher education than them."

- Self-employment

People start their own businesses, ie. Polish shops, translation companies, Polish accountants

<u>Housing conditions</u>

- Company housing: psychological impact
- Buying a house difficult because of the costs

Social life and Free time

- No time
- Polish people used to be more together, nowadays more envy among each other

Future plans

Not many migrants have detailed plans when they arrive in The Netherlands, nor do they have them for the future.

- Going back for family?
- Stay because they have left Poland for such a long time and they don't know if they can adapt to Polish life again

"After so many years, there's not even much to go to. [...] If I were to return to Poland now, I suspect I would have a big problem with reality. So imaginary, lovely, warm, loved and beautiful. If I were there permanently and it turned out that she [Poland] might not be so nice and I am really alone, because the world has changed, it could be a problem."

- Many don't know

4. 6 Contributions to the receiving regions (economic-social-cultural-political, belonging, interactions with society-institutions, future plans)

- People work. This is by far the way in which migrants themselves and stakeholders consider the contribution of Polish migrants to regional development in Poland. As mentioned by a stakeholder: *"we need foreign employees to run "The Netherlands Ltd."*
- Spend money on goods and services
- Pay taxes. Polish people pay taxes in The Netherlands.
- Once Polish people become more settled some open stores or start their own businesses
- Help other Polish people and other migrants with taxes, language courses, (temporary) housing, accountancy
- Some Polish people go to Catholic church. The Emmen region is partly a catholic region, but the number of churchgoers is dropping. More Polish attendants at mass could prevent Catholic churches from closing down.
- Connect to Dutch people, and therefore bridge cultures, often because of marriage

Agency and barriers

- Many Polish people are by themselves or within a (small) Polish community. Their involvement in typical Dutch activities appears to be quite low.

- Stakeholders: More migrants needed in jobs/functions in public organisations such as the municipality, sports clubs, interests groups
- Language is by far considered to be the most important agent to contribute to the receiving region. Some people learn the language already in Poland. Language is however not needed to do many of the jobs Polish people work in. It's also voluntary (as compared to asylum seekers).
- The lack of time is a barrier to contribute to regional development/or partake in the regional society in a broader sense (i.e. voluntary work/joining a Dutch sports club)
- It is not self-evident that a Polish person becomes more involved in Dutch society the longer they are here. It happens that people try to get involved , but don't feel comfortable with the Dutch ways and retreat again.
- In general people in today's society appear to be self-centered and it was suggested that Polish people maybe even a bit more self-centered than Dutch people.
- The lack of contact with Dutch people is a barrier for contributing/getting involved in Dutch society for those who live on "working compounds".
- Polish community helps new migrants to get around, but it is also an easy place to get stuck and don't interact with people from outside the community.
- A barrier often mentioned is that people simply lack the time and energy to do little more than work and provide their basic living requirements. There simply is no time to contribute to regional development in a social, cultural or political sense.
- Many policies in place for Polish migrants that touch upon regional development, for instance for opening a business, are the same as the policies for Dutch people. Bureaucracy is present, but if the right civil servant is found, getting something done is not more or less problematic than for Dutch people.

4.7 Contributions to the sending regions (economic-social-cultural-political, belonging, interactions with society-institutions, remittances, transnationalism, care arrangements)

- Visiting family/family support
- Visiting Poland/holidays/tourism
- Investments/owning or renting houses
- Some people work on Polish contracts so that they contribute to the Polish pension scheme.

1. translocal synergies and barriers (inc. experts' perspectives - impact of migration of sending and receiving regions)

Except for working agencies who recruit people in Poland to work in The Netherlands there weren't many translocal synergies found in our research from the stakeholder perspective.

From the migrants' perspective it can be observed that some Polish migrants embody translocalism. They work in The Netherlands, but have their social, cultural and political lives in Poland.

There is a group of people who have professions that crosses the bridge between the two countries, such as translators and

For those who have settled in The Netherlands translocalism fades with time. People visit home and family, but the frequency declines over time. It comes to the point where people lose or become uncertain of their Polish identity. They are not sure if they could ever move back and be part of Polish society once again.

- Home visits
- Family
- Trade
- Do jobs that cross borders – like translating
- Identities fade – especially with children

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5. Polish immigrants in Spain

Nachatter Singh Garha (UAB), Andreu Domingo (UAB)

Introduction: Polish immigration to Spain

The expansion of the European Union (EU) in the early 21st century, particularly the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, brought about transformative changes in the demographic and social landscapes of Europe. One of the most significant consequences of this process has been the intensification of intra-EU mobility, driven by the principle of free movement of persons, one of the cornerstones of EU citizenship. Citizens of member states gained the legal right to move, reside, and work in any EU country without the need for a visa or work permit, facilitating the movement of millions of Europeans in search of better opportunities and living conditions. Among the most mobile populations in this context have been Polish citizens, whose migration trajectories reflect the interplay of economic, political, and personal motivations across Europe.

While much of the scholarly and policy literature has concentrated on Polish migration to traditional destinations such as the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and Ireland, there is a growing need to examine other, less studied host countries where Polish immigrants have also established a presence, most notably Spain. Spain, once a country of emigration, has become a major destination for intra-European and global migrants alike, owing to its economic development, labor market demands, favorable climate, and relatively inclusive migration policies. Although the economic crisis of 2008 temporarily altered migratory dynamics, Spain continues to host a significant number of EU citizens, including a steadily growing Polish population.

This report aims to analyze the determinants and consequences of intra-EU mobility, with special attention to Polish immigrants in Spain. It situates Polish migration within the broader framework of European integration, labor market transformations, and regional mobility patterns. The report investigates what drives Polish individuals and families to migrate to Spain, how they contribute to the Spanish society and economy, and what consequences, both positive and negative, this mobility generates for the individuals involved, for their communities of origin, and for Spanish society at large. On the determinants side, several factors explain the movement of Polish citizens to Spain. First, Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 granted Polish citizens the right to work in several EU countries, though Spain initially imposed transitional restrictions until 2006. Once those restrictions were lifted, Spain became a more accessible and attractive destination. The combination of labor shortages in certain Spanish sectors (such as agriculture, construction, hospitality, and domestic services), relatively high wages compared to Poland, and the presence of existing Polish migrant networks helped stimulate new migration flows. Additionally, cultural factors such as the appeal of Spain's climate and lifestyle, as well as educational and professional aspirations, have played a role in shaping migration decisions. Beyond economic motivations, individual and family-level factors—such as marriage, family reunification, and the desire to raise children in a more stable or diverse environment—also influence mobility. Some Polish migrants are also motivated by transnational lifestyles, alternating between Poland and Spain, especially those working in seasonal or circular migration patterns. EU mobility policies, the portability of social benefits, and the mutual recognition of qualifications have further facilitated such movements.

Turning to the consequences, the presence of Polish immigrants in Spain has had multifaceted impacts. Economically, Polish workers have contributed to sectors facing labor shortages and helped fill important gaps in the Spanish workforce. Socially, the

integration of Polish migrants has been relatively smooth, although challenges persist—particularly in areas related to language acquisition, labor market segmentation, and access to housing and services. Polish migrants tend to have relatively high rates of employment, and many have pursued entrepreneurial ventures, particularly in construction, cleaning services, and food-related businesses. At the same time, there are important variations in the integration experiences depending on age, gender, education level, and family structure. For instance, younger Polish migrants often integrate more quickly due to their language skills and flexibility, while older migrants or those with limited formal education may face barriers to full inclusion. Furthermore, the Polish community in Spain exhibits a high level of transnationalism, maintaining strong ties with Poland through remittances, cultural associations, travel, and digital communication. This transnational dimension raises questions about long-term settlement, identity formation, and dual belonging.

A long-term perspective on the beginnings of Polish migration to Spain in the late 20th century to the present day, and the resulting population, constitutes a unique opportunity to observe the formation of an intra-European migration system and its radical transformation. We will thus see that from an initial migration characterized mainly by the demand for labor for low-skilled jobs—such as intensive agriculture, mining, or the meat industry, as well as some hospitality and construction sectors—prior to the Great Recession, we move towards a migration dominated by high qualifications, the diversification of migratory profiles related to quality of life, and the possibility of teleworking enabled by the new figure of "digital nomads." This change in the composition of flows by educational level has impacted the transformation of the Polish population residing in Spain, where there is a mix of former migrants who arrived before the crisis—many of whom decided to remain in Spain due to family ties, either through mixed marriages or already descendants of those migrants—and new profiles marked by their transient nature and transnational projects.

From a broader perspective, the dynamics of Polish migration to Spain reflect key tensions in the EU's mobility regime—between opportunity and precarity, openness and inequality. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for designing policies that support both integration and cohesion in diverse European societies. This report seeks to contribute to that understanding by providing an in-depth, evidence-based examination of the lived experiences, aspirations, and challenges faced by Polish migrants in Spain. In doing so, it also informs ongoing debates about the sustainability of intra-EU mobility, the social rights of mobile citizens, and the capacity of receiving

societies to adapt to changing migration flows. As Spain continues to evolve as a destination country within the EU, the case of Polish immigrants offers valuable insights into the broader transformation of European migration systems in the 21st century.

5.1 Data sources and Methodology

Data sources

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore participants' lived experiences and subjective meanings related to Polish migrants' integration experiences in Spain and transnational ties with their origin and other destinations in the Polish diaspora. A qualitative approach was chosen due to its suitability for examining complex social phenomena, capturing diverse perspectives, and providing in-depth insights into participants' interpretations and behaviors (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study followed an interpretivist paradigm[4], which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences.

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling strategy commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who possess specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). Inclusion criteria required participants to be Polish nationals, over the age of 18, and residing in Spain for at least one year. A total of 25 participants were recruited, ensuring variation in age, gender, occupation, and region of residence to achieve maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015). Recruitment was conducted via community organizations, social media, and snowball sampling.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for both guided inquiry and flexibility to explore emerging themes. An interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature and included open-ended questions covering migration motivations, integration experiences, labor market participation, and identity. Interviews were conducted in Polish, Spanish and Catalan languages, depending on participant preference, and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All

[4] The interpretivist paradigm is a research approach that emphasizes understanding the subjective meanings and interpretations individuals assign to their social world.

interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis with the help of *notta.ai* program.

This research received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained before each interview. All data were anonymized during transcription, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant identities.

Methodology

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The software MAXQDA 2022 was employed to manage, code, and visualize qualitative data. MAXQDA facilitated systematic organization, iterative coding, and conceptual linkage across large volumes of text.

All interview transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the content. Initial notes and memos were written in MAXQDA, allowing for early impressions and analytic ideas to be captured. Open coding was conducted by assigning descriptive and interpretive labels to meaningful segments of the data. MAXQDA's in-vivo coding tool was used to retain participants' language when appropriate. Codes were applied line-by-line and stored in the "Code System" panel, grouped into preliminary categories. After initial coding, the codes were reviewed, refined, and organized hierarchically into code categories and subcategories. This was facilitated by MAXQDA's drag-and-drop interface, which allowed for easy restructuring. Duplicates or overlapping codes were merged or differentiated. Using MAXQDA's "Code Matrix Browser" and "Code Relations Browser," relationships between codes and documents were visualized to identify recurring patterns and potential themes. Themes were developed by aggregating related codes under broader conceptual categories that captured underlying meaning across the dataset.

Analytical memos were integrated throughout the process to record theoretical insights and reflexive observations, aligning with grounded theory practices (Charmaz, 2014). Themes were refined by revisiting raw data, ensuring alignment between coded segments and thematic labels. Peer debriefing and member checking were used to enhance trustworthiness. Select interview excerpts were reviewed with participants

(when possible) to validate interpretations. Final themes were organized and defined for presentation in the results section. Representative quotes were extracted directly from MAXQDA using the “Retrieved Segments” function, which ensured transparency and traceability of findings.

5.2 Migration trajectories, sociodemographic profile and spatial distribution

Migration trajectories

Polish migration to Spain

Polish migration to Spain before entry into the EU (2004) was limited in scope, largely shaped by restrictive immigration policies, Spain’s relatively low economic attractiveness before the 1990s, and the geopolitical context of Eastern Europe. Unlike the large-scale post-2004 migration wave that followed Poland’s accession to the European Union (EU), pre-2004 migration was small, selective, and often irregular in nature. Before 1989, Poland was part of the Eastern Bloc under a communist regime, and migration to Western Europe, including Spain, was highly restricted. Emigration required state approval, which was rarely granted, especially for long-term or economically motivated migration.

> *We didn't have any passports, and I couldn't go abroad without declaring it first or having an invitation. There were a lot of restrictions in place. It’s just confusing to think that suddenly someone would say yes, especially because, I don’t know, my dad is Polish, but my mom is a complete mess too. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

As a result, very few Poles moved to Spain before the fall of communism in 1989, and those who did often did so through exceptional channels—such as political asylum, academic exchanges, or cultural programs. After the collapse of communism, the early 1990s marked a transitional period when Poles were increasingly able to travel abroad. However, Spain was not a primary destination for Polish migrants during this period. Countries like Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States were more

attractive due to existing Polish communities, geographic proximity, and stronger economies. Spain, still recovering from decades of Franco`s dictatorship and only recently becoming a more prosperous EU member (joined in 1986), had not yet become a major magnet for foreign labor.

My first experience of emigration was to Germany. I returned after the state of martial law. (Katarzyna, MS09_F67)

Before EU accession, Polish citizens required visas to work and reside in Spain. Legal migration pathways were limited and bureaucratically complex. Spanish immigration policy in the 1990s was still evolving and not fully prepared for large-scale labor migration. The *Ley de Extranjería* (Foreigners Law), first enacted in 1985 and revised several times in the 1990s and early 2000s, regulated the entry and stay of non-EU nationals, including Poles at the time. Due to these legal restrictions, many Polish migrants during this period were in irregular situations, working without contracts or social protection. Some were later able to regularize their status during Spain's periodic amnesty programs (*regularizaciones*), such as those in 2000 and 2001, which allowed thousands of undocumented migrants to obtain legal residence and work permits.

The work permit and the visa that we had to apply for back then—it's all part of the basics of settling into a new country. With Poland entering the European Union, things became significantly simpler. (Kamila Glucha, MS08_F45)

According to the municipal register data (*Padron Continuo*), in 1998, there were only 5.9 thousand Polish origin residents in Spain, comprising of 3 thousand males and 2.9 thousand females. Their economic and social impact was limited, and they did not form significant diaspora communities. However, these early migrants often served as pioneers, creating informal networks that later supported post-2004 migration flows. Moreover, in preparation for EU enlargement, Spain and other EU member states began developing migration cooperation agreements with candidate countries like Poland in the early 2000s. These included mobility programs, student exchanges, and bilateral labor agreements, which helped build pathways for future legal migration and familiarized both sides with labor mobility management.

Polish migration to Spain within the context of the European Union (EU) represents a significant case of intra-European mobility influenced by economic disparity, legal frameworks, and changing labor markets. Following Poland’s accession to the EU in 2004, Polish citizens gained the right to free movement under Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and Directive 2004/38/EC, which

guaranteed EU citizens the ability to reside and work in any member state without a visa or work permit (European Commission, 2004). Spain, in contrast to countries such as Germany or Austria that imposed transitional restrictions on Polish workers, opened its labor market immediately. This openness, combined with Spain's strong economic growth and high demand for low-skilled labor in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and domestic services, created a favorable environment for incoming Polish migrants (Okólski & Salt, 2014). The Polish population in Spain peaked in 2010, reaching 81.8 thousand individuals. The motivations for migration were largely economic: Poland at the time faced high unemployment and low wages, particularly in rural regions, while Spain offered relatively higher earnings and employment opportunities.

> *[Polish migrants] starting to earn money here [in Spain], doing well, and realizing that it's not just about coming to work but actually living quite well. They began to attract their families, who then moved here too. This was quite common, especially at the beginning of the 2000s to 2010, on the Costa del Sol, where there were many Polish groups. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

However, the economic crisis of 2008, reversed this trend, with many Poles either returning to Poland or migrating onward to more stable labor markets such as Germany or the United Kingdom (White, 2016). The Polish population began to decline rapidly, falling to 64.4 thousand in 2014.

> *Yes, what happened is that many people returned, which makes it harder to find them. Some stayed because they got married, ending up marrying Spanish women and Spanish men. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

This decline reflects the strong responsiveness of intra-EU migration to labor market conditions, which characterizes post-enlargement mobility within the EU (Fihel & Kaczmarczyk, 2009). Even during the period of economic recovery in Spain, and renewed immigration growth, the Polish population continued to decline, reaching 48.3 thousand by 2021. Not only the numbers, the profile of new migrants also changed to well-educated and high skilled workers.

> *The Polish community we have here now is somewhat different because, due to the presence of the university and the vibrant life around it, most of the Polish community consists of people with higher education. This represents a different aspect of the community, as these individuals typically learn the language and are interested in contributing. We have many people working at the university across various departments, including three*

Poles who are teaching classes in Spanish surgery and others who are teaching in Spanish priority. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

In the post pandemic period, after the release of COVID19 restrictions, the size of polish population in Spain again began to grow and reached 54.8 thousand in 2024, in which 21.9 thousand were males and 32.9 thousand were females. Nevertheless, those who remained in Spain had established families, found stable employment, and integrated into Spanish society. Integration was facilitated by the legal equality Polish migrants enjoyed as EU citizens, allowing them to access public services such as health care and education on par with Spanish nationals.

Reasons of Migration

Seasonal work in low skilled sector

Polish migrants who did come to Spain before 2004 fell into categories, such as seasonal agricultural workers, domestic and care sector workers, asylum seekers and irregular migrants. Firstly, in the late 1990s, Spanish agricultural employers, especially in Andalusia and Murcia, began to recruit workers from Eastern Europe, including Poland, to fill seasonal labor shortages. These arrangements were sometimes facilitated by bilateral agreements or private recruitment agencies. Many workers came on short-term visas and sometimes overstayed. Secondly, some Polish women migrated to work in domestic services, including caregiving for the elderly, often through informal networks. These jobs were typically performed without legal contracts.

Indeed, many of them were young girls, often with a lower education, coming for seasonal physical work to make some money, only to return and have some savings, as the pay was quite good. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

However, there was a small number of men who also migrated to work in construction and mining sector, but with formal contracts done by hiring agencies in Poland.

My father came here with a contract already; a Polish company that acted as an intermediary in mining had recruited him, and they brought him with a contract directly. That was the difference for those who could come and look for work—my father came with a contract, which made it easier, so to speak, because he did not have to struggle to find work. (Zofia Janiak, MS15_F42)

Education

Polish migration to Spain for educational purposes is a modest yet consistent trend within broader EU mobility. Since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, Polish students have increasingly taken advantage of programs like Erasmus+ to study in Spain, drawn by the country's climate, culture, and opportunities to learn Spanish. Language learning plays a key role, with many opting for short-term Spanish courses or internships, particularly in tourism and hospitality. Though the overall numbers are not large, educational mobility from Poland to Spain reflects the growing international outlook of Polish youth and the continued relevance of EU-funded academic exchange.

> *I started there and completed that higher degree; the first one I did was in secretarial work and then the one in early childhood education. Once I finished early childhood education, I felt capable and able to continue studying, always with the financial support of my parents and, above all, with scholarships because the fortunate thing was that, back then in Asturias, there were mining scholarships for the children of miners. (Zofia Janiak, MS15_F42)*

> *I went to Barcelona for a year with the Seneca program, Sikwés Seneca. I attended the Autonomous University of Barcelona for a year, where I took courses to broaden my horizons, learn Catalan, and pick up some new skills. (Monica, MS04_F40)*

Marriage or Family

Marriage and family reunification also played an important role in attracting Polish people to Spain. Many Polish migrants, initially arriving for work, later reunited with family members or established families in Spain. This includes both family reunification—such as spouses and children joining earlier migrants—and binational marriages, often between Polish women and Spanish men. Such unions are more common in regions with significant Polish populations, like Madrid, Catalonia, and coastal tourist areas. Cultural integration, linguistic adaptation, and participation in local communities often follow these marriage- and family-related moves. While smaller in scale than labor-driven migration, these ties have contributed to the long-term settlement and demographic stability of the Polish community in Spain.

> *The main reason, of course, was love, as my partner lives here in Madrid. We also met through my family, who has lived here for many years. After the pandemic, we decided that if we ever*

faced another six-month winter again, we should live together in the same place. (Andrejz, MS02_M41)

It so happened that a stir was created because Polish women started arriving, often young and blonde, which naturally captured the attention of local men, leading to the breakdown of marriages (MS04_F40)

I also met my ex, which was a good reason to come here and start my life. She is from here, from Catalonia, specifically Barcelona. (Alex, MS07_M47)

Cultural exchange

Spain's rich cultural heritage, Mediterranean lifestyle, and climate have attracted some Polish individuals, especially students, retirees, and digital nomads, who seek a different pace of life, creative inspiration, or personal fulfillment. Spanish cities like Barcelona, Madrid, and Valencia are popular among culturally motivated Polish migrants due to their vibrant art scenes, language schools, and international communities. Cultural migration is often linked to personal lifestyle choices rather than economic necessity and tends to involve higher-educated individuals or those with transnational outlooks. Though not a dominant migration pattern, it contributes to the growing diversity and intercultural exchange between Poland and Spain.

In 2008, I came to San Cugat with 8 people from Poland for an exchange, and since then, we have collaborated together every year. We have participated in exchange projects in Poland, Germany, Bulgaria, and, well, basically maintained a lot of contact. In 2014, when I completed my master's, I came here. (Tomasz Pawlowski, MS03_M35)

Simultaneously, new forms of mobility are emerging. In recent years, anecdotal and media reports have highlighted a growing presence of Polish retirees and digital nomads settling in Spain, attracted by its climate and lifestyle, especially in areas like the Costa del Sol. These new patterns of migration reflect changing demographics and aspirations within Poland, where younger and more educated populations are less likely to seek traditional forms of labor migration and more likely to engage in flexible, lifestyle-driven forms of mobility. EU citizenship facilitates this diversification, allowing Poles to live, study, and work across the Union without the legal and bureaucratic barriers that traditionally constrained mobility.

Well, many of these people are working remotely and choosing to live here in Spain. They say things like, 'Look, I can live here, my kids are learning the language, I get sunshine 360 days a year.' Life here is different; it feels more relaxed and calm, far from the tensions of war and political unrest. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

Investment in real estate

Polish migration to Spain for real estate investment has also grown in recent years, driven by favorable property prices, attractive climate, and lifestyle opportunities. Many Polish buyers, especially middle- and upper-class individuals, have purchased homes in coastal areas like Costa del Sol, Alicante, or the Balearic Islands for vacation use, rental income, or retirement plans. Some view Spanish real estate as a stable long-term investment compared to Poland's more saturated markets. This trend reflects both economic confidence and lifestyle aspirations, with many combining investment with part-time residence or future relocation. While not a mass migration flow, this group adds to the increasingly international profile of Spain's real estate market.

Apartments here are even cheaper than in Poland. You can buy a house here while in Poland you can only buy an apartment. So, this is definitely a plus... Plus, there's great weather and peace of mind, which is wonderful. (Alex, MS07_M47)

Because the real estate market there is a bit more expensive, with another hub being the Costa Blanca, specifically Alicante and Torrevieja. I believe if you turn over a stone there, you'll find three Poles, that's for sure. Many people don't buy with the intention of moving in; they purchase to have a getaway spot in case anything happens. Meanwhile, they might have a summer home or an apartment to rent out, or whatever else. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

Political reasons and same-sex marriages

In the last few years, Russia-Ukraine war has also forced many young men to leave Poland, as the government wants to ramp up military recruitment process and want to make it mandatory for all young men.

Just imagine that someday my brothers—one will turn 18 very soon, and the other in two years—will be told, 'Hey, we have to go to Military. Yes, it's about creating an army, right? Ultimately,

many people in Poland are very afraid of that. There may also be young people wanting to leave Poland to avoid this recruitment (Andrejz, MS02_M41)

Young people are still leaving this region to work elsewhere. Yes, they are going but they endure the typical situation where no one can afford to buy property because prices are so high. So everyone rents, and they keep asking for information about coming to Spain. My father is especially worried about my half-brothers, those young ones aged 17 and 15. If a war breaks out, he wants to save them and doesn't want them sent to the front lines—that's just not possible. (Andrejz, MS02_M41)

If Poland tries to recruit me to go to the front, I will indeed make it [Spanish nationality] so that the Spanish government does not hand me over to the front in Poland through the Mossos Esquadra, (Tomasz Pawlowski, MS03_M35)

Since same-sex unions remain unrecognized by Polish law, creating a "legal vacuum" that the European Court of Human Rights has condemned as a violation of privacy and family life rights. This legal gap has prompted some Polish same-sex couples to relocate to Spain—especially cities like Madrid, Barcelona, and València—where they can marry, adopt, qualify for family reunification, and benefit from robust anti-discrimination protections. Many cite rising hostility and institutionalized homophobia in Poland under recent conservative governments as a push factor for migration. While not a large-scale migration flow, these couples contribute to Poland's long-term LGBTQ+ diaspora in Spain, drawn by its inclusive legal framework, safer social environment, and culturally vibrant LGBTQ+ communities.

Well, if they were same-sex couples, I can't even begin to describe it, because there, neither civil partnerships nor marriages for same-sex individuals are allowed. These individuals often felt very overwhelmed by the political climate. Many times, they would come here, saying that here they could live their relationship with their partner freely and peacefully, start a family, adopt a child, or even get married if they want to. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

Routes of Migration

Spain was not the preferred destination for the majority of Polish migrants in Spain. Most of them ended up in Spain following their family and personal circumstances. Polish

migration to Spain has followed multiple routes, shaped by historical ties, EU membership, economic opportunities, and personal motivations. While early flows in the 1990s were limited and mostly individual, migration increased notably after Poland joined the European Union in 2004, granting Polish citizens freedom of movement and residence within the EU. The most common routes include direct air travel from major Polish cities (Warsaw, Kraków, Wrocław) to Spanish destinations such as Madrid, Barcelona, Alicante, and Málaga, often facilitated by low-cost airlines. However, a small number also lived first in other destinations and then moved to Spain for different reasons, converting this migratory journey to step-migration to reach Spain.

> *I have spent more than 20 years living outside of Poland. The first time I lived abroad was during a sabbatical year from my university, where I spent a year in Ireland. After that year, I returned to Poland, completed my studies, and then went back to Ireland again. I stayed there for two and a half years. In total, I've spent three and a half years in Ireland. After that time in Ireland, I came to Barcelona, and this year, at the end of the year, I will have been here for 20 years. (Alex, MS07_M47)*

> *That means, I might start by saying that I came to Spain from England, which means my migration started much earlier, as I have been in Spain for two years. Previously, I lived in England for 14 years. I understand, so you did not emigrate from Poland, but from England. (Marianna Czebiatowska, MS02_F58)*

> *I migrated from Poland in 2017, but first to Portugal. Okay, I understand. I was there for almost 3 years. I left for a postdoctoral position after my doctoral studies. Yes, and after completing that postdoc, I moved to Canada. ...after almost 3 years in Canada, it was in September 2022, we decided to return to Europe and we chose Spain (Sandra Manowska, MS11_F40)*

Return migration

Few Polish migrants consider returning to Poland, as the majority have settled permanently in Spain and envision their future there. A significant number live in mixed families, having partners from the host society. They appreciate both the living standards and the favorable climate, which contribute to their long-term integration and satisfaction with life in Spain. The dichotomy between roots and temporary projects among those interviewed is reinforced by the selectivity of those who chose to remain in Spain after the economic crisis, many of them due to having established family ties

with mixed couples, and the last to arrive, where migration seems to be part of a formative stage within transnational life - among the youngest -, or the opportunity to enjoy a real estate investment in the form of a second home with the option to transform it into a first home - among the older ones -.

> *There isn't really any thought about returning as such. However, there is an awareness that if we ever decided to return to Poland, it wouldn't be a trivial matter. (Henna Medrzec, MS11_F48)*

> *I think not. I remember how to drive, but to return there after all the things that happened here, I think it would be difficult for me as well. It would be harder for me to adapt there again. (Anna Zulen, MS13_F49)*

> *No, I really don't want to return; it made me feel depressed over time. it's not so much about the cold right now, but just imagine there are days when you don't see the sun for three weeks because everything is overcast. (Alex, MS07_M47)*

5.3 Sociodemographic profile of Poles in Spain

The demographic evolution of the Polish population in Spain from 1998 to 2024 reflects not only numerical growth but also significant shifts in age structure and long-term settlement patterns. As shown in figure 1, there was a steady increase in total Polish migration from the late 1990s until around 2010, followed by a notable decline in the early 2010s and a resurgence from approximately 2017 onward. Initially, the adult age group (18–45 years) formed the dominant segment of the Polish migrant population, which is consistent with the labor-oriented nature of early migration flows, particularly after Poland joined the European Union in 2004. EU accession led to an immediate and substantial spike in Polish migration to Spain, as Polish nationals gained legal access to the Spanish labor market. A large number of Poles also entered as students under different educational program, such as Erasmus, and later settled in Spain permanently.

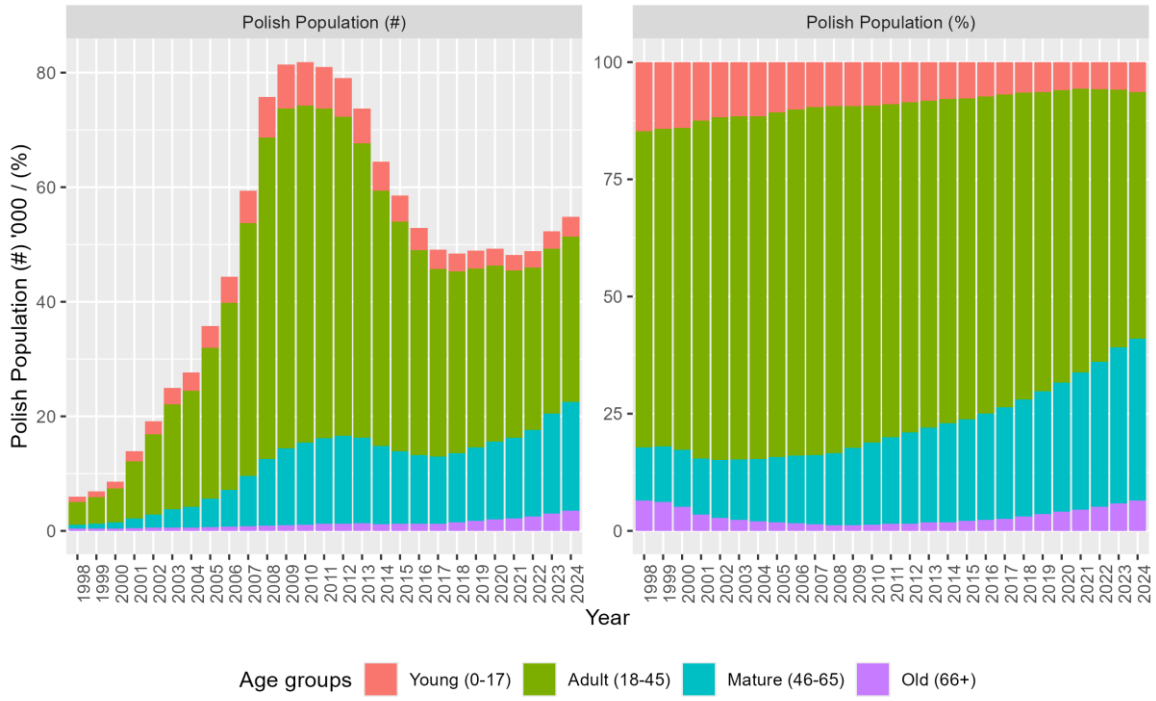
This surge peaked around 2010, with the total population exceeding 80,000 individuals, predominantly composed of working-age adults. This group was crucial in filling labor shortages in sectors such as construction, agriculture, domestic work, and hospitality, particularly in Spain's coastal and metropolitan provinces (Górny & Kindler, 2016). During this initial period, younger migrants (0–17 years) and older migrants (66+) constituted relatively minor proportions of the total population, reflecting the temporary and often individual nature of migration at the time.

The post-2010 decline in Polish population numbers coincides with the broader economic crisis that hit Spain particularly hard after the 2008 global recession. Job losses, especially in the construction sector, reduced Spain's attractiveness to labor migrants, resulting in return migration, onward mobility to other EU states (e.g., the UK or Germany), or stagnation in new arrivals.

This trend is clearly visible in the shrinking number of adult population between 2010 and 2015. However, what emerges from the data post-2015 is a shift toward population stabilization and eventual regrowth by 2024. Importantly, this new phase of growth appears more demographically balanced. The mature group (46–65 years), represented in blue, increases steadily both in absolute terms and in percentage share over the entire period. As the figure on the right shows, this age group becomes increasingly prominent, particularly after 2015, accounting for over 35% of the population by 2024. This trend suggests both aging within the migrant population and the arrival or retention of older cohorts, possibly tied to long-term settlement, family reunification, or the transition of initial migrants into middle age.

Moreover, the share of young Polish migrants (0–17 years), remains relatively small in absolute numbers but steady as a percentage over time. Their continued presence indicates family formation and reunification, especially after legal and social integration into Spanish society became more feasible. Similarly, the old-age group (66+), though numerically the smallest, grows proportionally throughout the period. By 2024, this cohort exceeds 5% of the total Polish population in Spain. This is reflective of several dynamics: aging of earlier migrants who have remained in Spain, increased attractiveness of Spain as a retirement destination for Polish nationals, and possibly chain migration patterns involving older family members joining relatives already settled in Spain. The proportional distribution provides additional insight into the changing demographic structure of the Polish migrant community. While the adult group (18–45) initially dominates, its share gradually declines from about 70% in 2003 to under 50% by 2024. In contrast, the mature group (46–65) nearly doubles in relative share over the same period. This rebalancing is significant, as it suggests a demographic transition toward a more stable, long-term migrant community rather than a transient labor force.

Figure 1. Evolution of the age distribution of Polish population in Spain.



Source: Own elaboration, Padròn Continuo, 1998-2022, Annual Census, 2023-2024, INE, Spain.

Taken together, the data indicate that Polish migration to Spain has undergone three distinct phases. First, the pre-2004 period characterized by minimal migration due to legal restrictions; second, the 2004–2010 boom linked to EU enlargement and labor market demand; and third, a post-2015 phase of demographic diversification and settlement stabilization. The initial adult-heavy profile is slowly being replaced by a more age-diverse population, indicating a community that is aging in place, reuniting families, and forming multi-generational households. These patterns support scholarly observations that Eastern European migration in the EU context has gradually transitioned from circular and temporary forms to more durable, settlement-based processes.

Over the last two decades, the Polish migrant population in Spain has undergone significant socio-demographic change, reflecting both broader shifts in European migration patterns and Spain's own economic transformations. Initially, Polish migrants arriving in Spain were predominantly low-educated and unskilled laborers, with many working in intensive agriculture, slaughterhouses, construction, mining, or seasonal jobs. This early phase, particularly during Spain's economic boom in the early 2000s, was marked by a significant influx of female agricultural workers arriving through temporary

contracts. As the boom progressed, the demographic shifted toward a predominance of semi-skilled male workers in the construction sector. However, this profile has evolved markedly over time. According to the 2011 census, 34.1% of the Polish migrant population had only primary or less education, while 47.8% had completed secondary education, and only 18.1% held post-secondary qualifications. By 2021, this educational profile had shifted considerably, with those possessing only primary or lower education decreasing to 18.9%, and those with secondary and post-secondary education increasing to 56.6% and 24.5%, respectively. These changes are largely attributed to the arrival of more educated Polish youth—especially those integrating into the service sector—and the remigration of less-educated workers to Northern European countries following the economic crisis of 2008.

Labour market participation similarly evolved. In 2011, approximately half of the Polish population in Spain was employed, while 28% were unemployed and actively seeking work. Pensioners accounted for 6%, inactive individuals made up just 1%, and 14.5% fell into other categories such as homemakers or students. By 2021, the unemployment rate had dropped to 11.2%, though the proportion of inactive individuals increased to 2.1%, and those classified in “other” situations rose to 25.1%. However, these figures must be interpreted with caution, as the 2021 census was based on administrative records, which tend to underreport those engaged in informal or unregistered work. This undercount likely masks a significant portion of economic activity, especially in the informal labor market. Nevertheless, occupational stability improved during this period. The share of workers with permanent contracts increased from 51.1% in 2011 to 61.4% in 2021, while self-employment rose from 7.5% to 15.4%. In contrast, temporary employment declined from 37.5% to 20%, and business ownership slightly decreased from 2.5% to 1.8%. Sectoral distribution also changed: employment in the service sector rose significantly from 44.0% to 59.1%, while participation in agriculture, industry, and construction declined, suggesting a long-term shift toward more stable, urban-based service employment.

Changes in marital status and household composition further illustrate the evolving integration of the Polish community in Spain. In 2011, 54.7% of adult Poles in Spain were married, 32.7% were single, 9.6% were divorced or separated, and 3.1% were widowed. By 2021, singles had become the largest group (44.1%), followed closely by married individuals (44.8%), while the shares of divorced and widowed persons slightly declined. This shift may reflect both the younger profile of new migrants and changing family dynamics within the community. The number of mixed Polish–Spanish couples remained relatively stable—6,323 in 2011 and 6,760 in 2021—but the gender composition

became increasingly skewed: in 2021, 90.5% of mixed couples involved Polish women. Cities like Madrid, Barcelona, Alicante, and Valencia saw either moderate increases or declines in such couples, yet most recorded a rising share of Polish women in mixed relationships.

Household structures also became more diversified. In 2011, 71.5% of Polish migrants lived in single-family households without additional members, followed by 8.7% in single-family homes with additional persons, 6.1% in single-person households, and 4.7% in shared households. By 2021, only 54.1% lived in standard single-family households, while 14.9% resided in homes with additional persons, and single-person and shared living arrangements rose to 10.7% and 9.7%, respectively. These patterns suggest a mix of growing independence, especially among young migrants, and economic constraints that encourage shared living. Housing conditions also improved notably. In 2011, 46% of the population lived in housing more than 60 years old, with only 37% in relatively new homes (under 20 years old). By 2021, the proportion in older housing fell to 33%, while those in 20–40-year-old housing increased to 33%, signaling access to higher-quality, mid-aged housing stock. Homeownership also rose significantly: in 2011, 55% of Polish migrants rented their homes and 39.5% owned them. By 2021, homeowners made up 53% of the population, with renters declining to 32%. These figures reflect a trend toward greater permanence and socioeconomic stability within the Polish community in Spain, marking a transition from short-term labor migration to long-term settlement and integration (INE, 2021).

Spatial distribution of Poles in Spain

The evolution of Polish migration to Spain between 2000 and 2024 reveals a clear transformation from minimal early presence to concentrated, structured settlement in specific provinces, reflecting broader patterns of intra-European mobility following Poland's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004. In the year 2000, the distribution of Polish nationals across Spain was extremely limited, with most provinces reporting fewer than 500 Polish residents. This period, marked by restrictive immigration policies for non-EU citizens, meant that Polish migration was limited to isolated cases, often involving temporary workers or individuals with familial or academic ties. Only a few urban centers such as Madrid and Barcelona, along with select coastal provinces, show even marginal Polish populations at this time. With Poland's EU membership in May 2004, however, significant legal and institutional barriers to mobility were removed,

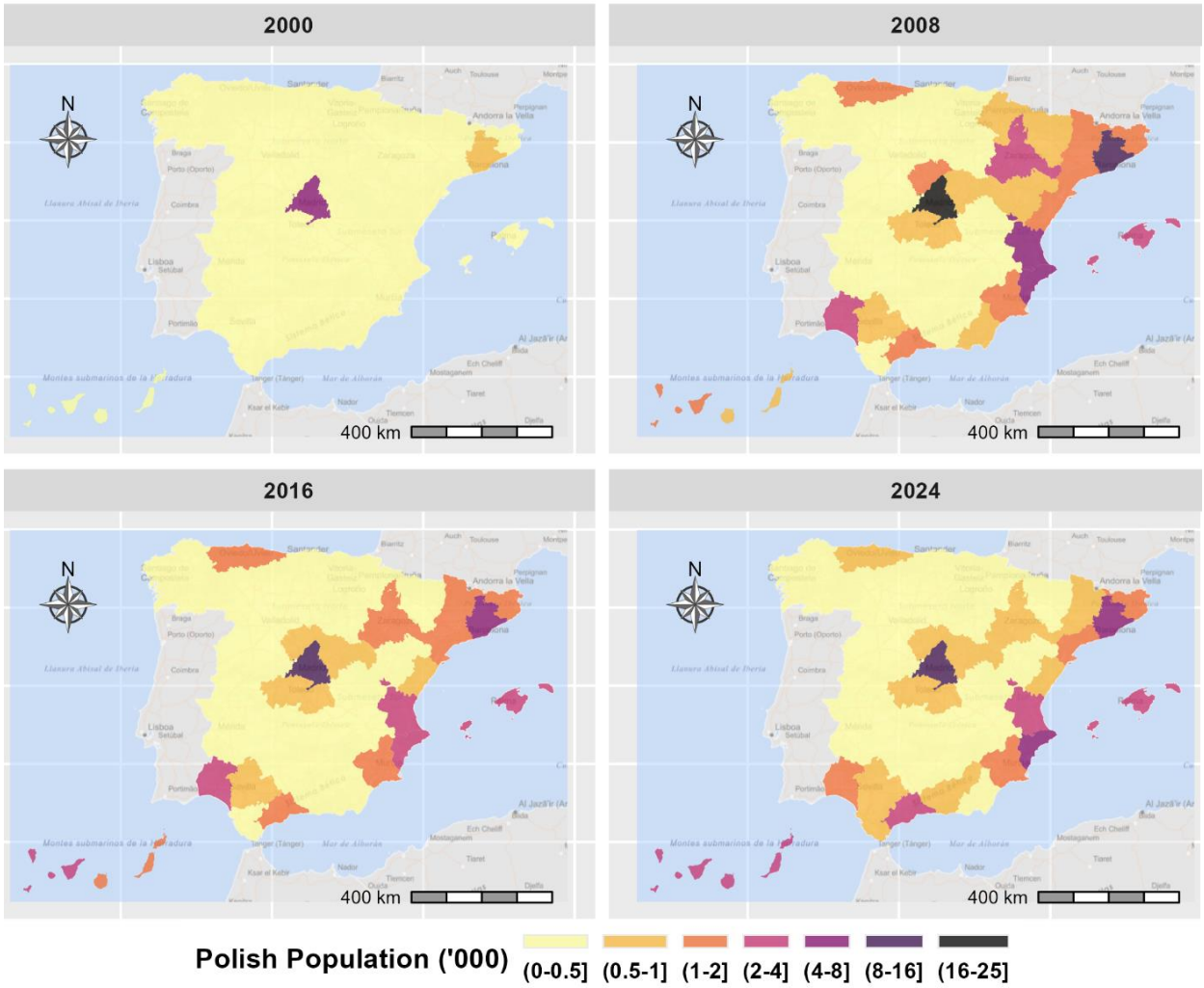
allowing Polish citizens to move freely for work and residence across EU member states, including Spain. As a result, by 2008, the demographic map of Polish migration underwent a notable shift, particularly in economically active regions such as Madrid, Catalonia, Valencia, Murcia, Andalusia, and the Balearic Islands. Provinces such as Madrid (24.3 thousand) and Barcelona (8.3 thousand) began hosting large populations, while provinces like Alicante, Huelva, Murcia, Málaga, and Tarragona also saw a notable increase in the number of Polish residents. This growth was largely driven by the economic boom Spain was experiencing during the early 2000s, particularly in the construction, tourism, domestic work, and agriculture sectors—industries that attracted mobile EU labor, including Polish migrants in search of better employment conditions than those available in Poland at the time.

By 2016, the pattern of Polish settlement had not only intensified but also consolidated in several key provinces. Madrid and Catalonia, with their robust labor markets, emerged as primary destinations, each hosting between 8,000 and 16,000 Polish nationals. This indicates a shift from temporary or seasonal migration toward more permanent forms of settlement. The presence of established Polish communities likely encouraged secondary migration, family reunification, and access to social networks that eased integration. Similarly, provinces such as Alicante and Málaga became prominent hubs, appealing to both working-age migrants and, increasingly, Polish retirees attracted by the warmer climate and cost of living advantages. The southeastern province of Murcia and the southern agricultural region of Almería maintained consistent attractiveness due to their demand for labor in farming and food production—industries that often rely on migrant labor under precarious conditions. In the Balearic and Canary Islands, mid-range Polish populations emerged, shaped by seasonal employment in hospitality and tourism-related services. The 2016 map underscores the spatial concentration of Polish migrants in economically vibrant or internationally connected provinces, while the majority of Spain's interior and less-developed regions—such as those in Castilla-La Mancha, Castilla y León, Extremadura, and Aragón—remained demographically unaffected by this migratory trend. This aligns with broader findings that EU mobility tends to be economically and geographically selective, favoring areas with strong labor demand, urbanization, and international accessibility.

By 2024, the pattern of Polish presence in Spain appears to have stabilized, with fewer provinces showing dramatic growth compared to earlier years. Nevertheless, Madrid continues to serve as the largest concentration point for Polish nationals, followed closely by coastal provinces such as Alicante, Málaga, Valencia, and Murcia. The

stabilization in numbers may reflect both a plateau in migration flows and the increasing integration of Polish nationals into Spanish society, including the naturalization of long-term residents and second-generation youth. This period likely also reflects the impacts of economic readjustments following the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, which slowed general migration trends across Europe. Importantly, the persistence of strong Polish populations in specific regions indicates not just economic migration but community formation and spatial rooting. Meanwhile, interior provinces with persistent socio-economic vulnerability—such as those in Extremadura, Soria, or Cuenca—continued to report fewer than 500 Polish residents, reaffirming the spatial selectivity of Polish intra-EU mobility. This suggests that Polish migrants, like many other EU nationals, are strategic in choosing destinations that offer both employment and long-term settlement potential, avoiding areas with weak infrastructure, limited public services, or poor labor markets.

Figure 2. Evolution of spatial distribution of Polish population in Spain, 2000, 2008, 2016 and 2024.



Source: Own elaboration, Padròn Continuo, 2000-2016, Annual Census, 2024, INE, Spain

Overall, the temporal and provincial analysis of Polish migration to Spain highlights several important dynamics. First, Polish migration surged in response to EU accession, with legal mobility leading to immediate and measurable demographic impacts in labor-hungry regions. Second, migration was concentrated in urban and coastal provinces with higher employment rates and opportunities for integration, while rural and economically marginalized provinces saw limited gains. Third, over time, the migration pattern shifted from short-term labor flows to more stable community settlement, particularly in provinces like Madrid, Alicante, and Málaga. These findings support the idea that intra-EU migration is both opportunity-driven and unevenly distributed, shaped by regional economic disparities, labor demand, and the socio-spatial preferences of migrants themselves. They also underscore the need for targeted regional integration policies in high-density migrant areas and development strategies in regions that are bypassed by such flows. The Polish case provides a clear example of how EU enlargement and freedom of movement policies interact with national labor

markets and regional inequalities to produce distinct migration geographies across member states.

5.4 Facilitators and barriers for Polish immigration to Spain

Facilitator for Polish immigration to Spain

Several factors facilitate the migration and settlement of Polish nationals in Spain. Chief among them are:

Favorable climatic conditions

Favorable climatic conditions are one of the most important factor that makes Spain an important destination for Polish migrants. The mild winters and sunny weather attracts many Poles seeking an improved quality of life. A large number of Poles only migrate to Spain for its weather.

> *I also enjoy the milder weather and the simple things, like the food. Those things are important. (Andrejz, MS02_M41)*

> *They have the advantage that they have such nice weather here, while in Poland it's nice for two months a year, sometimes three, if luck has it, and then there is such grayness, all those nice places, are closed, covered in snow, (Marlusz Sycz, MS08_M45)*

> *Just imagine there are days when you don't see the sun for three weeks because everything is overcast.... In other words, I need a bit more sun light in my life; the cold isn't the issue, it's more about the darkness, right? I prefer more sunshine. It's like the last few months in Barcelona. (Alex, MS07_M47)*

European Union membership

As fellow EU citizens, Poles can enter, live, and work in Spain without a visa or permit. Staying beyond 90 days requires registration, but not visa applications. The process is significantly simpler than for non-EU nationals. In the broader EU context, the Polish case in Spain illustrates how the freedom of movement has transformed traditional migration patterns.

Additionally, with all the mobility and the European Union's initiatives that made things easier for us, like the Erasmus program—I can tell you, in my association we have quite a number of marriages formed through Erasmus, and I'm sure there are many other combinations with other countries as well. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

Within the first three months of arrival, Polish people are required to register at the *Oficina de Extranjeros* or police station to obtain the *Certificado de Registro de Ciudadano de la UE*, which includes NIE (*Número de Identificación de Extranjero*). This document allows Polish migrants to work legally, open bank accounts, sign contracts, and access public benefits. Polish migrants as EU citizens can access Spain's public healthcare system if employed (contributing to Social Security) or hold S1 pension forms. Otherwise private insurance suffices. Local health systems often register residents quickly after *empadronamiento*.

Direct hiring mechanisms and employment opportunities

Direct hiring mechanisms play a crucial role in enabling Polish migration to Spain, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, hospitality, and construction. These bilateral agreements or employer-led recruitment programs reduce bureaucratic complexity by pre-arranging work permits, housing, and contracts in Poland before arrival. This streamlines the migration process and offers Polish workers legal employment, social security coverage, and clearer pathways to residency. Moreover, direct hiring minimizes the risk of exploitation compared to informal job searching and often includes orientation or language training, which facilitates better integration. As a result, many Poles benefit from stable employment and quicker social inclusion, making direct hiring an effective and preferred route for migration to Spain. Employers hiring EU nationals typically assist with social security registration, NIE acquisition, and healthcare, easing the process for working immigrants.

This [seasonal labour] agreement between Spain and Poland facilitated the arrival of groups of women from Poland who came to work in strawberry fields. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

Existence of well-established Polish communities and social networks

The existence of established Polish social networks in Spain significantly facilitates further migration. These networks, comprising friends, family, religious communities, cultural associations, and online forums, provide essential support to new arrivals. They help migrants find housing, employment, navigate bureaucracy, and adapt to Spanish culture and language. The presence of Polish-speaking communities, particularly in urban centers like Madrid, Barcelona, or coastal regions, creates a sense of familiarity and reduces feelings of isolation. Such networks also play a key role in encouraging chain migration, where newcomers follow in the footsteps of relatives or acquaintances. Ultimately, these informal support systems lower the psychological and practical barriers of migration, making Spain a more accessible and attractive destination for Poles.

I receive many Poles who need sworn translations of documents. They range from those with less knowledge to those with more expertise. There are also people who are in the process of nationalizing and ask about the necessary documents for that, as well as what paperwork I need because I have had a live child here in Spain and need to obtain the Polish documentation. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

We've had inquiries at the association from entire families who are considering moving. They're asking what options and possibilities are available, and honestly, there are families that leave you wondering... (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

Affordable real estate

Real estate investment in Spain has become increasingly attractive for Polish citizens, especially in coastal regions like Costa Blanca, Costa del Sol, and the Balearic Islands. Affordable property prices compared to Poland, a warm climate, and a high quality of life drive this interest. Many Poles purchase homes for holiday use, retirement, or rental income, with some even relocating permanently. Spain's relatively low property taxes, stable housing market, and the possibility of residency through investment (in some cases) further enhance the appeal. Real estate agencies and services catering to Polish buyers — including Polish-speaking agents — have made the process easier and more transparent. Overall, Spain offers a compelling combination of lifestyle and investment potential for Polish property seekers.

You also need to think about the current geopolitical situation, like the tensions between Russia and Ukraine, which also greatly

influence people's decisions in Poland. Spain is now seen as a safe and stable country, both politically and economically. So, if you should buy property in Poland, you might also consider buying something here. (Alex, MS07_M47)

Spain's welcoming attitude toward foreigners

A welcoming attitude from the local Spanish population plays a crucial role in facilitating Polish migration. Poles often report feeling accepted and well-integrated, especially in regions with experience hosting international communities. The cultural openness, friendliness, and hospitality of Spaniards help newcomers feel comfortable and reduce the stress of adapting to a new environment. Positive interactions in daily life—such as with neighbors, colleagues, and service providers—enhance social cohesion and encourage long-term settlement. This welcoming environment not only improves the quality of life for Polish migrants but also strengthens their sense of belonging, making Spain an attractive and sustainable migration destination.

I believe that's true. Many people come and feel that Spaniards are quite open, especially here in the south. They are really welcoming, and it's easy to make friends. It's true that if you go to the same fruit shop five times, your fruit vendor will already recognize you, and you'll end up joking around with him, but this is only possible if you speak the language. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

In Catalonia, you have festivals, exhibitions, cinemas, theaters, and countless other attractions. It's a small, compact region where, if you love nature like I do, you can enjoy the sea on one side and be in the mountains in just an hour and a half on the other. (Alex, MS07_M47)

I have to say that tolerance is a very, very significant topic that somewhat unsettles me as I return to Poland. It reminds me of Catalonia, and I guess what I mean is that Spain is tolerant of others, including different religions, skin colors, and sexual orientations. (Henna Medrzec, MS11_F48)

Barriers for Polish immigration to Spain

Although Poland and Spain are both EU member states, Polish migrants to Spain still encounter several barriers. Some of the most important are:

Administrative hurdles and bureaucracy

One of the primary challenges is **bureaucracy**, particularly regarding the registration process, access to social services, and recognition of professional qualifications. Many Polish migrants report difficulties navigating complex administrative procedures, which can delay access to healthcare, employment, or education.

As EU citizens, Polish nationals do not need a visa to live or work in Spain. However, if staying more than 3 months, they must register at the Foreigners' Office or local police to obtain the Certificado de Registro de Ciudadano de la UE, which includes NIE (Foreigner Identification Number), which is a time consuming and cumbersome task.

> *The biggest problem on-site was the NIE number, as without it we were unable to either open a bank account or have a normal internet connection, so that took some time. (Sandra Manowska, MS11_F40)*

Polish people have to register their address at the *Ayuntamiento* (local town hall) to obtain the *Certificado de empadronamiento*, necessary for healthcare access, schooling, official documentation, and many administrative steps. In some municipalities, delayed access to *empadronamiento*, mainly due to lack of housing, has led to difficulty accessing services, a concern especially in Catalonia.

> *As for apartments, it seems to me that this may be related to occupation and the laws in place here, as owners are somewhat hesitant to rent to unverified individuals, or even to rent without the mediation of companies that handle these matters. (Sandra Manowska, MS11_F40)*

> *They didn't want to rent to immigrants, so in this sense, I have benefited from having her [Spanish girlfriend] as a co-owner. (Tomasz Pawlowski, MS03_M35)*

To register as a resident, Polish migrants are required to give proof of sufficient financial means to show that they can support themselves without becoming a burden on social services. It commonly required an employment contract, or bank statements showing funds ≥ 100 % of Spain's monthly IPREM (~€600/month; ~€7k–9k/year). For long-term stay or if not working, they must have full coverage public or private health insurance recognized in Spain.

The only thing that surprised me was that you had to get in line at 6 in the morning to make an appointment at the National Police to get your NIE, and then they asked if you had sufficient money. I showed them my bank account, which is entirely in Polish, but since it had four digits, they said 'okay'. (Tomasz Pawlowski, MS03_M35)

Opening a Spanish bank account often requires a Spanish phone number and sometimes a work contract or rental agreement, which can be a chicken-and-egg problem when Polish immigrants lack an NIE or contract. (Alex, MS07_M47)

Administrative challenges related to scheduling appointments and document hurdles also result in delays. Some regions require in-person appointments (to obtain NIE) with proof of work or residency, and delays are frequent.

New immigrants find it nearly impossible to get an appointment at the immigration office, which is the first step they must take. They need to obtain the NIE, or Foreign Identification Number, since without it, they can't open a bank account, and without the NIE, they won't be able to legalize their stay. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

It means that my colleague, who is Spanish, also had to wait because of the bureaucracy. Everyone says that there is waiting, waiting for everything, whether we are waiting. (Anna Zulen, MS13_F49)

the appointment should be in a nominal way, because when I am asked for information for the appointment, I have to provide my first name, my last name, my ID number, or whatever it is. And for me, it should be non-transferable. This way, the issue of companies benefiting from the misfortune of those who want to fix or need to fix their documentation would be shortened, as they are forced to pay between 300 and 500 euros. (Zofia Janiak, MS15_F42)

Language barriers

Language barriers also persist, especially for newcomers without prior knowledge of Spanish, limiting job opportunities and social integration. Although Polish immigrants can work, no knowledge of Spanish decrease their possibilities to get good jobs. Being fluent in Spanish significantly improves job prospects, especially outside tourism and international companies.

The main problem regarding the Polish community that comes to the vicinity of Valencia and Alicante is the language issue, especially if there are children in the family, as these children do not adapt as quickly as parents might always expect. We discussed teenagers, as elementary school children are unlikely to have this issue, but they are at a different stage and probably find it easier in winter. (Anna Zulen, MS13_F49)

I knew the language a little. At first, it was quite difficult. Especially in offices, even as. Now I don't know if it has changed after two years, but when I went to the office to obtain a number, I couldn't speak in English; I was only thinking in Spanish. Language was indeed a barrier at the beginning, when it came to some form of official or medical topics. A bit like that, and I was able to communicate. I did not understand 100%, but I think I understood about 75%. (Sandra Manowska, MS11_F40)

I put in a lot of effort because I think it's very important to speak the language, and it truly takes a lot of work—sometimes I was even dozing off in class! Honestly, my brain felt like it was about to explode, but after a year, I already understand a lot, and I'm starting to speak fairly quickly. (Kamila Glucha, MS08_F45)

Language barriers are not relevant for those who recently arrived as 'digital nomads', who can navigate tourist hotspots like the Canary Islands and the Balearic Islands using only English, and Polish for relations with the emigrant community. Although it should be noted that the high level of qualifications of more recent migrants also means that, for the most part, they are more open to the language—not just Spanish—especially when they work in the cultural industry or scientific research.

I had to translate it because I did not understand the language and said well go to Spain or you will see, but for now I do not have that need or maybe I didn't even consider it, that obviously I would meet all the known requirements, but for now I am not interested. (Zofia Janiak, MS15_F42)

Labour market segmentation

Labour market segmentation often places Polish migrants in low-skilled or seasonal jobs, regardless of their education level. Cultural differences and limited institutional support networks can further hinder full integration, especially in smaller towns with less experience of immigrant populations. Moreover, access to high-quality employment

remains uneven, with many Poles employed below their qualifications, a phenomenon known as “brain waste” or “occupational downgrading” (Parutis, 2014).

> *I have the impression, at least for me, that it would be easier for me to find a new job in Poland than in Spain. I have the impression that the job market in Spain is worse, making it more difficult to find a job than in Poland. (Sandra Manowska, MS11_F40)*

> *However, what I dislike about this place [Spain] is the unemployment. My husband was unemployed for six years even though he has a degree in archaeology. Despite having a postgraduate degree, the only jobs available to them are low-skilled positions. The recent opportunities presented in their field, which are not even for a laborer but rather for a technician and similar roles, are unfortunately very poorly paid. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *When it comes to economic activity, the problem is to find a niche for oneself in which it will actually be possible to develop through economic activity. (Anna Zulen, MS13_F49)*

> *Despite having a postgraduate degree, the only jobs available to them are low-skilled positions. The recent opportunities presented in their field, which are not even for a laborer but rather for a technician and similar roles, are unfortunately very poorly paid. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

This reflects broader structural issues in EU labor markets, where migrants from Central and Eastern Europe often face barriers to professional recognition and career advancement. Additionally, while anti-immigrant sentiment is less pronounced in Spain compared to other EU countries, the general precarity of migrant labor can expose Polish workers to exploitation or poor working conditions, particularly in agriculture and domestic services (Anderson, 2010).

> *Another matter that deeply affected me and continues to do so is that I had the right to be recognized as a translator and interpreter of English based on my degree. There was a specific regulation stating that if you took certain courses and earned a certain number of credits, you would automatically receive this designation upon passing an extraordinary exam, as a sworn translator and interpreter for your first foreign language, which in my case was English. However, during my final years of study, the ministry decided not to grant this title, right when I was completing my degree before the transition to the bachelor’s system, which eliminated this opportunity. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

Less incentive for migrants

Over time, economic convergence between Poland and Western Europe, driven in part by EU cohesion policies and structural funds, has reduced the economic incentives for emigration. Poland's rising wages, declining unemployment, and improving standard of living have contributed to a slowing of outward migration and, in some cases, even return migration from Spain and other EU countries (Kaczmarczyk, et al. 2020).

> *My close friends and family who stayed in Poland are not doing any worse than I am. So I can't say that economic reasons are the main reason that being here is a plus. (Henna Medrzec, MS11_F48)*

> *In Poland, the standard of living, especially in large cities like Warsaw, is much better than here. Here salaries are very low. The work situation and the types of contracts offered are quite precarious, and honestly, I find it very disappointing. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *In Spain, however, inequality has been increasing since the past, and people were more equal back then than they are now. (Alex, MS07_M47)*

Climate change and heat waves

Weather in Spain was a factor of attraction for many Polish migrants in the past. However, extreme summer heat in Spain creates growing challenges for migrants, particularly those from cooler climates like Poland. In recent years, Spain has experienced increasingly intense and prolonged heat waves, such as in summer 2022, when temperatures exceeded 45 °C, resulting in thousands of heat-related deaths across the country. This intense heat started to expel people from the South Spain.

> *When I was younger, I could handle the weather better, but now summer has become unbearable. I don't know if it's due to climate change or if it's just me getting older. But this scorching summer is just intolerable. After I finish the school year, we pack our bags and head to Poland, returning just when the new school year begins. We basically save all summer to see the grandparents once a year. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *And also in terms of the weather. Because, after all, I am not sure I would be able to live further south, as it is quite difficult for me here to cope with the heat in summer. Therefore, it seems to me*

that the location in terms of temperature is not, is not bad. (Sandra Manowska, MS11_F40)

Degraded public services

Spain's degradation of public education and healthcare services poses notable challenges for Polish migrants, particularly those arriving with families or seeking long-term integration. Structural underinvestment in the welfare state has led to long waiting lists, limited availability of primary care, and rising reliance on private healthcare even for legally entitled migrants

You get sick and they schedule you an appointment for a month later. When I need an appointment, I think, well, during the peak flu season and all, if I have to wait a week, then that's okay. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

The education system is really struggling, and in Poland, it's also diminished quite a bit. There, for example, in schools, we call it the rat race; there's an immense amount of pressure on the kids. In fact, there are extremely high rates of suicide attempts and completed suicides, both failed attempts and unfortunately successful ones. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

5.5 Contributions to the receiving regions: Spain

Economic contribution to Spanish economy

The economic contribution of Polish migrants in Spain has evolved significantly since the early 2000s, reflecting the community's increasing occupational diversification, and growing socio-economic stability. Initially attracted by labor-intensive sectors during Spain's pre-crisis economic boom, Polish migrants were primarily employed in low-skilled, often precarious positions in agriculture, construction, and domestic services.

There was a wave of such migrants in Huelva, stemming from an agreement that was signed prior to Poland joining the European Union. This agreement between Spain and Poland facilitated the arrival of groups of women from Poland who came to work in strawberry fields. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

However, over the past two decades, Polish migrants have transitioned from seasonal and temporary labor toward more stable, long-term participation in the Spanish economy, particularly in services, skilled trades, and even entrepreneurship. This shift not only highlights their adaptability but also underscores the important role they have played in regional labor markets, demographic renewal, and the informal economy. As explained by respondents, among most of them have good education and are engaged in service sector.

> *There are many people working at the university, teaching classes, because they completed their academic careers here, earned their doctorates here, and decided to stay to contribute their research to the University of Granada and to society. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *At that moment, I was illegally employed at a company where I had already been working. I was hired based on the documents I received. (Henna Medrzec, MS11_F48)*

During the early migration period in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many Polish migrants filled vital labor shortages in Spain's expanding agricultural and construction sectors. These sectors, characterized by informal employment, long hours, and seasonal variation, were often unattractive to native workers, making Polish labor an essential workforce. In agriculture, especially in regions such as Huelva, Almeria, and Murcia, Polish seasonal workers—many of them women—were employed under temporary work permits to support fruit and vegetable harvesting (López-Sala, 2016). Their participation helped maintain Spain's competitive position in European food exports. In construction, especially during the real estate boom, Polish male workers were valued for their trade skills and flexibility. Their contributions in this period were essential to infrastructure development in areas like Madrid, Catalonia, and coastal tourism regions.

> *There was a time, especially during the real estate boom of the 2000s and 2010s, when a significant amount of construction was happening, and many Polish workers came to work on the sites. Their primary goal was to earn money, and in construction, it was possible to make good money quickly due to the abundance of work and high wages. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

Following Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, mobility increased, and with legal barriers removed, Polish migrants gained easier access to the Spanish labor market. This coincided with a diversification in their economic roles. Increasing numbers of migrants began moving into urban service sectors, including hospitality, retail, cleaning services, and elder care. This was particularly notable in metropolitan areas

such as Madrid and Barcelona. As Spain's economy began to recover from the 2008 financial crisis, Polish workers were also among those who adapted quickly to changes in demand by entering new occupational niches. For example, some Polish migrants with higher education or language skills moved into translation, teaching, logistics, tourism, or administrative support roles.

> *I previously worked in the public sector as well, but in schools for children aged zero to three years within the same municipality, as I applied to various job pools and so forth. However, in the end, I transitioned to the position I have now. (Zofia Janiak, MS15_F42)*

> *I worked as a logistics specialist, and for Balzen I worked in the marketing department. (Marianna Czebiatowska, MS02_F58)*

Moreover, Polish migrants have contributed to entrepreneurship and self-employment in Spain. According to Spanish labor statistics (INE, 2021), the rate of self-employment among Polish migrants grew from 7.5% in 2011 to 15.4% in 2021. Many Polish entrepreneurs operate in small-scale businesses such as construction services, import-export of Polish goods, beauty salons, language tutoring, and online sales. This entrepreneurial activity has played a part in local economic regeneration, particularly in provinces with declining native populations. Additionally, Polish-owned businesses often serve as community hubs, providing employment opportunities for fellow migrants and offering culturally tailored goods and services.

> *A lot of people come here and start their own businesses. I see more influence from the immigrant community here than in Poland, maybe because I'm not there to witness it myself. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *Now I have my own tapas bar, yes. That's right. Yes, I've made progress. Very well. So, how long have you had your business? Uh... This year it'll be three years, in September. Great. This year will be... (Alex, MS07_M47)*

> *Currently I operate independently, managing my own business without partners, focusing on smaller projects. I do not create entire systems, but rather develop applications that are components of the system. I collaborate permanently with a Polish company (Marlusz Sycz, MS08_M45)*

Polish migration has also indirectly contributed to Spain's economy through demographic renewal and housing investment. The presence of young Polish families in rural and semi-urban regions has helped mitigate the effects of depopulation in aging

provinces. Furthermore, an increasing number of middle-class Poles have purchased property in Spain, either for permanent residence or as a second home. These real estate investments, particularly in coastal provinces such as Alicante, Malaga, and the Balearic Islands, not only reflect the community's upward socio-economic mobility but also stimulate local construction, property management, and service sectors (Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2019).

> *In Poland, wealthy individuals often buy apartments in areas of Alicante. I know this because there are direct flights from Warsaw to Alicante, and Warsaw is a capital city where people can earn a lot... So, I mean, compared to prices in Poland, you can buy apartments like these for less money or fewer euros in a tourist context, but people do it just in case. Because Warsaw is already in a part that is quite close to Belarus (Andrejz, MS02_M41)*

> *I should mention that property prices are particularly affordable for Poles because you can buy here. There's a large community in southern Spain, especially around Alicante, like in Torrevieja. (Alex, MS07_M47)*

In conclusion, Polish migrants have made a multifaceted economic contribution to Spain's development. Initially filling labor shortages in agriculture and construction sectors, they have increasingly diversified into service jobs, self-employment, and housing investment. As the Polish migrant community continues to stabilize, its long-term contribution—both formal and informal—to Spain's economy is expected to remain significant, especially in light of shared EU mobility frameworks and the ongoing need for skilled and semi-skilled labor across regions.

Social-cultural contribution

The socio-cultural contribution of Polish migrants to Spain has developed progressively since the late 1990s, accompanying their demographic expansion and deeper integration into Spanish society. Initially perceived primarily through an economic lens, the Polish community's influence has gradually extended into cultural, religious, educational, and social spheres, reflecting both their efforts to maintain cultural identity and their engagement with Spanish institutions. This contribution is particularly evident in areas with high concentrations of Polish residents, such as Madrid, Barcelona, Alicante, Málaga, and the Basque Country, where Polish associations, cultural events, bilingual

schools, and religious activities have become increasingly visible and valued components of local multicultural landscapes.

> *Years ago there was a Catalan-Polish association. I'm involved with all the Polish associations, and there's also the church since a lot of people from Poland go there. We've made some connections, but we're still looking for more people to join us... (Alex, MS07_M47)*

One of the most prominent aspects of Polish migrants' socio-cultural impact in Spain is the establishment of Polish community organizations, which have served as crucial vehicles for cultural preservation and intercultural dialogue. These associations often center on Polish national traditions, including the celebration of Constitution Day (May 3rd), Independence Day (November 11th), and religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter, which are marked by folk festivals, traditional music, and Polish cuisine. These events not only reinforce community ties among migrants but also foster intercultural exchange by inviting Spanish neighbors to participate in Polish customs, thus enhancing mutual understanding and reducing xenophobia.

> *We've really built a community where we help each other a lot. During the COVID pandemic, we organized a fundraising raffle that brought the Polish community together to get to know one another, like what everyone does for a living. For instance, I'm a hairdresser, and I offered a voucher in the raffle for... (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *Besides providing my services as a certified translator and interpreter, I also offer some consulting to help people with various topics related to documentation. Facebook is a fantastic tool for this because I'm in countless groups, like Poles in Spain, Poles in Alicante, Poles in the Basque Country, and so on. I think I'm part of around 80 groups, although that's not all of them. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *Every year she organized a picnic on the beach around Independence Day. (Katarzyna, MS09_F67)*

> *In Madrid, they also organize an event called the Polish Solidarity Carnival. In Poland, there's a movement every January to raise funds for hospitals, aimed at equipping public hospitals (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

Religious practice, especially Catholicism, has been another important cultural bridge. Many Polish migrants maintain a strong attachment to the Catholic faith, often forming congregations within Spanish parishes or attending Polish-language masses. The

presence of Polish priests and religious orders has further supported the spiritual needs of migrants, while also reinforcing connections with local Spanish dioceses. Shared religious practice has facilitated a smoother integration process, especially in rural or conservative areas where Catholicism remains culturally dominant. In some cases, Polish migrants have even revitalized declining local parishes by increasing attendance and supporting church-based volunteer activities.

> *The Great Christmas Aid Orchestra, which we organize every year as an event with my Polish friends, raises money to be sent to Poland to purchase technology for machines used in children's hospitals. (Andrejz, MS02_M41)*

> *During Christmas, for instance, we bring fresh beets from the Mercado and offer them, along with some Polish products that may not be available in all the local fruit shops. We're also trying to engage not just with the Polish community but also with the local market here. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *I am there twice a year in August; we always stop by, and in December, because I cannot imagine Christmas without Polish traditions. (Anna Zulen, MS13_F49)*

The Polish community has also made significant contributions to education and bilingualism in Spain. As the number of Polish children in Spanish schools has increased, so too has the demand for Polish language instruction and cultural content. At the same time, some Polish families also send their kids to international schools where they learn English and Polish. Most Polish families tend to value education highly and often participate actively in school life, contributing to stronger community-school partnerships.

> *Many families send their children to British schools. After all, it was understood that at least there will be no pressure there, although of course, these are schools with an emphasis on English. (Anna Zulen, MS13_F49)*

> *The parents want their children to speak Polish because, just like me, I wanted my kids to speak Polish too, if only a little. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *I mix a little with the youngest and try to keep up with Polish, but with the two older ones, I only speak Catalan. With the youngest, I mix them up a bit, so to speak (Henna Medrzec, MS11_F48)*

> *I believe that any kind of immigration often brings significant enrichment. It enriches us culturally, provides a different per-*

spective, and adds diversity. I believe that immigration is enriching, as it allows us to explore and understand other cultures. I think that in the past, Spain and Andalusia were much more closed off. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

Beyond organized cultural expressions, Polish migrants contribute to Spanish society through everyday intercultural encounters, particularly in intermarriage and community participation. According to census data, there has been a steady increase in mixed Polish-Spanish couples, especially Polish women married to Spanish men. These unions often act as points of cultural convergence, facilitating language learning, shared traditions, and hybrid family identities. Polish migrants also participate in neighborhood associations, civic initiatives, and volunteer work, especially in education, elder care, and environmental projects, furthering their social visibility and integration.

It so happened that a stir was created because Polish women started arriving, often young and blonde, which naturally captured the attention of local men, leading to the breakdown of marriages. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

Now, in my children's classroom, I'm not sure how many kids are 100% Spanish, but there are South American kids, and there's, I don't know, a kid with a Russian mom, my kids have a Polish mother, there are other kids of Maghreb origin, a Pakistani girl, and two Black boys who come from Africa. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

In 2012 alone, for example, we brought nearly 100 people to Chesto Rová in Corre Fox, during a Catalan night where we received assistance from one, a university professor of post-line, and the embassy to organize Paellas, Castaíes, the Bastons Group, and all of this, as it was a project of our association because the idea was to offer international projects to young people. However, since we had this partner here, such as the Diables and all the other groups, Catalonia has been very close for many, many years. (Tomasz Pawlowski, MS03_M35)

Importantly, the Polish community's socio-cultural presence has challenged traditional notions of "immigrant identity" in Spain. Unlike many other migrant groups, Poles are European Union citizens, predominantly white and Christian, which has in some contexts shielded them from racialized discrimination but also rendered their cultural distinctiveness less visible in policy and academic discourse. Nevertheless, their experience illustrates how intra-European migration also generates complex processes of identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, and belonging. The growing Polish population has contributed to the diversification of Spain's European immigrant

communities and encouraged a broader understanding of European multiculturalism. This helped Poles to redefine their identity as migrants and EU citizens.

> *My impression is that for a long time, Poles often had complexes about being Polish and did not like to speak of their Polish identity abroad. However, I feel that this is changing a bit now. I do not know if this is also your experience. (Katarzyna, MS09_F67)*

> *So, that pride of being Polish, we pass it on, I mean, my parents and I, we pass it on to the children. For example, now that he is older and it's a bit different, he expresses his opinions on his own. (Zofia Janiak, MS15_F42)*

> *I have gone through a process of assimilation, and my attempts to do well there were just that—attempts. I truly consider Spain my home, and I feel good here. (Kamila Glucha, MS08_F45)*

In conclusion, Polish migrants in Spain have made multifaceted socio-cultural contributions that go beyond economic labor. Through cultural associations, religious and educational institutions, artistic engagement, and everyday intercultural practices, they have enriched Spanish cultural life while maintaining strong transnational ties with Poland. These contributions reflect not only successful integration but also the evolving nature of European mobility and cultural pluralism in the 21st century.

Political contribution

The political contribution of Polish migrants in Spain, while less visible than their economic or cultural engagement, has been gradually emerging in tandem with their demographic growth and socio-economic integration. As citizens of the European Union, Polish nationals enjoy political rights under EU law, including the right to vote and stand as candidates in local and European Parliament elections in Spain. However, their actual participation has been modest and shaped by factors such as limited political mobilization, linguistic barriers, and a general perception of temporariness.

> *I am not interested in the local politics. That is why I have not asked for Spanish nationality. I have no likings (Alex, MS07_M47)*

> *No, I'm not politically engaged. I'm not sure about unions and things like that either (Henna Medrzec, MS11_F48)*

Despite constraints, the Polish community has increasingly become involved in local civic life and transnational political networks, indicating a growing awareness of their

role as political actors in the Spanish and European contexts. Many have opted for Spanish nationality to become complete citizen of Spain and participate in local and national party politics.

> *People who want to obtain Spanish nationality do so for political reasons in order to be able to vote in their country of residence. (Honoreta Twardowska, MS02_M41)*

Despite these positive developments, barriers to greater political participation remain. Linguistic limitations, limited outreach by Spanish political parties, and a general lack of targeted policies toward Eastern European migrants also contribute to their underrepresentation in political processes. Some Poles laments their lack of Spanish nationality, which does not allow them to participate in local democracy.

> *And there are certain rights associated with nationalities that I don't have, right? I bring this subject up and I bitterly lament that I live here, work, and pay taxes—substantial ones at that—yet I have no say in what happens to those taxes, at least at the national level (Henna Medrzec, MS11_F48)*

> *They are not going to accept us; we are foreigners. But well, sometimes we have to assert ourselves, regardless of where you are from and regardless of who you are. I mean, I don't care whether those men, those women, or whether you are from one place or another. (Zofia Janiak, MS15_F42)*

However, as the Polish community becomes more settled, and as second-generation Polish-Spaniards come of age with full citizenship rights, their potential for political influence, both at local and national levels, is likely to grow. There are Poles who want to retain their nationality till the conditions allowed in Spain and in their home country:

> *I believe that as long as I do not need to change my nationality, I will not do so, because I do not think it is right for the Spanish state to oblige us to, in relation to the Spanish state, renounce our nationality. It seems unfair to me. So, while I always say that as long as we do not lack bread or my work and my life do not depend on it, I have no intention of taking on citizenship. That does not change the fact that I might have to deal with something if, the day after tomorrow, Poland or Spain decides to implement a Brexit, just like England, because things could get complicated there. (Zofia Janiak, MS15_F42)*

In summary, while the political contribution of Polish migrants in Spain remains modest compared to other areas, it is not insignificant. Through local elections, civil society activism, and grassroots representation, the Polish community has begun to establish

itself as a civic and political actor in Spain. Their evolving participation highlights the complexities and opportunities of EU citizenship and points to a more inclusive vision of democratic engagement in an increasingly diverse Spain.

5.6 Contributions to the sending region: Poland

Polish migrants in Spain contribute to Poland not only through remittances and return migration, but also by fostering cultural diplomacy, participating in national politics, promoting international academic cooperation, and maintaining transnational business ties. These multidimensional contributions highlight the active role of the Polish diaspora in shaping both Spanish society and Poland's economic, cultural, and political landscape. Their engagement is emblematic of the increasingly complex and reciprocal nature of migration in a European Union characterized by open borders, shared institutions, and growing interdependence.

Economic contribution

One of the most direct and measurable contributions comes in the form of economic remittances. Although the volume of remittances from Spain to Poland is smaller compared to that from countries like the UK or Germany, it has nevertheless played a role in supporting household income, especially during the 2000s and in the early years following Poland's EU accession in 2004. Remittances helped finance housing construction, education, and small business activities in Poland, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged regions (Kaczmarczyk & Okólski, 2008). These financial transfers, while declining in proportion as migrants settle long-term in Spain, have historically contributed to reducing poverty and fostering regional development in Poland.

> *Their goal was to win, win, win, win for three years, continuously sending money to Poland while they built houses there. They invested that money not here, but there, until the situation shifted and, instead of sending money, they started bringing their families over. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

Some Poles have their houses in Poland, which they maintain and save as assets for their kids, who can enjoy vacations in Poland and have a connection with their parents' home land.

I still own an apartment in Warsaw, I have family in Warsaw, (Katarzyna MS09_F67)

There are people who live here and also have a house in Poland. I have a small apartment that I'm still paying a mortgage on, so I have something here that helps me, but it also assists in paying the mortgage. (Alec

Yes. I inherited a house in the countryside from my parents while they were alive, a house at my grandparents' place that has been renovated. It's an old, very nice house nestled in the woods, showcasing the charming Lasków architecture. (Henna Medrzec, MS11_F48)

Yes, the only thing that could be considered an economic tie is that I have a piece of land over there from my father, but I am neglecting it; I am not doing anything with it, so you could have moved there globally. (Sandra Manowska, MS11_F40)

Due to the increasing possibilities of owning a house in Spain, many Poles are wanting to sell their houses in Poland to buy apartments in the coastal cities of Spain. This is creating a new supply of houses in Poland, which are for sale due to the migration of their owners to Spain.

I'm considering selling my grandmother's apartment instead of renting it out in Poland; I'll sell it and buy something here in Spain to rent out. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

I was just thinking that it might be good to sell it one day and have something to start fresh here, but that's not possible in Madrid. (Andrejz, MS02_M41)

Some Poles are also helping religious or cultural associations in their home country to improve their infrastructure and provide better services to the people in need.

The Great Christmas Aid Orchestra, which we organize every year as an event with my Polish friends, raises money to be sent to Poland to purchase technology for machines used in children's hospitals. (Andrejz, MS02_M41)

If I donate money, I usually give it to animal shelters or associations (Alex, MS07_M47)

Social-cultural contribution

The Polish diaspora has actively participated in promoting Polish heritage abroad, enhancing Poland's image in international contexts (Nowosielski and Nowak, 2022). Contrary to this, a large number of Polish migrants in Spain have very limited social contact with their home country, which is limited to their family members and friends.

> *My relationships with Poland are based solely on maintaining connections with friends and family. (Sandra Manowska, MS11_F40)*

> *I used to go regularly. I would try to spend a few days during Christmas and then a bit longer in the summer. But once you get married, have kids, and tickets start getting more expensive, it usually means that I go for two months every year. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *Yes, I go quite often, at least four times a year. it's mainly to see family and friends; I don't really do tourism. (Alex, MS07_M47)*

> *And don't get me wrong, from June to October, we're planning to move to the Polish countryside. It's such a nice, beautiful Polish summer, and we want to relax and breathe in the fresh air. So yes, I have economic ties and connections to Poland. (Henna Medrzec, MS11_F48)*

> *Over time, for various reasons that I won't delve into here as they are private matters, the relationship with my immediate family has started to fade. Meanwhile, I have my aunts and uncles and grandparents who have passed away, and although I might still have stronger emotional ties with them in certain moments, that too eventually comes to an end. The last of them left me at the beginning of COVID in 2020. (Kamila Glucha, MS08_F45)*

Educational and academic linkages represent yet another domain of contribution. Polish professionals, researchers, and academics working in Spanish universities or institutions have helped build scientific and educational bridges between Spain and Poland. Furthermore, through participation in EU-funded programs like Erasmus+ or Horizon Europe, Polish-Spanish collaborations have facilitated the transfer of research expertise and innovation, contributing to the knowledge economy in both countries.

> *I was also in Barcelona on my Erasmus program in 2000, at the same time. Overall, I can say that I first visited Barcelona, in Catalonia, back in 1998. The main reason for that trip was that I was studying international relations and needed to learn Spanish at*

a very high level. So, that was the first reason I went there in 1998... (Henna Medrzec, MS11_F48)

There's a lot more cultural mixing happening nowadays than before. Additionally, with all the mobility and the European Union's initiatives that made things easier for us, like the Erasmus program—I can tell you, in my association we have quite a number of marriages formed through Erasmus. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

There was a signed agreement with the Ministry of Education in Spain, which allowed me to obtain both certifications: a Polish high school diploma and a Spanish high school certificate. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

This transnational academic engagement enhances Poland's global educational footprint and fosters intellectual mobility that benefits Polish institutions through knowledge circulation.

Political contribution

Another significant aspect is the political contribution of Polish migrants in Spain to their country of origin. As full citizens, they retain the right to vote in Polish national elections, and voter turnout among the diaspora in Spain has been particularly notable during periods of political tension or critical national decisions, such as the 2015 and 2020 presidential elections. Polish embassies and consulates in Madrid, Barcelona, and other cities regularly facilitate voting abroad, and migrant participation has influenced close electoral races, especially in the presidential runoff rounds.

Polish politics do interest me, and I do vote in Polish elections and all of this. My husband is living here at a Polish consulate, that we are following what is happening in Poland much more. (Honoreta Twardowska, MS06_F47)

When there were elections in Poland, last year in Alicante we created an Electoral Commission, actually two, because I don't know if we were ahead of Barcelona, or Barcelona, or us somehow at the forefront, when it comes to participation. (Anna Zulen, MS13_F49)

I will tell you something, I voted in the last elections, but generally speaking, I did not vote, because I believe that individuals who do not live in Poland, who have not lived in Poland for over, I don't know, ten or more years, should actually not have the right

to vote, because their minds, so to speak, are elsewhere, they are interested in different politics, and do not always have a good perspective on this. (Katarzyna, MS09_F67)

Well, of course these recent elections, which took place, were elections where one could either be different or not, to be different, just like one of many in Poland, where one voted not for someone, but against someone, and in such elections, well, yes, so it is about the choice, right (Katarzyna, MS09_F67)

In addition, diaspora advocacy groups based in Spain have occasionally engaged in public campaigns or petitions addressing issues such as judicial independence, reproductive rights, and freedom of speech in Poland. These actions reflect the evolving political consciousness of the diaspora and their desire to participate in shaping Poland's democratic trajectory—even while residing abroad.

The government was right-wing until recently, very extreme. A large segment of society, especially educated people, often said that the extreme right government in Poland was supported by ordinary people—specifically, those from rural areas who might not be very educated. If you actually look at the voter statistics, you'll see that this is the case. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

It was something like this: there were elections for the Polish Parliament that mobilized everyone because we wanted a left-leaning government. We hoped for a shift in power and for the left to win, and there was significant mobilization across the board to get people to vote. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

There was a time when I could criticize Poland, the country I left. I could complain about it and speak poorly of it, so to speak. But just like a mother about her child, I can say it, but if someone says something bad, then I, like a lioness, defended it. When someone from outside said something bad about Poland, that's when I joined in and defended it. (Katarzyna, MS09_F67)

Transnational ties

Polish migrants in Spain maintain multifaceted transnational economic, social and political ties that illustrate the complex ways in which migration is embedded within broader economic and social systems. It reinforces their national identity and preserve cultural continuity despite geographical distance. These ties are expressed through frequent contact with family and friends in Poland via digital communication tools, as

well as through regular visits to their homeland, especially during religious holidays and family events.

> *I used to go regularly. I would try to spend a few days during Christmas and then a bit longer in the summer. But once you get married, have kids, and tickets start getting more expensive, it usually means that I go for two months every year. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *I used to go, trying to visit twice a year, though I rarely went three times. When you're studying, you don't really have much freedom, either. Occasionally, you'd take a few days because something happened, like when one of your parents got sick, or when your grandmother fell ill, and you'd sneak away for a bit, but those visits weren't very long. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *I continue to maintain a lot of contact because my grandmother still lives in Poland, and I have a lot of contact with my cousins who live near my grandmother. There is also the fact that, for example, some of them are godparents to my children. We keep in touch; they come to visit us, we go there. We have an apartment in Poland, so we go at least every two years and we stay there for at least three weeks or so. (Zofia Janiak, MS15_F42)*

Religious practices, particularly Catholicism, play a central role in maintaining cultural cohesion; many Polish migrants visit their friends and family during Christmas holidays.

> *My husband and I started the tradition of alternating Christmases, one year in Poland and the next in Spain, to avoid family disputes. This continued until we had children, (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *I promised myself that aside from vacations and Christmas, I would also try to visit, like in spring and autumn with my youngest son, for sure, because he's at that age where he has a lot of cousins in Poland and he gets along really well. He speaks the best Polish, so I believe he feels the most Polish out of all of us. (Henna Medrzec, MS11_F48)*

Language retention is another key aspect of socio-cultural transnationalism, as many Polish parents emphasize teaching their children Polish at home or enrolling them in supplementary language schools to preserve linguistic heritage. Cultural associations and diaspora organizations also serve as important institutions that organize Polish festivals, folklore performances, and national celebrations, helping migrants maintain a shared identity and pass traditions to the next generation.

In my family, Polish is spoken, especially by the children. They know that when they enter their grandparents' house, nothing else is spoken. Among themselves, well, maybe sometimes they skip it a bit, but with the grandparents, it's all Polish. (Zofia Janiak, MS15_F42)

When my son was younger, the gift that he liked the most to receive from Poland was, for instance, the jersey of the Polish national team or the jerseys of Polish football clubs, and he still has a collection of Polish football jerseys (Zofia Janiak, MS15_F42)

Polish media—television, online news platforms, and social media—further reinforces ties to Poland by providing migrants with continuous access to domestic cultural, political, and social discourse. These socio-cultural practices illustrate that Polish migrants in Spain are not merely assimilating into Spanish society but are actively sustaining a transnational way of life that connects their host and home countries in meaningful ways.

There's a lot of news, every day, I make sure to stay connected so I know what's happening in my country, for sure. (Andrejz, MS02_M41)

Polish migrants in Spain actively cultivate transnational social networks that link them to family, friends, and broader diaspora communities in both Poland and other countries. These networks are crucial for emotional support, practical assistance, and the exchange of information regarding employment, housing, and legal matters.

Just being on Facebook is enough to know what is happening and how the presidential elections will unfold. (Anna Zulen, MS13_F49)

We use WhatsApp to talk because, you know, it’s free and I have it too. (Andrejz, MS02_M41)

Kinship ties remain at the core of these networks, with migrants maintaining frequent contact with relatives in Poland through regular visits, phone calls, and digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Skype. These connections foster a sense of belonging and continuity, even for long-term migrants.

To maintain our connection, we communicate a lot through WhatsApp and have frequent video calls so they can see what the kids are up to. It works out well, (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

Facebook is a fantastic tool to connect with people here and in Poland, because I'm in countless groups, like Poles in Spain,

Poles in Alicante, Poles in the Basque Country, and so on. I think I'm part of around 80 groups, although that's not all of them. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)

Additionally, diaspora media, such as online Polish-language newspapers or radio stations in Spain, often serve dual roles, informing both the diaspora and Polish audiences back home about life abroad, thereby fostering a more interconnected understanding of the global Polish experience. Moreover, many second-generation migrants travel to Poland for summer programs, family visits, or Polish language camps, which reinforces cultural ties and contributes to the soft power of Poland in Europe.

When I'm in Poland, I listen to Spanish radio and stay updated with the news from both countries. For instance, right now I've kind of disconnected from Poland, but when I'm there, I rarely disconnect from the political situation. I keep track of all the developments happening, and I feel quite integrated, as if this is something that belongs to me. (Kamila Glucha, MS08_F45)

5.7 Policy recommendations

To enhance the integration of Polish migrants in Spain and strengthen their transnational ties, policy efforts should focus on both structural and social dimensions. Some of the most important steps highlighted by respondents are:

Streamlining administrative procedures:

Streamlining of administrative processes such as residency permit or NIE, employment contracts, housing contracts and access to healthcare and education can ease bureaucratic burdens.

The first is to facilitate the processes related to all necessary documents.... It seems to me that this could be made a bit easier for citizens of the European Union. Regarding documents such as NIE, social security numbers, for instance, right? Yes, mainly that. In Spain, this is the biggest problem and there are plenty of them. (Sandra Manowska, MS11_F40)

Expanding language training programs

More investment in language training programs, both Spanish and regional languages, can improve social inclusion and employment outcomes. Most Poles enter Spain with

no or very little knowledge of Spanish or regional languages. These language course can help them secure better jobs and integrate to the host society. Some efforts are made by regional governments to promote regional languages but coordinated effort for Spanish learning is still required.

> *It's about the language... I know that there are free Catalan courses here in Catalonia, I don't know if there are Spanish courses, but there are Catalan ones for newcomers. (Sandra Manowska, MS11_F40)*

Titles and skills recognition:

A simpler procedure for title recognition and initiatives for skill development would help Polish migrants access employment that matches their qualifications. A large number of Polish migrants do not get employment according to their qualifications, which leads to wastage of human resources and underemployment.

> *all the bureaucratic processes I handle with my clients—especially things I've never experienced myself, like the equivalency of studies since I haven't needed it—are quite familiar to me because many of my clients navigate these procedures. Often, they say things like, 'Look, this is what it says on the ministry's website, but I just can't make sense of it.' (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

> *I was thinking about credentials recognition. It also takes a long time, like two or three years for any kind. (Andrejz, MS02_M41)*

Supporting intercultural education

Intercultural education in schools and promoting community-building activities can foster social cohesion, particularly for mixed families and second-generation migrants. Many parents struggle to get good public schools and they feel forced to send their kids to private schools.

> *For many years, I have struggled to find an educational institution that I like, whether it's a public charter or a private school. My children have attended a charter school and then a private school for several years, which I consider to be poor quality, despite the effort I made. Ultimately, we decided to pull them out, but the real challenge was figuring out where to transfer them. (Svetlana, MS04_F40)*

Strengthening collaboration

Strengthening collaboration between Polish associations, local governments, and civil society can ensure migrants' voices are included in policy design, ensuring tailored and sustainable integration strategies. Bilateral agreements should be signed to strengthen transnational ties. Tax policies and social care system should be updated to accommodate the needs of foreign workers:

> *I would simplify the tax and social care system, as this has been the biggest issue: who is entitled, with what rights, and so on. What happens if I cease operations in Poland but reside here? What if I sign an employment contract there, but live here? What if I manifest my interest in establishing an economic venture without being certain that it is the best option? The process is simply very complicated. (Marlusz Sycz, MS08_M45)*

5.8 Conclusions

In conclusion, the Poland-Spain migration system has undergone significant transformations over the past two decades, with notable changes in demographic, socio-economic, and territorial patterns. In this way, the reduction of migration flows to a third of their former size conceals a transformation in their sociodemographic characteristics, which in turn affects their territorial distribution in Spain—this distribution largely reflecting the activities of Polish migrants. Moreover, the reasons, routes and impact of this migration system (on both origin and destination) has also evolved greatly over the past two decades

In terms of population, changes in migration flows contribute to a growing complexity within the Polish community residing in Spain. On one hand, we find the pioneers of Polish migration—both men and women—who chose to remain in the country, neither returning to Poland nor initiating a second migration to a third country. Most of these individuals have contributed to raising the average age of the Polish population in Spain, and among them, forming a partnership with Spanish nationals often appears to have been the main reason for settling permanently.

This population tends to remain in the same municipalities where they initially settled (such as Madrid and neighboring provinces like Guadalajara and Toledo), as well as in early destinations of labor recruitment programs—for example, Huelva, with its strawberry-picking sector employing many women, or the mining sector in Asturias. To this population, we must now add the flows of Poles arriving after 2014, who, as we have

seen, differ significantly in terms of sex, age, and level of education from the pioneers. These more recent flows are much more heterogeneous than the earlier ones.

Once again, the heterogeneity of this new Polish migration is reflected in a different territorial distribution, with emerging concentrations in provinces characterized by real estate investment and the associated business and service sectors—such as Alicante and Málaga. However, this transformation also affects other Spanish cities that have long hosted Polish migrants beyond Madrid and Barcelona, such as those in the Canary and Balearic Islands. As a result, we now find Poles who arrived at different times living within the same provinces.

The growth of migration flows in the post-pandemic years reflects both a trend toward temporary migration typical of digital nomads and, more broadly, highly qualified youth who view migration to Spain as part of their educational or professional journey—as well as those who see Spain as a destination for retirement.

From a policy perspective, the Polish-Spanish migration corridor highlights both the opportunities and the challenges of free movement within the EU. On one hand, it allows individuals to seek better opportunities, contributes to labor market flexibility, and fosters intercultural exchange. On the other, it exposes inequalities in labor market treatment and underscores the need for more coordinated EU-wide approaches to integration, skills recognition, and social protection for mobile citizens. As the EU continues to grapple with demographic aging, labor shortages, and regional disparities, the mobility of citizens like Poles in Spain will remain a vital component of its social and economic fabric. Future research should continue to monitor how these migration patterns evolve, particularly in the post-Brexit and post-pandemic context, where new forms of digital labor, remote work, and climate-related migration may further transform the landscape of intra-EU mobility. Ultimately, Polish migration to Spain offers a nuanced case of how EU citizenship, labor market dynamics, and individual agency intersect in shaping contemporary European migration.

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6. Polish sending regions

Michał Wanke (UEK)

6.1 Vulnerable regions in Poland

The selection of the regions employed a multistage purposive sampling was applied to identify regions first (NUTS 2 in the case of Poland) and their sub-regions second (below NUTS 3 in the case of Poland: at the "powiat" – or "county" – level). Poland is administratively divided into 16 provinces (Voivodeships) at the NUTS 2 level, which are partially self-governed and organize the social and economic life around themselves. Yet, there is significant variability among the province sub-regions, which tend to be dominated by their capital centers and relatively deprived outside of them. Once the area was selected, individuals were identified based on a range of theory-driven criteria related to their migration experience or expertise on regional issues and migration alike.

The use of a single indicator of migration is problematic in this case. For example, in the case of Poland, permanent residency registers were used, though they proved to be an inaccurate measure of migration (residency registration is not a well-executed duty). They did, however, illustrate some long-term trends, as people could eventually de-register for various reasons. For instance, Fig. 1 illustrates the post-accession (2004–2018) out- and in-flows to the regions. It should be immediately added that intra-EU free mobility and short-term arrangements significantly distort this picture.

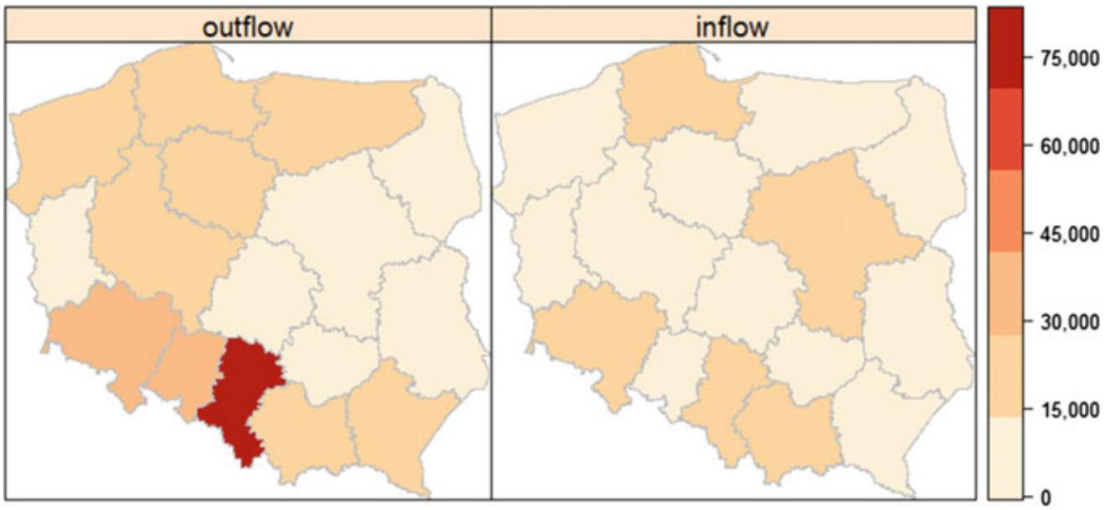

Fig. 19.6 Total permanent regional migration flows from and to Poland in 2004–2018. *Source* Own studies based on Statistics Poland data

Fig 1. Permanent migration registration flows. Source: Orczyk, J., & Woźniak, M. (2022). The Ins and Outs of the Labour Market. In P. Churski & T. Kaczmarek (Eds.), Three Decades of Polish Socio-Economic Transformations: Geographical Perspectives (pp. 467–486). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06108-0_19

6.2 History and trends of migration

Not only the form of migration and its indicator alters the picture, but also the relation to the region's population. This is why emigration rates should be considered. The census data arguably provide more realistic illustration, as it captures the temporary residence outside of the region. For example, the 2011 data (Fig. 2) indicate that Opolskie, Podkarpackie as well as Podlaskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie score the highest (7-11% population temporarily abroad). This is consistent with the 2021 census data, which shows similar dynamics with the same regions scoring the highest (Fig. 3.).

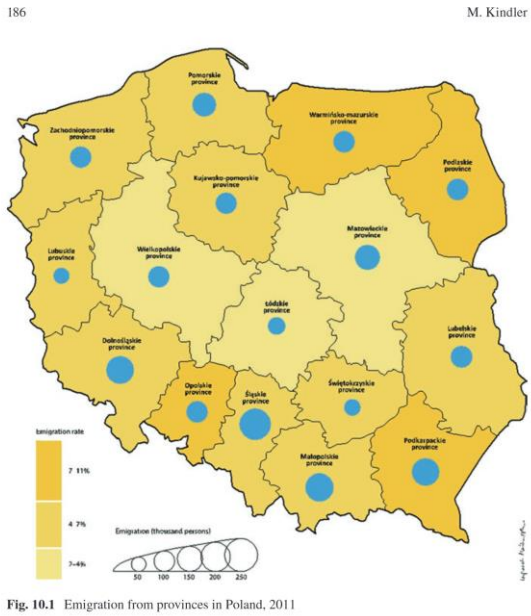

Fig. 10.1 Emigration from provinces in Poland, 2011

Fig. 2 Emigration rates based on 2011 census data. Source: Kindler, M. (2018). Poland's Perspective on the Intra-European Movement of Poles. Implications and Governance Responses. In P. Scholten & M. van Ostaijen (Eds.), Between Mobility and Migration (pp. 183–204). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77991-1_10

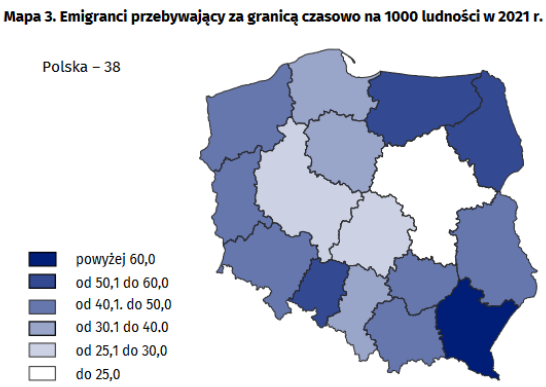

Fig. 3 Emigration rates based on 2021 census data. Source: GUS, Migracje zagraniczne na pobyt czasowy – wyniki NSP 2021

Besides the quantitative criteria, some qualitative factors were also taken into account when characterizing Polish sending regions. For example, there was a longstanding history of migration dating back to the dawn of the industrialisation era from the Silesia region, which encompassed the Lower Silesian, Opole, and Silesian provinces in the south-western belt of the country. The literature also suggested that migration from Silesia was less selective (i.e., more low-skilled) and geographically skewed towards Germany—due to historical ties and regional identities—as well as the Netherlands.

International migrations did not occur in a vacuum, and some regions were affected by internal migrations at both the national and regional levels. Fig. 4 illustrates the process of depopulation in the border regions of Polish provinces and the concentration of population in or around the main urban centers.

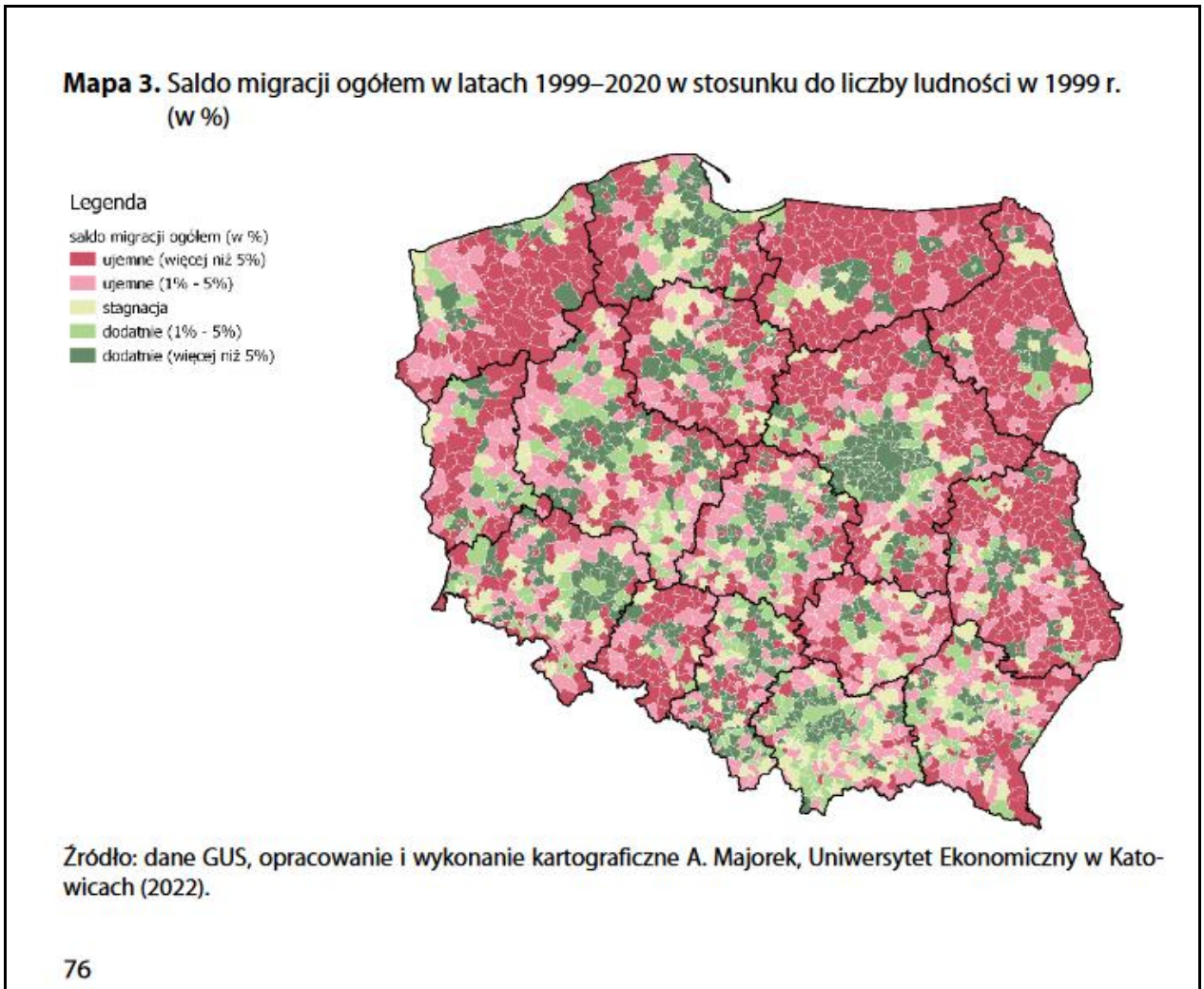

Fig. 4 Net total migration ratio in 1999 - 2020 related to the 1999 number of inhabitants. Source: (Solga, B., & Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa (Eds.). (2023). Migracje i rozwój regionu: Materiały z III Kongresu Demograficznego. Cz. 7. Zakład Wydawnictw Statystycznych.)

6.3 Demographic structure and the selection criteria

In the case of Polish case studies we selected 4 regions of interest first. Based on 2021 census migration data, but also aligning to the historical migration. Using out-migration rates of the regions measured as temporary residency outside of the country helped to identify regions that are under emigration pressure that is both high - in relation to the number of inhabitants - and recent.

Additionally, qualitative criteria were taken into account:

- Proximity to the destination countries of interest: Denmark and the Netherlands (i.e. close to the Western and Northern border) in case of West-Pomeranian (Zachodniopomorskie) province.
- Historical patterns of outmigration to Netherlands (and Germany), that is traditionally low-skilled and rich in migration infrastructures (brokers, transportation links etc.) in case of Opole (Opolskie) province.
- The regions are scattered around Polish historical regions that display different patterns of social and economic development and are affected by their geographical location through bordering different EU and non-EU states.

Fig. 5 illustrates the selected regions stretching from East to West and North to South of the country. Subcarpathian (Podkarpackie) province tops the emigration rates, followed by Podlachian (Podlaskie) province and Opole (Opolskie) province at more than 6% of inhabitants temporarily abroad. West Pomeranian (Zachodniopomorskie) scores below 5%, but is also affected by shuttle migration patterns due to the borderland location.

Fig. 5 Share of emigrants in the four Polish provinces. Source: own calculations based on Statistics Poland data.

Further zooming into administrative sub-regions called “counties” demonstrated intraregional discrepancies and gaps. Using the same out-migration variable based on

2021 census data, indicates variation at the sub-NUTS 3 level ranging from as low as 3.9% to as high as 10.4% outgoing rate. Illustrated in Fig. 6., the counties that stand out are highlighted: Szczecinecki county in West Pomeranian, Moniecki or Siemiatycki counties in Podlachian, Oleski in Opolskie or Niżański or Kolbuszowski in Subcarpathian.

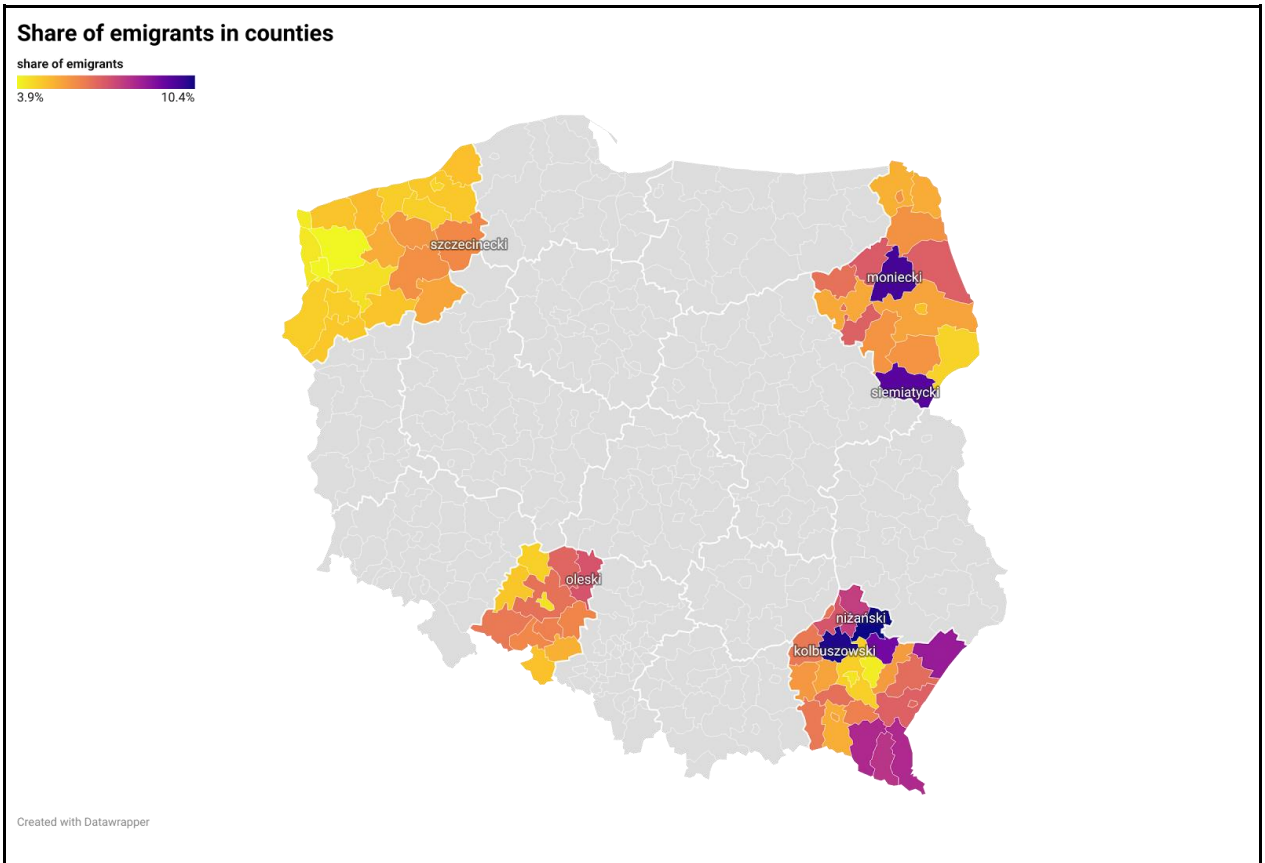

Fig. 6 Share of emigrants in the counties of the four Polish provinces. Source: own calculations based on Statistics Poland census 2021 data.

A different migration variable could be considered as well. Taking immigration rates to illuminate the replacement migration phenomenon yields several different potential cases (Fig. 7). When controlling on emigration rates (to be high enough), counties: Goleniowski (in West Pomeranian), Zambrowski (in Podlachian), Namysłowski or Opolski (in Opolskie) can be selected. There is no significant inflow registered in the Subcarpathian province except for the urban centers.

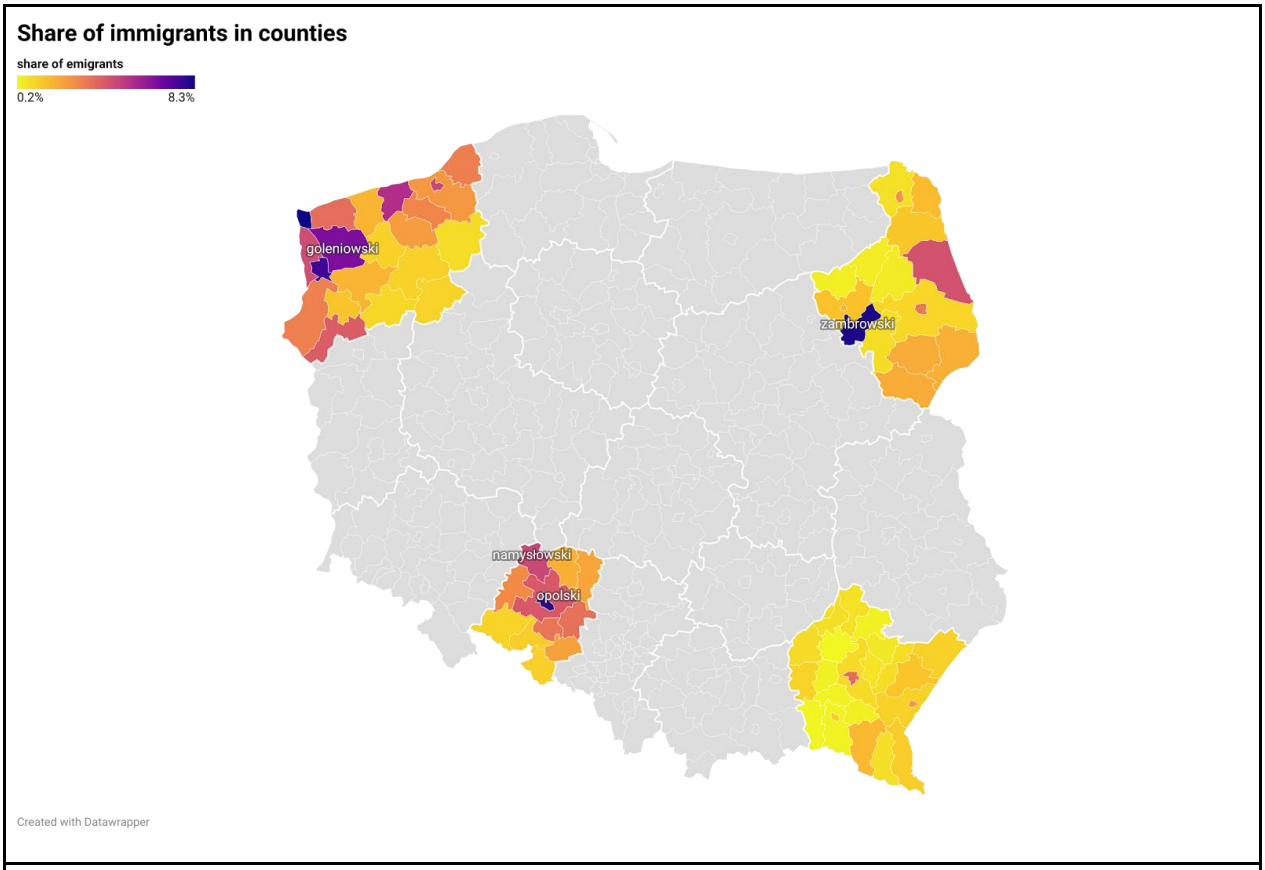

Fig. 7 Share of immigrants in the counties of the four Polish provinces. Source: own calculations based on Statistics Poland census 2021 data.

In summary, Polish fieldwork was conducted in:

- Szczecinecki county in the West Pomeranian province.
- Zambrowski county in the Podlachian province.
- Oleski county in the Opolskie province.
- Niżański county in the Subcarpathian provinc e.

6.4 Ethnographic snapshot: Migration landscapes of vulnerable regions

Motivations to migrate

The regions were selected due to different migration histories. Some of them are conducive to historical configuration of statehood and the subsequent ethnic composition - like in the case of Silesia, and some just are influenced by the proximity of the state border. On the micro level, our interviews offer insights on the triggers of the migration decisions as perceived by people who migrate themselves. They can be located on the nexus of capabilities and aspirations (de Haas, 2021). The capabilities ought to be understood here as the access to the EU labor markets and the free

movement of individuals within the community, but also as the migration networks in place. The aspirations can be conceptualized both as desire to work or to work in line with one's qualifications profile. Also, especially with younger generations, the aspirations align with the capabilities to challenge oneself, try out a different career path or study abroad and they are more related to an identity project than to a structural push factor.

Nevertheless, the stories of migrations from vulnerable regions almost universally start with the perception of no sufficient demand for labor in the origin regions. They typically concern young people at the stage of making decisions about their adulthood, setting up family life or moving in together with a spouse. Early stories of the 1990s, embedded in the economic crisis of post-transformation Poland with its high unemployment and harsh restructuring of the collapsing industry, depict a degree of desperation. Even though some people might have had work and they aspired to move in together or start a family, arguably it was impossible to achieve as the following quote illustrates:

> Yes, I left here with my husband. The reason was that we just didn't have any way to start a life together. No place to live, no house, no real opportunity to begin. Even though we both had jobs. But it was the 90s, there was an economic crisis, and wages were so low that it just wasn't possible to get started on your own. That's why we left for Germany together. (MPL18_PL_F53)

The migration to Germany from the Silesian region was enabled by the historical and political configurations that allowed many to claim German citizenship and effectively leave Poland a long time prior to the opening of the labor market for the Polish citizens post EU accession.

Once the borders opened and the post-accession opportunities were available, the migration decisions were simply valid alternatives to what the local labor market offered. With high unemployment and low salaries despite high education achievement, the opportunities to go abroad presented itself as a valid alternative to pursue life goals locally:

> There was a lot of unemployment in [city] back then. It was really hard to find a job. Some of our friends had already started going abroad. They helped open up the path for him and suggested he should join them. And for the same reason... I had finished my studies, and I had worked in a shop throughout university, earning minimum wage. There weren't really any opportunities here in [city] — no internships, no real prospects in my field. So we decided to leave. (MPL10_PL_F40)

Intertwined with the housing investment - typically - constructions underway, they converged with aspirations to facilitate the decision. For example:

> It was hard for us to get anywhere, because we were building a house — just a basic one, with a sloped roof. One room, a kitchen, and a bathroom. That was all we could afford. And it was tough to move forward. To add anything, to do anything more. That's what gave me the push to just go. There was an opportunity, and my husband already had his job, so it was difficult for him to leave. So I decided to go. Back then, you could go to Italy pretty easily, without any visas or paperwork. That's what pushed me — just to do something, anything. (MPL27_PL_F59)

Effectively, as reported by the youngest participants of the study, the migration option became ingrained in local discourses and visions of the region. As one of the participant recalled, her teacher prompted the aspiring generation to prepare to leave the remote region for one of the big provincial capitals in the vicinity, where apparently their qualifications would be matched with their qualifications:

> My logistics teacher always used to tell us, "You logistics people should go to Poznań." I don't know why Poznań or what's going on there, but she always said we'd find work in Poznań. Is logistics really that big there? I don't know, because I left for Germany and didn't keep up with it. Here, as a logistics person... well, there's [company name], where they do some shipping. So yeah, maybe there are jobs. But other transport companies? Maybe just tiny ones. (MPL05_PL_F23)

In this sense, according to the participants, migration is normalized in the vision of the remote regions. Strongly connected to the economic differences, it would be embedded in the discourses of the young generations living there:

> Why did we leave? Better pay abroad. That was really the only reason, just that. You know, young people... even now, when you hear about it, a lot of young people are leaving. So it's kind of normal. (MPL26_PL_F35)

Again, the younger generations leaving both the regions would not match their aspirations and as well, the opportunities were there. When the decisionmaking stages of life would come, the choice to migrate would be one to pursue:

> I left because I didn't see any real prospects here, and I wanted to earn some money. I couldn't decide what I wanted to do with my life. So I figured that right after high school, during that time when you don't really know what you want, I was 18 and still kind of lost, I'd just go. See the big world, make a bit of money. And maybe something would come to me along the way. (MPL08_PL_F31)

Overall, the combination of tight economic conditions and aspiring to prosper, typically involving owning a property, are arguably shaping the migration motivations from vulnerable regions. "Making money" is the prevalent theme that underlines the economic differences between Poland and the western EU countries and constitutes the major reference point for the migration narratives collected in this report.

Aspirations and financial goals

Since financial motivation prevailed, very often it was reported to us that there were more or less precise economic goals set. They ranged from grand housing projects and

unspecified “making it” to quick fixes of the individual budget that may be subject to debts. The decisions were made at the backdrop of the embeddedness of leaving in the perception of people in these areas:

> Participant: Well, one reason was that a lot of people had already left, and it was kind of empty and boring here. And yeah, also to earn more money.
>
> Moderator: Did you have a specific goal in mind? Because the first time you mentioned it was about paying off debts. Was it the same the second time, or more general?
>
> Participant: No, more in general. Just to save up and come back. Stay for two or three years, put some money aside, and just come back here. (MPL25_PL_M29)

Some individuals set precise and foreseeable goals tying them to the renovation plans and indicating the time horizon to achieve them. Migration trips would be temporary by design, with participants sharing stories of unpaid leaves interrupting their careers at the destinations. However they would often feature a domino effect, with one goal accomplished opening a new aspiration for yet another material goal:

> So we were both working, my husband and I, and then he got this idea. His cousin was already in England. They had gone there as a group of friends, and he thought he would go too, just for three months. He took unpaid leave and said, "I'll go for three months, that's all I need. I'll earn enough for the renovation, maybe pay off some of the loan, and do something to move things forward." We had already ordered kitchen furniture, and he said, "I'll earn money for the furniture, for a few things, and then I'll come back." (MPL33_PL_FM_40-45)

Due to the land ownership possibilities through inheritance and sparsely urbanized nature of these remote regions, many individuals reported a possibility to build on a piece of terrain available to them. This is why many financial goals were tied to home construction.

Opportunities and unforced choices

There were also individuals for whom migration constituted a sheer opportunity. They were not influenced by the push factors, yet the migration networks and possibilities prevalent in the region shaped their choices. For example this person with family migration history, and prior vacation work in Germany, although never considered migration - was responsive to her friend’s offer to study abroad:

> And then I went to study in Germany, completely spontaneously. I had never planned it in my life. Germany never really appealed to me. I mean, yes, there was prosperity there, but somehow I never thought about staying, or that I might actually enjoy living there. But my friend said, "They don't have entrance exams for university there, maybe we should try?" So I decided to go. (MPL17_PL_F42)

The study mobility transformed into almost two decades abroad eventually, but the intention was to study German and return to teach it back in the home region. It finally

materialized recently, but due to family dynamics and was not entirely decided at the time of the interview.

Some people would leave not out of necessity, but out of carefully designed opportunities to try. With no clear intentions to relocate, neither to return, some individuals would pause their careers and effectively lives in the origin region to "challenge" themselves abroad:

> I left [city]. It was basically, how to put it, kind of like an exploratory trip? I wanted to improve my language skills. I'd worked here for 8 years as a manager in a stationery and office supplies store, and, you know that saying, that it's good to change your job after 8 years, so that's what I decided. I told myself, it's now or never, time to change something in life, so... I went on vacation, spent a week there, and my friends took me. [...] Since I was the first to go on vacation, and I really liked it there, I came back and said to [my husband], listen, I'd really like to move there, I like that country, life there is just totally different. I'd like to get to know the culture, yeah, see it, work in something else. And I asked if he was okay with moving. So we both left, even though we had everything here. We had our own apartment, savings, a car, so for us it wasn't really a risk. We could go, stay there, come back, and everything would still be here. Of course, we didn't burn any bridges, right? We also talked with our employers, so that if anything happened, we'd just come back and return to our old jobs, yeah, our old workplaces. So there was no issue with that. We weren't really taking any risk. (MPL31_PL_F42)

Leaving the possibility of returning open by design, some of the study participants could afford taking no risks and treat the mobility as an opportunity to make a change to their current life. These "explorations" were possible through the existing migration networks that made them relatively easy, affordable and imaginable in the first place.

Chains of migrations

The departures were most often enabled by the existing migration networks. Another quote illustrating the above combination of higher aspirations than the available market options as well as the perceived discrepancy between the region prospects and the vision to earn more, underlines the way the networks worked:

> And right after school, right after finishing my economics program, I left straight away for Germany, yeah. I didn't even try to look for... Well no, there were some, like, [jobs], but nothing that was satisfying for me, so we decided to go. We had friends in Germany and we went there. [...] I think they didn't really have to convince us. We just knew what was going on in Poland at the time. That region was really weak when it came to jobs, but I think during that period there was high unemployment everywhere, not just in Podlasie. And also it was like... For young people like us, to quickly just kind of... To earn some money faster, yeah, to somehow get set up, become independent. We didn't want to live with our parents. (MPL35_PL_F50)

The migration networks consisted of family and friends as well as remote acquaintances. They were latently present in people's lives and ready to activate when the decision to migrate was about to be made. In some cases, there was an information chain that would activate the actual contact and lead to a decision to leave:

> I'd had enough, and someone basically told me there was work in, that in Austria they pay well, and somehow through a friend, or I don't even know how it happened, maybe someone was just looking for a crew, because actually, with those people, I didn't really know them that well, but I went with them. Yeah, I just wanted something better. So it was a job in Austria as a steel fixer. (MPL19_PL_M40)

The presence of migration networks and patterns was also apparent in the interviews. The majority of individuals reported that their family members, most often parents, had prior migration history. In this sense, migration is ingrained in the regional imaginaries and individuals are socialized to see it as one of the valid life choices:

> My dad, for example, also used to go to Germany for work, my mom went to Italy, and I went to the Netherlands. Traditions, kind of, well not really traditions, we just went to earn money, let's put it that way. Just to make some extra cash, to have more, to have more, so life would be better for us, not to just go, have fun, and come back. (MPL21_PL_M37)

As indicated above, the worth of mouth is also a valid channel of migration opportunities dissemination. The migratory networks mediate between the migration experiences and know-how and the individuals who may want to consider leaving. As one of the participants told us, he first left the Podkarpackie region to Western city in Poland, where he hosted a regional compatriot halfway back from the Netherlands. Through this migration talk, he started considering and finally decided to move out of the country:

> A friend came to visit me, also from the Netherlands, from that agency. On the way he was supposed to go to [city], and since it was on the way, I invited him to stay at my place for two nights, get some rest before heading home. When he started telling me about the Netherlands, how the wages are, what life is like there, I decided to go myself too. (MPL23_PL_M27)

Migration brokers, such as labor agencies mentioned above, constitute a "migration infrastructure" that facilitates mobilities.

Most common stories however, involved chain migration and following family members. In the most typical setting these are the wives who follow the husbands, or children who take advantage of the father's presence abroad. Reverse is also possible as illustrated by this man's story who decided to go based on his observations of how the omnipresent migration works in his region:

> My wife and I have been together for 25 years, and actually it was her idea. I mean, back in those, let's call them younger years, she had the idea to go abroad for 3 or 4 months, on her own. I was already living in this region and I was watching this whole trend of people going abroad, especially how it affected couples. Like, either the husband or partner works abroad and the partner stays here, or the other way around. For me, that kind of thing just didn't make sense, so I told her, back then she was still my girlfriend, that if she was planning something like that, then we'd need to think about whether I could create that space for myself to go with her, and if not, and if she saw a bigger future in that trip or something like that, then we'd have to break up. So in the end, we went together. (MPL20_PL_M42)

Although many migration projects involved return of the wives and transformations into a shuttle migration, the role of family and friends in facilitating departure and the decision is apparent.

Summary: temporary and instrumental migration

Taken together, the migration project we identified in the Polish vulnerable regions, involved movement that - at least was indented - as temporary and was pursued with particular goals in mind. These goals, even if multiplied or extended, influenced the temporal horizon of the migration, making it a determined and definite endeavour that serves a purpose - either continuous, like better life - or fixed as construction of a house.

6.5 Contributions to the receiving regions

People who migrate from vulnerable regions settle in very different locations that range from urban centers to remote rural areas. Other parts of this report present particular contributions to the receiving vulnerable regions made by Polish migrants. In this section, the focus is on how the contributions in general are perceived by migrants who left Polish vulnerable regions. This perspective facilitates grasping the sensemaking processes of migration as seen from the outside.

This section presents the vision of labor, as work clearly constitutes the primary goal and a central activity of people who left Polish vulnerable regions. It also investigates very fragile belongings that may potentially enable contributing to the region of settlement. The materialities of settling in are also investigated, as they mediate between the migrant presence and any possible contribution. Finally, the assessment of the destination regions by people who migrate is considered. Ultimately, this part of the report aims at answering the question of what is, and what facilitates - and simultaneously - what hinders contribution to the receiving regions by Polish migrants from vulnerable regions.

Work

As evident from the above section on motivations to leave, economic goals were by far the most pronounced ones. It obviously makes work the central goal of mobility and the focus of migrants' lives abroad. In the migration stories we collected, mobility is about work. Labor also constitutes the major contribution to the receiving regions.

We identified several ways of adjustment of the incomers to the local labor markets that may be considered contributory: reskilling to meet the demands and niches of the local labor market, flexibility as an expectation, hard work as an experience and a norm as well as the work discipline.

Reskilling and deskilling

Reskilling or deskilling are frequently featured by migrants as the economic factors pushing them away from home may be coming from the structural mismatch between the local labor market and the education system (Nowicka, 2014). From the perspective of the receiving region, the competence adjustment serves the demand of the local labor market and the differences in the wages level lubricate the accommodation people are willing to make.

Even seemingly matching professions, like industrial woodworking may require reskilling. One of the participants who left a carpentry region to work in a similar company in the Netherlands, first worked as an aid, and later specialized in glazery and not woodwork. It was enabled by the company internal training scheme:

> Moderator: So actually, are you working there exactly in your field? With the training you got for the job...
>
> Participant: Yeah. I mean, not exactly, because I'm working as a glazier now, right? I mean, back then too, already, just that the company is the kind where you do a course right away, get a certificate, and only then you work in a specific position, but you're already trained for it, you know? And it's all on paper, right?
>
> Moderator: Aha, okay, so from the start, you came there as a carpenter, but right away they said, "we need a glazier," and you go take the course...
>
> Participant: I mean, at the beginning you did everything. A bit here, a bit there, some of this, some of that, and then they're like, hey, you're good at this, so stay there, so yeah. (MPL15_PL_M43)

Reskilling can be imprinted in the job with a company training its workforce, but we also heard stories about people learning through work. It that case, the responsibility is shifted on the person, but at the same time, it grants them some agency as it was the case with another person, trained electrician:

> Moderator: Okay, you said you finished electrical technical school, and now you're saying that in those tunnels you're working with electrics, so do you think you're working exactly in the field you trained for?
>
> Participant: No, no. That field, maybe you didn't catch it, the focus was audiovisual equipment, so more like TVs, stuff like that. No, I'm not working in that. There's a cable, the current flows, sure, but it's not really the same. There's a lot I've just learned on the job, really.
>
> Moderator: Okay, and did you have any training, or did you learn just by doing?
>
> Participant: Mostly just by watching and doing, in this case. Unfortunately there were some mistakes too, but luckily nothing serious. You learn best from mistakes, because you don't forget those. (MPL19_PL_M40)

We identified different ways of reskilling that involved active choices made by people who migrate. It included pursuing education at the destination. It is typically interconnected with acquiring language skills. One example is a person who migrated to Sweden after high school following her then husband. She reportedly started from cleaning homes of Polish diaspora members ("phisicians") but she pursued language acquisition and enrolled in nursing school: "At the beginning it was cleaning. Later, once I got the hang of it and learned Swedish, I signed up for nursing school." (MPL26_PL_F35) She could not finish it due to maternity leaves and then started working in a nursing home. After returning to Poland - again - following in turn her current husband, she was unable to get the education recognized which resulted in another reskilling upon return.

Reskilling could be also connected to random assignments by the migration brokers or due to entrepreneurial choices undertaken by people who migrate and decide to work on their own. We also identified one special type of reskilling, when migrants pursued careers within migration infrastructures due to profound engagement with them.

> I got a job at a company that was a job agency, and I got hired as a coordinator, kind of like a support person for people coming from abroad. Back then, for the company I worked for, it was only Polish people, so I was handling, you could say, the logistics. Getting them to work, arranging housing, helping with paperwork and stuff like that. (MPL20_PL_M42)

From working via a broker to working for a broker, this person eventually opened his own job agency and moved back to Poland supplying workforce to the Netherlands thanks to the know-how and contacts in the field. In this case, reskilling from any manual job (greenhouses, magazines) to managerial, was thanks to the migration capital, acquired through living and working abroad.

In many cases, the reskilling constituted de facto deskilling. In this case, not only the material reality of job alters, but also its symbolic value a person assigns to it differs. This means that migrants have to do certain narrative work to redefine the seemingly less

valued job and make it meaningful to them. One way to accept it, is to frame it as temporary. It aligns with many migration projects - as discussed in the previous section - and can help justify accepting work below qualifications. The financial gain has an explanatory power too:

> I mean, I just knew why I was there, because I went there to make some money. And like, obviously, you kind of have it in the back of your mind that you were made for higher purposes than working for some Danish landowner, pulling weeds in the rain and cold. So I just knew I wanted to earn some money there and come back, that's it. At the beginning my partner at the time was a bit more critical about it, but she got used to it. We worked through it there, and by the end, during those last 2 or 3 months, we were basically living and working there in harmony. We just knew that our stay there was going to end soon, and we'd earn a bit and be able to come back to Poland. And also, looking back on it, we saw it as just an interesting experience. (MPL06_PL_M23)

Retrospective meaning assigned to it can help coping with the devaluation. It is illustrated by another quote, that comes from a migrant to the UK, who was confronted with the hardships of manual labor and immediately juxtaposed it with the fact that they are highly qualified:

> I was wearing heels, I had makeup on, and I was like, what am I doing here with a cute little backpack on my back. And then I walked into the factory and boom, everyone's like, "grab some rubber boots," because this supervisor came in yelling, and I ended up working the whole 8 hours with two left boots on, because there wasn't a proper pair. I came home and, well, my husband could tell you how I was mentally draining him, because I'm the stronger personality, and I was saying every single day, like, screw this, I don't want to be here, I'm not staying, I'm not working in these conditions, I have a degree, I've done stuff, until the first payslip came. The first paycheck showed up, I looked at it and said, hey, that's almost my monthly salary, and just like that, everything felt fine. (MPL33_PL_FM_40-45)

As the narrative illuminates, the experience of deskilling is not an easy one. It can be neutralized with the financial gain, but the perception of injustice may be uneasy. One such example of difficulty with accepting being deskilled is the story of a person who worked as a chef in the nursing home kitchen in Iceland. The cooking position was already a downgrade compared to her university degree, but a perception of a closed path to advancement and interpreting it as discriminatory made the experience of deskilling difficult to accept:

> Moderator: So at that nursing home where you are now, it's been 10 years already? Okay, right, and over that time it was different kinds of jobs, and you had a university degree from Poland, right, you'd finished your studies. And how did you, how did you deal with that, how did you feel about having higher education, and yet there...?
>
> Participant: Really bad. Really bad. Of course. Because I know, for example, that I'm capable of more, I can do more and do it better, but here they just won't let me into certain positions. It's not that easy.
>
> Moderator: Never? Or just back then? Like now is it more or less okay?
>
> Participant: You know what, there was even a situation recently, because my old boss was leaving the kitchen, and I was the assistant, and even my manager was sending me links to schools and stuff, like I was supposed to get that position, I was supposed to be the head of the kitchen, the main one. But then it turned out they took, well, it's kind of a family thing. Turns out there was some cook who didn't have a job and it's like this pushing people out, you know? So of course they took him, and now he's been working for three months. And I'm still the assistant.
>
> Moderator: And compared to the beginning, how do you feel now about how much you know and what qualifications you have versus the work you do? How is that for you?
>
> Participant: I've never felt good about it, no.
>
> Moderator: Even in the assistant role?
>
> Participant: I mean, here, now, I think it's a little better. It's definitely a bit better now, because I also handle computer stuff, invoices, ordering everything from the wholesaler, making phone calls and all that, so now it's more for me, you know, than just physical work, than being just a physical worker, right? It's a bit of a step up in terms of qualifications, you know? (MPL01_PL_F46)

Adjustments to the receiving labor market characterize the migration shifts. They can be more or less actively pursued by migrants, who are structurally inclined to make these choices. Reskilling may involve agency of people who migrate, and often require narrative and identity work on their part. They are a benefit of the receiving region, but may come at an emotional cost for migrants.

Flexibility

Reskilling is a part of a bigger characteristic of migrant labor, namely its alleged flexibility (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2018). Structurally enabled and individually accepted, ability and eagerness to adapt to types of work, work regimes and times, working conditions as well as payments and formal arrangements of work - flexibility arguably constitutes a benefit of migrant labor from the perspective of the receiving region. However, at the same time it may produce exploitation due to the inherent vulnerability of migrant workers.

Flexible workers can produce a manageable and effective labor force for the employers. They can be moved around, adjusted and sorted in an order. One participant gave a graphic example of being managed and observing managing other people with an alleged assumption of flexibility. He gave an example of two different greenhouses -

reportedly - for better and worse quality workers. He noticed these hierarchies and allegedly acted upon them too:

> Participant: Anyway, yeah, it was warehouse work at first, and then later my partner and I ended up not in a flower shop, in a greenhouse, yeah, a greenhouse. At the beginning it was a greenhouse with, what were the flower names, orchids, something like that, orchids, roses? Something like that. The flowers would come down the line, we'd stick in little sticks, tie them up, and it was like this line system. And basically we were taking care of the flowers, you could say, getting them ready to be sold. And then it turned out we were in this worse greenhouse. Our agency at the time first sent us there, and we were there for maybe a week or two. And then after that, our agency moved us, kind of spontaneously, I don't know why exactly, but to a better greenhouse. That was the one you kind of had to earn your way into. [...]
>
> So yeah, the worse greenhouse, I mean, you could really see it. You could tell by the people who worked there. In that worse one, there were, I'll call them this way for now, more problematic people, just to keep it short. And in the better greenhouse, there were people who were more put together, people you could actually talk to, who had something about them. There was already this one guy, a friend I met there [...] or that couple we met, the ones we later went to Denmark with. So yeah, I don't want to be too harsh, but it did feel like a different type of people, I think.
>
> Moderator: Right, I get that, but do you think the agency was kind of sorting people that way?
>
> Participant: I think so, I think they were. I think that better greenhouse was just a better client, and they wanted more representative people there, people they could count on in terms of their attitude to work and general behavior, because yeah, there were definitely more interesting people in that better greenhouse. [...]
>
> Moderator: Okay, right, so you were at that better greenhouse, and then the offer for Denmark came in? That's how it went?
>
> Participant: Yeah, it came by email. I'm trying to remember now, it was actually a different agency. Like, in the Netherlands we were working through one agency, and in Denmark we worked through another one. So as soon as we got that info, we kind of ended the contract with the Dutch agency and we went to the Danish one. (MPL06_PL_M23)

Accepting flexibility, some of the migrants also treated the work engagements in a flexible way. In this case, they switched agencies and moved to a different country where the offer was better. This demonstrates the contradictions of flexibility-as-benefit, as it can produce a reverse effect.

Flexibility can also mean benefits on the individual level for people who migrate. We heard stories about flexible shift adjustments and other benefits provided by the companies, that - for example - enabled their migrant workers longer home stays in a circular/shuttle arrangement. We also collected stories about evolution of time arrangements that included such a shifts - for example of mothers taking care of elderly people in Italy - that would enable them taking their children and work in between jobs in Poland:

> Before that I was working, like I said, doing these temporary replacements, like 3-month stints where I'd cover for someone, until I, you know, learned the language and got myself sorted. I was going for those kinds of replacement jobs. When one of the Polish women wanted to go home, like for 3 months or 2 months, then I'd go. But I didn't really like it that much, because in Italy the pay isn't great. Caregivers don't earn as much as, say, in Germany now, right? There they get better wages, but back then it was like 750 €, 800 €, so not that much. So going back and forth wasn't really worth it financially. But later, like I said, I had my own regular job, so I could stay longer, save up a bit, make some money, and at the same time be with my daughter, right? (MPL27_PL_F59)

In this sense, flexibility can be used to foster agency and work for mutual benefit - the employers and the migrant workers.

Flexibility also may refer to the geographical distribution of migrant labor force. Especially in the construction industry, where work is site-specific, this requires moving people across regions and countries. This flexibility further deepens isolation and prevents migrants from anchoring. It will be discussed in the later sections.

Working hard

Another benefit of the migrant labor as per narratives we collected, is the alleged ability of Polish people to work hard. As in the case of flexibility, it is both used by the employers to frame as well as by some Polish migrants to self identify and also make distinctions from other migrant groups.

Physicality of labor, long working times, working multiple jobs were mentioned. For those who completed university degrees, manual labor was something strange even despite the fact of having been previously exposed to it, for example doing summer jobs. As it is the case with flexibility or deskilling, hard work also required narrative work to make sense of it. We also observed interesting discoveries, like being exposed to no gender distinctions of the manual labor in the Netherlands:

> The work wasn't easy, it was really physically tough for me. What I saw at the beginning in the Netherlands, and what kind of hit me a bit, even though it wasn't my first time there, because during my studies I'd spent three months picking broccoli or something like that. But over there, they don't have the same kind of division we do when it comes to how hard the work is and whether it should be done by a man or a woman. Over there, women are honestly treated more like men at work, and they really do heavy physical jobs or work in tough conditions too. So in those tomatoes, believe me, it wasn't easy for us. But we were motivated, we knew why we went, we wanted to improve our situation, earn some money. (MPL20_PL_M42)

Recalling working in the farm industry, this man underlined how hard it was. At the same time, he evoked the justifications they would make together with his wife (then partner) - namely narratives of pursuing their goals and improving their living conditions.

The narrative work is used to justify longer shifts. For example a construction worker who was promoted to a more independent position, assumed responsibility for having the job done, effectively working an hour later, as a part of the local work ethics - as perceived by him. He reportedly observed how Austrian superiors and fellows would work until issues are solved and not until the end of the shift:

> Do I have time after work? Maybe the guys have more time. Lately we've mostly been working night shifts, because somehow it always ends up like that. I don't know how to explain it, but I always stay longer. Always. It just always happens that I stay longer, because I'm the kind of person who just doesn't... maybe the Austrians taught me that a bit, because I know a few of them. They don't leave stuff unfinished. If something needs to be discussed, we talk about it now. I know some Austrians, those ones from Tyrol, they used to come in at seven and we lived together in the same hotel, and I saw them coming back from work at 10:30 at night, right? So maybe they were workaholics. I don't do that, luckily, but I still end up staying like an hour longer or so. (MPL19_PL_M40)

Making comparisons can be used to make sense of more workload and responsibility. Comparisons can also be made externally. As one of the participants working in creative industries recalled: fellow German workers requested that she slows the pace of her work:

> Funny thing, I remember some coworkers once pulled me aside and told me not to work so fast, because they couldn't keep up with their own tasks because of it. And I was just used to how we worked in Poland, you know, just normal pace. But over there, everything goes slower, there's time for everything, so for me it was actually easier. (MPL04_PL_F38)

Being recognized as hardworking and hence productive may make you a valuable worker. This comes with a discipline spiral, as the productivity can be measured and the reference values can be tightened. As a person who started with manual labor picking tomatoes and climbed all the management ranks up to owning a job agency himself, observed:

> [Poles are perceived] in terms of productivity, because what you also need to know about the Netherlands is that it's a country that is, I don't know how to put it, very strong when it comes to computing power and calculations. You get paid by the hour there, but what you're supposed to do within that hour is calculated so precisely that if you don't get it done, they'll fire you. So it's essentially piecework, meaning performance-based work, but paid by the hour. But the measurability of that work, believe me, with all those damn calculations, and the way they count everything in Excel and all those spreadsheets, they are so good at that. They really have it all figured out when it comes to setting targets, it's mind-blowing. So when it comes to Poles, it's mainly productivity. Productivity and showing up to work. (MPL20_PL_M42)

Polish advantage over other migrant groups is reportedly productivity and reliability. It implies comparisons that are also made to other migrant groups. One of the warehouse workers shared an elaborate opinion on how being seen as hardworking results in being assigned more work spiraling into a vicious cycle of excessive workload:

> And there were team leaders who, let's say, often gave the worst tasks to the Polish workers, you know. [...] That's just kind of how it went because we also worked well and fast and they knew that for example if they gave it to a Black guy or someone who didn't feel like working he'd just stretch it forever. But when we did it we did it fast. [...] Yeah I guess it was just a habit. To work slowly you really had to do very little, you know. Once you got the hang of it once you understood how it all worked I mean the scanner, there wasn't really that much to figure out. You'd just kind of know visually that if that location popped up it meant it was over here, and how to drive there because there was this system for moving around the aisles with those carts and all that. But really you didn't have to rush to meet the quota and the quota was pretty high. [...] And those guys they'd just drive around... Like they'd do three laps, chat, go to the bathroom. (MPL25_PL_M29)

A hardworking group obviously is capable of making productive contributions. Nevertheless, the reputation of industrious migrants comes with a risk of exploitation. It also entails self-disciplinary narratives internalized by Polish migrants.

Work discipline

Precarious positionalities produced by the early migratory movements of Polish people came with alleged derogatory treatment or even abuse. It certainly entailed a patient attitude when the migrant workers did not have tools nor symbolic power to resist. In the stories of our participants, these early abuse was the part of the migratory experience and they would accept it, as this woman who recalls first experiences from Italy and contrasts it with the contemporary standards, she believes the younger generations adhere to:

> So my mom said well if you want to, then go. [Name], my husband would never in his life go abroad somewhere just to get bossed around by someone, so you know how it is that kind of humiliation, it was a different time back then now when I look at the younger generation I wouldn't even let anyone shout at me or yell at someone or something now. I'd just say fine I quit and that's it. I'm going home or whatever. But back then it was like you know, without a phone, without insurance, everything under the table, so yeah it was different. (MPL24_PL_F38)

According to the participants, the work discipline is internalized for many Polish people who migrate. As one of the young migrants observed during his short term spells in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, there is a special work norm many Poles observe: to work hard and be efficient:

> But strongly, let's say, this attitude of Poles towards work and towards life abroad, let's say, also made normal functioning more difficult, even just at work itself, like imposing some strange standards, unnecessarily high ones. And competition among Poles is very noticeable, and that was visible both in Denmark and in the Netherlands [...] And well, there's this attitude that the faster the better, just go faster, just go faster, this pressure on others to keep up the pace even though the official quotas are completely different, lower. And that, I don't know, somehow it seems to me that all of this sort of feeds into itself, meaning that the intensity of work imposed by the people on themselves came from the fact that most of them were uneducated or poorly educated, like only finished primary school or so, and that also influenced their lifestyle and somehow all of this intermingled and formed a whole. (MPL06_PL_M23)

One association was with the social class background, but the self-disciplinary narrative was prominent across different individuals. For example a person with secondary education who followed her husband to Norway and worked there in the informal cleaning sector, shared a story of her clients encouraging her to pause a bit when working for them, what she firmly opposed:

> Participant: From what they told me, for example, it's that we are hardworking, we are hardworking. They say to me, why are you running around so much, sit down, I'll make you some tea or something. But no, because I don't have time, I need to be quick, there's the next thing, I have a thousand things to do. And they're just like, take it easy. Now it's break time, so we sit down, and if you still have like, I don't know... one room left to clean, they take their break. It's their break, they sit down and leave it for tomorrow. I'm like, how's that possible, I'll just get it done quickly and it'll be finished. How can you leave it? And they're like, there's no rush, work isn't the most important thing. Now it's break time, now we drink coffee and...
> Moderator: And what do you think about that? Is it a good attitude? A bad one?
> Participant: Maybe it's a good one, because I'm just too much like, well. I can't help it, it irritates me right away, I have to finish, I have to complete the task and only then can I sit down and rest [laughs]. (MPL36_PL_F40)

The internalization of efficient work is also externalized as a self-profiling narrative of Polish people as more productive. Further dismantling the working-class only hypothesis, a highly educated, creative industry employee shared her thoughts on the - seemingly - inefficient work organization in Germany. It is important to note that another tacit work norm, or treating the rules freely is mentioned here:

> I think that in Poland people work more efficiently. In Germany it was like you worked long hours, there was a mandatory one-hour lunch break, which in my opinion is a waste of time, because, well, I don't know, if you have a quick lunch it's done in 15 minutes, right? And here it was so forced that, for example, there was a girl working with us who had a 3/4 position. So it looked like she would come in at nine and leave at four, because she was required to take that one-hour unpaid lunch break starting at two. So she ate lunch and then still worked another hour before going home. She really didn't like it, because she had a small child, but those were the rules, and that's it, right. There was no arguing. In Poland, I think it's easier to somehow adjust. At that time, this was before Covid, there was no option for remote work, if you were supposed to come to the office, you had to be there at a certain time. That was hard for me because I already had some experience with more flexible work. For example, in Poland my boss didn't mind if I was late by an hour, as long as the work got done. (MPL04_PL_F38)

This further complicates the thesis on work discipline of Polish migrants. Reportedly the strongly internalized rule to work hard and complete tasks contradicts taking the regulations freely.

Work emerges as the fundamental contribution of Polish migrants. Its centrality and the normative framework built around it allegedly makes Poles vulnerable workers prone to exploitation supported by self-disciplinary narratives.

Belonging

Migrants' sense of affiliation to the sending regions is considered both crucial and problematic (Skaptadóttir et al., 2024). Any emotional or civic investment in the new region is hindered by a sense of isolation or let alone indifference. Belonging is a function of connectedness and hence relationships with locals, general sense of attachment and civic participation seem to be key areas where it plays out. Conversely, a sense of isolation and exclusion inhibit affiliation.

Interactions with locals

The most prominent stories of interactions with locals were the ones of certain inattention. Especially in the low-skilled occupations, manual agricultural work or warehouse jobs, the perception of non-relationship with the locals surfaced:

> Moderator: And how did the Danes treat the Poles?
>
> Participant: I think they didn't really care about us. I mean, we just stayed out of each other's way. When they came around, we exchanged a few words. There were, like, relations that gave the appearance of being positive, but we knew they didn't care about us and they knew we didn't care about them. And that's how it was, so there weren't really any conflicts. (MPL06_PL_M23)

It was associated with the work hierarchies and managerial positions held by locals. Our participants told us stories about interactions of certain superficiality and cordiality or civility, yet typically without any extension of these relationships beyond the workplace:

> The Dutch hold higher positions, we just pass by them, see them in the warehouse, but they don't do the same work as we do. [...] Very friendly, really friendly. The Dutch are friendly, very friendly. [...] Honestly, I don't really know any Dutch person, like not even to say hi or good morning, just the ones I pass at work.
>
> Moderator: Any neighbors? No?
>
> Participant: No, I don't know any Dutch people, I don't hang out with Dutch people, I don't talk to Dutch people. (MPL23_PL_M27)

Apparently, progressing through work hierarchies creates some opportunities to interact. For instance, a construction worker reported work based interactions with Austrian colleagues explaining that this is due to his more pronounced position at the company and other Poles do not get to interact with the locals on a daily basis:

> Moderator: So, do you work with Poles on a daily basis?
>
> Participant: With Poles, and also Austrians. Well, okay, I probably have more contact with the Austrians than my colleagues, because I'm a bit higher up in position now, since I also deal with some organisational matters, actually construction-related and organisational. (MPL19_PL_M40)

Reports of interactions with locals came from individuals who were mothers taking time off work with children or people walking their dogs and meeting fellow dog walkers. It seems that rural, smaller communities were conducive to opportunities for contact with locals outside of professional context. For example, a couple who used to live in a small community, reported the neighbors helping out the wife with a newborn child and teaching her the language in the process:

Moderator: And how was it on a daily basis, on the street, or with the neighbors, did you speak Dutch then?

Participant and Participant: Yes.

Moderator: Okay. And did you eventually learn from that neighbor?

Participant: Well, I had to. Maybe I didn't speak everything with perfect grammar, but I had to. She was at my place every day.

Moderator: But was she just really determined to teach you? And why do you think that was? Was it just kindness or...?

Participant: Well, she needed contact with someone too.

Participant: Yes, she was alone. How old was she again?

Participant: And later she was... 75. But when we were in the Netherlands two years ago, we went to visit her and also the neighbors who used to sit with [name] and her daughter. We visited them too, but they don't live there anymore, they've moved away.

Participant: They moved out, and that old lady, she's still alive, but she doesn't live in the same place anymore. She's now...

Participant: But it was all very positive. We even wrote letters for a long time after we came back.

(MPL15_PL_M43 – his wife interrupted and joined in)

These interactions reportedly produced a strong connection, evident from the later correspondence and visits after the couple returned to Poland.

Apparently, these interactions in social spaces facilitated flattening the ethnic hierarchies that people who migrate experienced by default. When the relationships seemed equal, the migrants would notice it as an exception to the norm:

> And once we had that dog and started walking it on the street, well, dog owners, we immediately had a bunch of acquaintances, right? There were dog parks, and people would talk to each other, and I'll tell you, I met a lot of people there, and I didn't feel like, I don't know, like I was a Pole or anything. Because before that, I did notice it. Even though the Dutch say they're not like that, I think they very often treat people differently based on their background.
>
> (MPL20_PL_M42)

Opportunities to interact with locals shape the possibilities to connect and anchor. Limited connectivity, hierarchies and their perception significantly prevent affiliation with the region.

Sense of belonging

Anchoring through interactions and networks is fundamental for building the sense of belonging to the receiving region. In a few cases, those who reported a sense of

belonging to the receiving regions, typically would be embedded in networks of local acquaintances. A returnee who followed her husband back to Poland called Sweden her "home":

> Moderator: And could you tell me, when you were there, you said you had Swedish friends and work, and friends at work, did you feel like you were part of some kind of community there?
>
> Participant: Yes, I do feel that way, I miss home.
>
> Moderator: Ah, okay, that's interesting. And in general, where did you live, did you have your own place or was it rented? How was that?
>
> Participant: We rented a house, but honestly, most people there rent. It's not like here, where there's a beautiful house, a beautiful car, a fence taller than the house. Over there, people have campers. They don't show off with houses and all that, it's more about spending time together, traveling, doing things.
>
> (MPL26_PL_F35)

Interestingly, she also adheres to the local lifestyles and despite returning to build her own home in Podkarpacie, she demonstrates understanding for home renting and post-materialist values, like quality time or travel. In turn, showing an immersive affiliation with the locality.

Other rare cases of people who reported belonging to the sending regions were for example mediated through embeddedness in family life on a micro level - through carework:

> Participant: Yes, I had a lot, really a lot of friends. Interestingly, I had many friends among Italians. Yes, neighbors, because they... Well, I'm the kind of person who likes older people, and I often visited them. When I visited some of the girls at work, I built up some trust that way. And the neighbors, when they saw me, they would all wave, say hello, "ciao," things like that, so I felt good. It wasn't like, no, I didn't isolate myself, like "oh, they're Italians, so..." It was all really nice. (MPL27_PL_F59)

Being professionally present at homes, among people apparently facilitated interactions and helped develop a meaningful presence in the community. Another person claimed that belonging is about integration through lifestyle. His observation is however expressed from a certain power position, as he progressed through the ranks of a job agency he used to be hired through when coming to the Netherlands. Economic attainment enabled the "Dutch lifestyle", starting from home ownership to a vast network of colleagues and business partners. As he explained:

> Still, when living abroad, you have to be aware that, in quotation marks, you're not at home, and in order to feel comfortable, you have to assimilate. You just need to have that ability in you to, let's say, adapt to the given country, right? And we adapted, because we didn't, I don't know, we didn't manifest our origin, or our religion, or anything like that. A lot of other nationalities do that there. We didn't. We simply lived the way the Dutch live, we adjusted to that lifestyle—well, definitely except for the religious aspect, because that's a bit different there. But at some point, we started to miss Poland, right? It's something that's hard to put into words. (MPL20_PL_M42)

Interestingly, discussing his alleged belonging to the Netherlands, at the same time, he concluded that the nostalgia towards Poland started to prevail.

Therefore the narratives we collected - if they acknowledge some degree of belonging, there was always a reservation or condition. Some people - especially in specialized jobs - told us they basically did not belong to the community, but they felt association through the workplace. For example, an aspiring chef who left for Iceland to gain experience:

> I didn't feel like a typical local, but I did feel, let's say, like a citizen of a wonderful kitchen, where I could simply create something, where people from all over the world came to eat really interesting things. So in a way I felt like an ambassador of the place, and that was nice too, that by emigrating I could also host someone, in a way, through that form. (MPL04_PL_F38)

Yet, in principle, the typical spontaneous answer people would give, was a firm denial. After reflection, they would find exceptions to this rule. In one case, a wife of the participant who casually passed by the living room, where the interview was held, interrupted and added that the interactions and associated feeling of belonging were very different in the period when they stayed in the Netherlands as a family, but once the husband stayed alone, all he does there is work, what limits opportunities to interact:

> Moderator: Do you feel like you are part of some kind of community, like in your municipality?
>
> Participant: There's no such thing there. There, everyone just looks out for themselves, right? There's nothing like what we have. We just stick to work-home, work-home.
>
> Participant (wife): I'll interrupt here, it was different when there were just the two of us. When life was happening there, it was different. We were the only Poles on the street, so the Dutch welcomed us very positively, they taught me the language, took care of our daughter, and we participated in that Dutch life. But now, like my husband said, it's just work-home, there's no going out or anything. (MPL15_PL_M43 – his wife interrupted and joined in)

Moreover, Polish migrants we talked to also indicated a certain degree of individualism, they observed among receiving societies that reportedly hinders interactions. For example, a migrant from Silesia, who went to study in Germany based on her double citizenship due to her family heritage, explained how she did not quite felt she belonged there despite efforts and activities she engaged in:

> Moderator: Do you think you belonged there, to that community? Were you "one of them" over there? How was it?
>
> Participant: Yes and no. I mean, yes, I definitely acclimated, I looked for connections, I felt comfortable there. For example, I was involved with Caritas, I visited elderly people on their birthdays and brought them little gifts, later they even pulled me into collecting donations for various causes. So in that sense, yes. I think with my friends, too, I went to different meetings. But I always had this feeling... Well, for example, with the moms of my kids' classmates. I don't know if it was because Germany is kind of an individualistic country, where people don't just invite someone over for coffee right away? I was invited for coffee in some houses, but I still had this feeling that, well, I wasn't quite one of them, not quite German. Sometimes, when I had a bad day, it was hard to express myself on certain topics, I couldn't say things the way I would in Polish, and that bothered me. Also, mentally I think, I don't know if it was related to religion or to my personal values, but I didn't always feel entirely aligned with everyone, like I was... well, definitely not German, no. (MPL17_PL_F42)

More often however, Polish migrants reported a complete lack of belonging. Be it due to lack of interactions or just like that. Many people though developed complex theories of difference that helped them explain the disconnection. Such was an observation of a young person, born in Germany to Polish parents, who recently returned with them to a region in Polish Silesia and started a vocational school:

> Moderator: And when you lived there, did you feel that you belonged? That you were part of a community, that it was your place in the world?
>
> Participant: Not really. It was just like I said. People there lived very much for themselves, you know. They only looked out for themselves, and here, well, people live more together. [...] Here we meet up more, people are kinder, they welcome you more warmly and so on, and there it was... well, it was more like... well, that was just the mentality there in that particular Land. That was the general mentality, let's say. And money changes people too, right? That's also a thing... [...] When a person earns a lot of money, then they start to think, why would I need others? And that's what it turned into, people didn't need each other anymore, to help or anything. You had to really rely on yourself. It was especially strong at school. When it came to assignments or something, well, there wasn't much kindness... There was a lot of competition, and it's not like that here. Here they'll help you kindly, if you're missing something or whatever, they'll help you out, and there it was, well, not so much. I had to take care of things on my own. (MPL14_PL_M18)

Highlighting community support and collectivist values, this person connected his family's lack of belonging to the receiving region with the allegedly individualist culture. Intertwining with discourses of materialist and competitive approach to life in the region where he grew up, he contrasted it with the kindness of people in Poland, in his parent's homeland.

The prevailing sentiment though was that of indifference. The migrants just "got used" to living at the destination regions:

> Moderator: And how did you feel, did you feel that you belonged there?
> Participant: I got used to the place, but I don't think there was that sense of belonging. I just got used to the place itself, because it was 9 years, right. (MPL07_PL_F36)

Overall, very little belonging was identified in this study. Instead, partial or none affiliation was reported and different explanations for this fact were given. Nevertheless, the most pronounced sentiment was that of not belonging at all.

Social and civic participation

In the light of predominant non-beloning reported by Polish migrants, we examined their participation in civic life or associations knowing that we should not expect robust participatory activity (Nowosielski & Cichocki, 2023). Indeed, we found very little to no mentions of any form of civic participation, communal work or any activity beyond work. On rare occasions, there were gym goers or football players who would belong to organizations based on these sporting interests. One young person who left to train at top Icelandic restaurants, reported going to jazz jam sessions because he was an avid guitar player himself:

> Participant: Not in groups, but sometimes I liked to walk around and listen to jam sessions in pubs. That's when a few different musicians get together, not necessarily knowing each other, and just play.
>
> Moderator: Just to listen? You don't play anything yourself, or do you?
>
> Participant: I do, I play the bass guitar.
>
> Moderator: Did you take it with you?
>
> Participant: Unfortunately, I couldn't really pack it because, well, I switched, let's say, my instrument to a set of knives. (MPL03_PL_M32)

A handful of other migrants reported some degree of involvement in Polish religious organizations in their regions. It was typically passive and attendance based:

> I wasn't part of any Polish groups, only when it came to the Polish church. There was a Polish church there, so that was a kind of Polish community, and we used to go there, you know. On Sundays, always, and that was it. (MPL14_PL_M18)

In a rare case of extensive participation in Polish organizations we identified and interesting dynamics within Polish diaspora, that exceeds the scope of this report, but and making distinctions between different classes of Polish migrants who happened to meet via the Polish church:

> Participant: Later on, a priest came to us, he joined the Polish Catholic Mission, and there was talk about extending the one in Bielefeld to include our area too, because there was a large pig slaughterhouse in that town, one of the biggest in Europe, or at least one of the largest, and many workers from Poland and Romania were coming there. So this priest came, and I got involved in the Polish community through that, I was a lector in the church too. And through that mission I got to know a few people, although at first I didn't really want to. I preferred to keep in touch with Germans so I could speak the language and not just keep using Polish all the time. I felt like I had to have contact outside Polish circles. Besides, I kind of had the impression that the people arriving there, well, I don't want to say they were simple, but they were a bit from the social margins, I don't know if that's the right word. People who come just to earn money and live a certain kind of life, you know what I mean?
>
> Moderator: I might have an idea, but I don't want to assume.
>
> Participant: From lower social classes, yes.
>
> Moderator: You mean, just earning money?
>
> Participant: Yes, earning, and then maybe looking for contacts to sell something, or so someone could help them with something. Not exactly to take advantage of others, but still... I just wanted to keep my distance from those circles. Besides, I didn't really have time. But later, I met this one woman I felt sorry for, and through her, I started helping some of those people. (MPL17_PL_F42)

This excerpt may serve as a reminder of the vast diversity of the migrant group itself, but also about the boundary making and stratification within it.

Settling in

Settlement into stability at the receiving society comprises social, emotional and material anchoring at the destination (Grzymala-Kazlowska, 2018). The latter one includes housing that makes up the most profound need and may be particularly challenging for the newcomers. Language constitutes the most basic intermediary between migrants and the locals.

Housing

Housing typically constitutes a serious challenge for people who migrate. The market is typically unfamiliar, the uncertainty about the length of stay produces issues with planning, and they may also face discrimination (Kleininger-Wanik & Wanke, 2024). Participants of this study reported many different residential practices: ranging from labor agency arranged accommodation to sharing and renting, as well as shuttle/circular arrangements or home ownership.

Often, the migration trajectories starting as chain migrations, begin with staying with family or friends. Moving on can be difficult, especially in big urban areas with an inaccessible market. One of the participants migrated with a partner and moved in with

his father. When the relationship broke up, the woman faced a challenge of finding a place for herself:

> Finding an apartment in Berlin is nearly impossible. No matter how much time I spent on different Facebook groups, listings, all of that, looking for a place. The number of people interested in an apartment is just so huge that I don't know if you need to have connections or a lot of money to just pay someone under the table, so to speak, to get a place. (MPL05_PL_F23)

She eventually returned home and at the time of the interview stayed with her mother planning another departure.

Circular or shuttle migrants often keep two homes, making the costs of migration higher, but also opening transnational possibilities.

> Moderator: Ok. And your husband lives there, he has an apartment? Is everything set up there?
>
> Participant: Yes, yes.
>
> Moderator: And what's there?
>
> Participant: Yes, and my children go there often. We all sort of feel at home there too, it's just that… it's not Poland, you know. He has a very nice apartment, and now my middle son went there, because he just finished his studies, and he's doing some additional programming courses… (MPL35_PL_F50)

For the migrants who are seasonal and depend on the migration brokers, the housing is very often pre-arranged. It is convenient, but it may produce issues with the living conditions, sharing and privacy but also with the commuting distances. Study participants shared many stories like this:

> Participant: Well, the first month we complained quite a lot, because first of all the place we were living in and the conditions there were terrible. We lived, let's say, like in a basement. That was the standard. Whoever lived upstairs had it okay because it was a big house. But downstairs, there was this descent and then, like in a block of flats, a basement corridor, a little nook where the kitchen was, and the rooms were like basement rooms in a block. Separate doors and… the rooms were small. Two beds, just enough space to pass between them, like a tiny box. There were windows, but you couldn't open them. The conditions were awful.
> Moderator: And what kind of job was it?
> Participant: Construction warehouse.
> Moderator: Construction, okay, got it. And did things get better? I understand something has changed.
> Participant: Yes, it got better. After a few phone calls, we managed to get transferred to another house. After about a month. That house was quite okay. The only problem was we had 60 km to work, so we had to drive 60 km each way every day. That was a bit of a pain, especially since we worked the second shift. (MPL25_PL_M29)

Among the stories we collected, there were those of despair due to the living conditions. It may be conducive to the fact of downskilling and the mismatch in expectations associated with class experiences of housing.

> Participant: And what happened next? I sat down and cried.
>
> Moderator: Why?
>
> Participant: Because it felt like the worst decision of my life, and I was thinking: what now, what can I do now? I don't think that anymore, but we ended up in a kind of workers' hotel, and that was our very first job, working in a fish factory. It's not an easy job. And we got one room, with only three beds. A typical workers' hotel, but I had no idea what that meant. People had talked about it, someone had mentioned it, but the living conditions weren't explained. Just one suitcase and one chair in the room, one table and three beds. And for me, it was just devastating. (MPL01_PL_F46)

Not only the quality of living conditions matters when it comes to the labor broker provided accommodation. According to our participants, it can range from terrible to very convenient. Yet, what was underlined, the arranged residency prevents individuals from engaging with the local:

> Yes, you know, an employment agency is basically a place that takes care of everything for a person. If someone wants to work, they'll do the following: they arranged our work permits, organized transport from Poland to the Netherlands, and when we arrived at the specified address, there was already accommodation ready for us. It was a kind of multi-family house. For example, we lived with seven people. It was a two-storey house. Upstairs there were three bedrooms—three couples and one guy who was probably alone. Downstairs there was a kitchen with a living room, and another bathroom upstairs. And we lived in that house. The employment agency, generally speaking, does everything for a person who wants to go abroad. At some point I realized that it's convenient, but it's also a kind of crippling practice. Because 90% of the people I saw who came through that agency weren't interested at all in what normal, independent life looks like in a given country. They handed everything over to the agency. They had problems with everything, made lots of demands, and so on. I didn't like that. I'm the kind of person who likes to take things into my own hands, to understand how things work, and so on. But people were just demanding, demanding, demanding. (MPL20_PL_M42)

Conducive to the abovementioned disconnectedness, job agency housing may contribute to the detachment from the receiving region.

Polish migrants also purchase properties. Some stories that contributed to this report include also renovating. Among others, we also collected stories about renovation done personally, both due to cost-effectiveness of such a solution and also specific skill- and min- set of migrants:

> Participant: Well, I mean, the house, we owe a lot to the fact that my husband can do everything himself. He just took care of it. It wasn't all high standard. We furnished it quite modestly. We also bought a lot of things second-hand, but that works better in Germany than it does here. And he did everything himself, he's an electrician, right, so he could paint the walls, lay the flooring, all that. If he didn't know how to do that, there's no way we could have managed. (MPL17_PL_F42)

For many migrants, a place to stay is often a challenge - for it must be found, and very often shared. Temporary agency housing may mean below standard conditions or lack of agency.

Language

Language is the most basic interface to the receiving region. Language barrier hinders access to services, limits job opportunities, renders skill unusable and in general isolates migrants from the receiving region. Not knowing language contributes to the sense of isolation.

One of the participants of the study, working as a dog groomer after following her husband to Germany, admitted that she did feel comfortable not knowing the language:

> I couldn't find my place abroad. Umm, the worst thing for me was the language barrier, because at first I was home with the children, and of course animals don't speak German, so it was hard for me to get into the language. (MPL07_PL_F36)

One can make up for not knowing the language with the right attitude. But knowing basics, or being smart can only be of help in basic situations. A retiree and a seasonal worker described how her outgoing attitude helped her in different simple situations, like withdrawing cash at an ATM or understanding basic commands at the greenhouse to the astonishment of her fellow worker who was too shy to make such attempts. At the end of the interview, she humoristically admitted, that she can communicate in every language "using signs":

> Moderator: OK, and you speak languages, you speak Polish and any other if needed?
>
> Participant: Polish, sign language, sign language in every language. (MPL22_PL_F65)

Yet, "sign language" used by a lay person is a very restricted code. In principle, if one does not know a language, they are dependent on brokers. They may be husbands, who work and pick up language from colleagues or fellow workers. This is especially characteristic of seasonal work through job agencies. Coordinators or individuals who are higher up the crew hierarchy act as intermediaries:

> When it came to relations between Poles and the Danes, in terms of handling things, there was this one [name] and also [name], who spoke English. And everything went through them, they basically had the role of interpreters. Because the rest simply couldn't speak English. (MPL06_PL_M23)

Such mediation may be as convenient as problematic. Another participant pointed out to the fact that there may be matters too private to be suitable for being interpreted by a company appointed coordinator:

> Just like, for example, asking the coordinator if he could go somewhere with me or help sort something out. And with some of the more private matters, they would not help, because they do not have to, right. They are there for things like Sofi numbers, doctors, and work, work-related issues. And the fact that I could not be, so to speak, 100 percent independent, that also somehow... No, just the very thought already, that language barrier. Of course, I could have also learned the language, but somehow I was not too motivated. At work, I was able to communicate well enough that it did not bother me. I understood the instructions and my supervisor and so on, and I could also talk freely with the Indians or whoever I was working with, so... (MPL25_PL_M29)

Although able to interact in basic social situations, this person remained disconnected from opportunities or assistance and it bothered him. Another person, who left after secondary school for Sweden with her then husband explained how she intended to create possibilities for herself through language acquisition:

> Participant: I was working, just cleaning for acquaintances, for Poles. In the meantime, I was attending school, I enrolled myself.
>
> Moderator: What kind of school was it?
>
> Participant: A language school.
>
> Moderator: For what purpose?
>
> Participant: To open up more opportunities for myself in terms of education and employment.
>
> Moderator: And which language were you learning there?
>
> Participant: Swedish.
>
> Moderator: And did you learn it?
>
> Participant: Yes, after a year I was fluent. Later, through experience, I improved in writing and speaking. Right now, it's actually easier for me to explain or say something in Swedish than here in Polish, although I'm still learning. (MPL26_PL_F35)

She eventually started a nursery school and found employment at a nursing home which proved her right. Such investments in language were not prominent in our interviews. Some individuals decided to take up courses. Some regretted doing it relatively late.

Very few reported attending courses subsidised by local authorities. Instead they would pay themselves to learn the language. One person shared an observation about the access to subsidized courses for different migrant groups, claiming that Poles are not treated equally in the Netherlands:

> I paid for it myself. I paid out of my own pocket. Let me put it this way: there were courses that were funded by the municipality, but the Netherlands is a country that, in my view, treats Poles as second-class citizens in certain respects. And I'll tell you, all those language courses subsidized by the municipality were available mostly to people from Turkey, Morocco. These are people who are already well rooted there, so I have a sense, or a thought, that they somehow earned that access over time. For us, getting such a subsidy was very difficult. I took part in a long procedure, and I wasn't successful either. And I'm also the kind of person who believes that if I want something more, I need to invest in myself, so you know, it wasn't a problem for me to pay that money. I just knew it was a good investment. It allowed me to grow, later to start my own business, and so on. And now I work with Dutch clients, so I use the language every day. (MPL20_PL_M42)

In this contradictory statement, the expectation of public provision policies and a praise of individual attainment intertwine to make a critical comment about hierarchization of different migrant groups. Nevertheless, the local language proficiency is rendered pivotal for a successful migration story.

Those who learned the local language, however, typically did it through immersion. For some, institutionalized courses were even insufficient:

> I took a lot of courses, but I just can't learn that way. Courses don't work for me. The best method for me is simply through conversation. I later worked in a hotel. My boss was Icelandic, and only the Icelandic language was used there. English wasn't even an option, she didn't speak English at all, even though most Icelanders do. But I happened to work for someone who didn't, so I had to learn through conversation. At that time, I worked with two Polish women, twin sisters, who spoke Icelandic, even though they were Polish. I kept asking them questions, what's this, what's that. Whenever I picked up a word by ear, and after a while, I already knew the basics of Icelandic. (MPL01_PL_F46)

This highlights the role of connectivity to the locals, but also illuminates how chain-language-acquisition, through fellow nationals, may be viable. This person's story also brings the role of migrant children to the limelight. They can learn language quickly and bring it home. Having children also produces opportunities to interact in social situations (eg. with fellow parents). For some, it may mean additional motivation to actually uptake the language. The same person who went to Iceland, shared her experiences of shame at the kindergarten, that allegedly motivated her to acquire the language:

> Participant: But when I had children, I felt more ashamed that I couldn't communicate, that I wouldn't be able to talk in school or kindergarten, you know. And that also motivated me to learn the language. More for the children.
>
> Moderator: Why ashamed?
>
> Badana: Being here for so many years and, for example, in kindergarten they would say something, I don't know, for me it's a bit embarrassing, kind of silly, just a sign of laziness, like I have kids in kindergarten, and the teacher tells me that the child needs rubber boots, and I don't understand and just nod my head. I just felt that I had to, as a mother, that I wanted to, that I want to and have to, maybe more that I want to. (MPL01_PL_F46)

Last, but not least, living in small, rural communities facilitate language acquisition. The aforementioned wife who joined her husband in the Netherlands picked up language via interactions with the local senior citizen who would visit her to help out with the child.

Language mediates between people who migrate and the social lives of their destinations. Not knowing it reduces opportunities and facilitates developing dependency on interpreters. To get to know it requires motivation and investment and is probably the best achieved via immersion, and hence the function of connectedness.

Evaluation of the destination

In order to understand the involvement of Polish migrants in the destination region, it is essential to scrutinize their assessment of the region. Knowing what is valued and what is rendered negative may help understand how people who migrate make sense of their presence abroad. However, it must be noted that for many people we interviewed, especially those who engaged in seasonal migration, the receiving regions were not triggering complex evaluation. On the contrary, individuals would express indifference:

> I have a rather neutral attitude toward the Netherlands because, as I said, I was mostly focused on work, so I do not really know what it is like there. (MPL30_PL_F21)

Due to such detachment, making observations, let alone assessments, is obviously limited. Nevertheless, when asked about the advantages and disadvantages, some participants were able to produce answers that concerned mostly work related issues and generally - people living in the receiving regions.

Perceived advantages of the destination

Polish migrants value the receiving regions predominantly because they offer what these people came there for: prosperity. Multiple stories about economically better lives emerged. They associated earrings with lack of constraints they reportedly used to experience prior to migration:

> Life in the West is a very carefree life. That is, in my opinion, something that must change in Poland for citizens to be satisfied with their lives. In the Netherlands, doing very simple work, the financial return in terms of earnings and what I can afford is very good. You receive, let's say, €2000, and with those €2000 you are able to pay for your accommodation, feed yourself, buy clothes within the same month, and still save something. (MPL20_PL_M42)

Financial freedom was associated with peace and the influence on their lifestyles was pronounced:

> It was a peaceful life, financially it was better, as I mentioned, I did not have to keep checking my account. Above all, it was a free life, one that was not planned from A to Z just to get something done that day, but rather you simply felt free. (MPL26_PL_F35)

These valuations were made retrospectively and in case of returning migrants, their current situation was a reference point:

> I had an easier life there. Here, now that I am here, it is different, the lifestyle is different. Here, a person has to think more, has to plan. Over there, I used to get money, for example once a week, I received money for groceries and had to manage within that amount. If I ran out, my [client's] daughter-in-law would give me more, but here it is different. (MPL27_PL_F59)

It was important for the migrants we talked to that they are able to spend money not only on the basic needs, like accommodation or food, but also they can save up or entertain themselves:

> City breaks, even slightly longer ones, like 3 or 4 days, I have been to Milan, also to Rome. We have also been to Greece, but that was more of a longer holiday, right? An all-inclusive one. The financial situation finally allows for not having to save up. Unlike in Poland, where you have to sit and book your vacation six months in advance, focus on saving, there, really, two paychecks and you can easily book something. (MPL23_PL_M27)

Related to the financial freedom, some participants highlighted the consumer choices they have related to their increased needs they acquired when abroad:

> In Germany, for example, there is an enormous variety of products, like spreads for children — kids like those chocolate or hazelnut ones. Here, in a store, you have maybe three options to choose from, but there, there is so much that everyone can find something for themselves. If someone wants a healthier product, they can choose one without, I don't know, chemical additives, with a high nut content. And here, that's just not available, so for me, that was a shock. There are a few other products as well, like pasta, for example. I really liked buying spelt pasta — here, there is no such thing, at least not in [city], I haven't found it yet. Some favorite things I used to buy for the kids are either less available here, or the flavor is different, or they're just not available. So in that regard, the selection of food products is much wider over there. (MPL07_PL_F36)

As this person, a parent and a return migrant to a remote region in Poland, highlighted, she became a more selective consumer living abroad and she recognized the benefits of the vast supply.

Apart from the better off lives in the receiving regions, some of the participants of the study recognized the benefits of civility and general positive attitude they reportedly encountered abroad. Rendering people nice and kind was contrasted with the perception of Polish people:

> That's something I like about the Netherlands, for example, that people are simply kind to one another, and here, when you walk down the street, no one even says hello. Over there, everyone greets each other, whether I know the person or not. So yes, that kind of thing. (MPL21_PL_M37)

In a similar vein, the relations in public, the appearance was also valued: "What I really liked about Iceland was that everyone was generally smiling, open. I practically never saw any fights there or any serious incidents." (MPL03_PL_M32) One of the return migrants made a retrospective assessment and compared relations in public in Poland to what she used to experience in the UK:

> But now that I am in Poland, and when someone bumps into me in the proverbial Biedronka and cannot say "sorry," I start to appreciate their "sorry" every single time, truly. That's what irritates me here. Those arguments in queues, for example, that the poor cashier is scanning too slowly or that there are too few checkouts open, that started to irritate me here. And in England, I didn't appreciate the fact that the lady was just slowly and calmly scanning all my items, asking how I'm doing, how my day at work was. (MPL10_PL_F40)

Many more such descriptions and comparisons highlighted openness and positive attitude of locals in the receiving regions. There were also some assessments that considered the openness beyond relations in public. Broader openmindedness was acknowledged and contrasted with the situation in Poland:

> Participant: There is a big difference, they are very open, there is definitely a lot of tolerance in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, there are many LGBT individuals, you can meet people of different sexual orientations or from a wide range of cultures and subcultures, from punks to all sorts of subcultures, to diverse cultures. It's not just Poles or Romanians, there are many Asians, Moroccans. I myself have a Moroccan supervisor at work. Many different cultures, and the Dutch are very tolerant, which I don't know if Poles are…
>
> Moderator: And do you like that, or not?
>
> Participant: Yes, very much.
>
> Moderator: You really like it?
>
> Participant: Yes, the fact that the Dutch are very tolerant. (MPL23_PL_M27)

Societal tolerance for diversity was appreciated by some Polish migrants in the Netherlands. It was also associated with a more relaxed way of being. For example, a person with seasonal experience in Denmark praised the balanced life he reportedly observed:

> Generally, I think they have built their own, how to put it, well, a culture of being, a kind of slow life, and they don't really need any rollercoasters in life. But I think they're also tolerant enough to accept those kinds of things and just don't do anything about them. And coming back to what I liked, it was very clean there, overall, everything was neat, tidy cities, tidy cars. You can see they live slowly, they have time for everything, even to clean. And that's basically it. If I had to choose a place to live, I probably wouldn't choose Denmark, but I do like that they've built this kind of harmony for themselves and they live in it and they're happy with it. (MPL06_PL_M23)

The attitude of people was in this case associated with how the regions look and what environment for living they produced. This in turn, connects to what some reported as valuable in the countries they lived.

Asked about the positives of the receiving regions, some people also referred to the neat and tidy public spaces. For instance, a person who worked in the Netherlands, Austria and Germany on a shuttle basis, remarked about the visual aspect of the landscapes he encountered there:

> I don't know how it works, but they somehow manage money in such a way that when you travel around, everything is really neat and clean, there are lawns, everything is raked, there are flowers and such. The smaller the town, the better it sometimes looks. For example, there was this little town I visited recently in the mountains. It was in the Black Forest region, and it was an area with a lot of hiking trails, where people would go walking in the mountains. There was a little castle or some ruins nearby, and there was this one really nice town I happened to come across, and it was really well kept. You could tell they took care of it. (MPL19_PL_M40)

Similar assessments were made about Scandinavian countries and some participants acknowledged that they appreciated greenery and city spaces designed for inhabitants' wellbeing.

Overall, participants of this study did not pay too much attention to the regions they lived in, but when they did, they praised them for better living conditions - predominantly due to their higher earnings - and also for the locals being open and generally positive. Clean and green areas were also appreciated by some.

Perceived downsides of the destination

At the other end of the spectrum the negative evaluations were predominantly focused on the receiving countries being too diverse and also extensively liberal. If people who migrate were able to produce an unfavorable opinion, it was about the ethnic composition of the local migrants.

The opinions concerned alleged lack of effective policies in place to manage migration. Many of them were of unspecified nature and were generally unfavorable for different ethnic groups. For example a person who returned from Sweden immediately mentioned migrants when asked about the downsides of the region where she lived in:

Moderator: What did you dislike the most there? Was there something like that?

Participant: It was precisely the fact that too many immigrants were being accepted, and the state could no longer cope with it. (MPL26_PL_F35)

Similar sentiment was prominent throughout many interviews. The anti immigrant tone was often substantiated with the lack of proper governance. These narratives ranged from general, yet firm, like the following one of a person who returned from Germany, and whose husband still lives there on the shuttle basis, to very specific instances of lived experiences, showing an interaction of encounters and media discourses:

Participant: What's really bad is the influx of refugees, that they're simply not managing it, that instead...

Moderator: Who's not managing it?

Participant: Germany. Germany is not managing it, they're sweeping it under the rug. And it's not really being talked about in the media. Not that they're hiding it, no. And honestly, I don't know why. But it's terrible, really, Germany is just [unintelligible]. And there are many awful things that happened, which should have been prosecuted, those people should be held accountable. But they're not. Even though they didn't harm anyone directly, it's still between them, for example a German family, or some German children. And that too just gets swept under the rug, it's honestly outrageous. (MPL35_PL_F50)

Some people also cited specific situations they observed and contrasted them with the order and tidy landscapes they valued, which had a strong symbolic appeal. As a person who had a seasonal experience in Denmark illustrated:

For me, it was a bit boring there, because people are extremely phlegmatic. And very, on the surface of course, polite. I mean the Danes. And, let's say, it's the immigrant communities that introduce a bit of chaos, from what I observed. You can see it in everyday situations. For example, we were at a gas station and someone of, let's say, an Arab appearance showed up, driving a gold Mercedes, screeching tires, drank a cup of coffee and threw the cup on the ground instead of into a bin. So, you can see the differences. And of course, among Danes such behavior would be unthinkable. They would arrive slowly and dispose of the coffee cup in the appropriate recycling bin. (MPL06_PL_M23)

Putting together the Danish way of living and the allegedly strange and disruptive behavior, this is the nicest of illustrations we obtained of how incompatible other migrant groups are according to the Polish. Other examples concerned noises, smells and instances of ethnic crime they reportedly suffered from. Some migrants from Silesia, identifying themselves as Silesians or Germans even claimed that it is now better to return to Poland, which is allegedly free of other migrant groups.

Conclusions: What facilitates or hinders contributions to the receiving region?

Work is the most profound contribution to the regions Polish migrants live in. They very often re-skill (what in turns frequently means de-skilling) to adjust to the labor market needs. Facilitating these processes or rerouting migrants to more fitting jobs may facilitate contributions.

Hard work is perceived as a major contribution. Polish migrants seem to obey strong norms of efficiency which may lead to conflicts with co-workers or to exploitation. Arranging flexible and performance oriented jobs with transparent monitoring of output may facilitate recognition of effort and prevent exploitation, increasing job satisfaction.

Polish migrants seem to be poorly embedded in the social tissue of the receiving regions. Their social capital is low, sense of belonging is weak and participation in organizations is limited. Efforts towards realistic engagement, possibly through a workplace that holds the central position, and opportunities to connect, are needed to turn the social absence of Poles into socially meaningful presence taking account of the fact how work-oriented this presence is.

There are housing and language issues that may hinder possible contributions. Making language courses available to Polish migrants may facilitate language acquisition and ease inter-ethnic tensions.

Evaluations of the region reveal very little interest of Polish migrants in the regions they inhabit. They appreciate better living conditions and higher salaries, and notice and value the openness of locals and clean, tidy spaces as well as urban greenery. Diversity and the management of migration by the destination regions is seen as problematic. Investing in instilling clear rules and fostering responsible intercultural contact may produce more involvement in the regions.

6.6 Contributions to the sending regions

Experiencing the transnational

People we interviewed in the sending regions were making references to “here” and “there”, constantly making comparisons of where they left from to where they lived or used to live. Many of them, who were still living in the transnational arrangements - either circulating or going seasonally, experienced translocality on a regular basis.

Migrations and transnational living are present in the studied regions. It is immediately visible if one understands the context: cars with foreign registration plates, renovated or recently constructed houses and specialized services, like accounting offices advertising specialization in international tax. More importantly, the translocal living is visible and omnipresent for the locals residing there. One return migrant who recently relocated his business from the Netherlands was asked to speculate about the possibility of making it in Poland without the migration spell. He pointed to the palpability of migrant living to explain why he did not consider a career in Poland:

> Moderator: I was just about to ask, do you think you wouldn't have achieved something like that in Poland?
>
> Participant: I would have. But I would have needed to be, at the age when I started studying, wise and sensible enough to understand that I had to invest a few years into something that I could then benefit from for the rest of my life. And I think I would have done it… If perhaps I hadn't lived in this region. But here the phenomenon of emigration was so widespread, so tangible, so visible all around us. You could see that people were bringing money back from abroad. You know, new houses were being built, beautifully plastered, fenced in, cars parked in front, and I was still driving my dad's car. (MPL20_PL_M42)

This vision recalled by a person who eventually returned, links back to the socialization to migration analyzed in the earlier section. The presence of migration was obvious, because those who left kept having profound influence on the sending regions. Not only through investments or remittances, but also making periodic trips back to visit those who stayed. Reportedly, the connectivity and transport infrastructure improved enabling returns on a regular basis, for holidays, summer vacations or family occasions like weddings or birthdays. With the development of flight connections, especially lower costs, the car remains the default means of transport for migrants from the remote regions, both if they come to visit or if they shuttle between home in Poland and work abroad:

Moderator: And there is no alternative to taking the car?

Participant: You know, actually, you can take a plane, and that is quite convenient. But then there are limitations on luggage, and that definitely becomes a bit of a problem. In my town, for example, there is no airport. The nearest one is in [city] or in Rotterdam. I am not sure if there are flights from Poland, but supposedly there is an airport in Rotterdam. Still, from any of those cities, you would then have to somehow get home in the Netherlands, right?

Moderator: That is another issue, OK. And the luggage, do you carry a lot of things?

Participant: Yes, we bring a lot of stuff. That is because, well, parents or grandparents always give us some jars, sausages, a lot of honey for example, medicines from Poland. We end up taking a lot of things. (MPL23_PL_M27)

Living in the remote areas makes it less practical to take a flight (railway was not mentioned). It is flexible and connects remote areas - whereas taking a flight means having to transfer through an airport, which means that one still needs to connect to a remote area where they stay. Cars enable end-to-end connectivity. They also let people who migrate take items like homemade food or medicines. Many people reported carpooling for better cost-effectiveness too.

Transport arrangements are hence important as are the work days adjustments for those who live on the shuttle basis. There are many different schedules that transnational families apply. A man gave us examples of such adjustments of schedule over the years. He used to live with his wife in the Netherlands, but then they decided for her to return with their child entering early education, whereas he stayed to work abroad:

Earlier, well, obviously, with the three weeks away and one week back home, once you arrived, there was so much work piled up that during that one week you didn't even have time to get everything sorted, right? But now, with the full three weeks here, there's more time for family and everything, right? Here, at home. With family. You can go for a walk, do something normal, yeah? Go somewhere for the weekend or something like that, you know? Obviously. And before, there wasn't time for that, because basically you'd come back on Friday and by Sunday you already had to leave again, right? For another week. So there was only one weekend left. (MPL15_PL_M43)

Restoring a transnational work-family-life balance is essential for the family. Not many individuals in our study could afford it. In a conversation with a stayer, who returned from Germany and lives in Podlaskie while her husband is still working abroad, she brought up the emotional cost of the shuttle arrangement when asked to discuss the financial dimension of it:

> Moderator: So in this whole setup, with you having come back here and your husband still there, how would you assess your financial situation? Generally speaking, is that part working out at least?
>
> Participant: Well yes, that part worked out, financially speaking. But like I said, more on the emotional, spiritual level, not really. When it comes to raising children and so on, those are things that are lost and can never be regained. Those deeper relationships...
>
> I'm still dealing with that constantly, because my husband is still going back and forth. But we manage. I joke about it sometimes. There's a colleague I work with whose husband is a long-haul truck driver. We once calculated how many days her husband is home during the year, and it turns out my husband is home more often. He goes away for three weeks and comes back for four days, for example. My husband, when he comes, it's once a month or every month and a half, but he stays for two or three weeks. So that's how it works out. Still, of course, it's not ideal. It's not how a family is supposed to function, really. If you're thinking about something like this for your own future, I wouldn't recommend it. A family should be together. (MPL35_PL_F50)

For many migrants we interviewed, the end of the shuttle/circular arrangement was inevitable, yet it just would be permanently postponed as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Benefits of returns or transnational presence

Decisions to return

In this report, we are attempting to illuminate the contributions made by Polish migrants from vulnerable regions to their very places of origin. On the most basic level, the returns constitute the most fundamental contributions given the demographic dynamics. In this section, we will look beyond the physical presence of return migrants and attempt to identify different types of benefits the regions that we studied receive. Many of them are more of a potential to explore, and may require policy adjustments to thrive.

Firstly, it is important to understand the context of returns. In order to explore actions to foster return migrations and more importantly to cater to the specific needs of people who decide to go back. The decision to return is rarely triggered by a single factor. It typically comes from a convergence of many different circumstances and motivations. Since for many migrants, the leave was temporary by design, the return is about the "right time". It is also true that in many cases, the time horizon extended perpetually. There are always new migration goals, new life projects and developments. As one of the recent returnees from the UK told us:

> I really wanted to come back and finish my Master's degree. So my initial plan was just for a year. I would take a year off and return after that to do my Master's. My big dream at the time was to become either a prison psychologist or a police officer. And I kept telling my then-partner, now husband, that I was only going for a year, I would save some money and then return to continue my studies, finish my Master's and join the service, because that is what I wanted, that is just how I felt.
>
> Moderator: Mhm. Here in Poland, of course?
>
> Yes, in Poland, yes. And then after a year—well, we still did not have enough for a down payment on a flat. After two years we had a car and wanted a better one. After three, we thought it was time to finally have a wedding, because we had been together for so long. And so the return kept getting pushed back. Then we bought a house there. Then we started to travel a bit. And we kept postponing the return until 15 years had gone by. (MPL10_PL_F40)

She reported a mix of personal goals (like education attainment) and identity projects (like becoming a resocialization specialist) and material living arrangements issues (like the down payment) and bigger family projects like wedding or house ownership - all of which kept surfacing and reportedly pushed the decision to return further.

Sometimes, the migration project is at the same time a return project - it so happens when it comes to home development in the sending region. In the regions we studied, composed of small towns and rural areas, the land ownership through inheritance or inexpensive purchase was not uncommon. Some individuals invested in construction or renovation endeavours and decided to return when it was complete.

Combined with nostalgia for the homeland nature and the importance of the family ties, ideas about future re-settlement in the sending regions can eventually trigger a decision to return. As a person living in the Netherlands told us, he imagines his future at home:

> Moderator: Will you spend your retirement here?
>
> Participant: I think so. I think that in the long term, really, yes. I believe I will spend my retirement here in Poland, even in this region. I can narrow it down that much. Right here in this region.
>
> Moderator: So not even in [nearby large city]?
>
> Participant: Not even in [nearby in Poland], no.
>
> Moderator: And why is that?
>
> Participant: Because my girlfriend has a plot of land just outside [hometown], on the outskirts. And if we managed to build a house there, that would be ideal. On that plot near [hometown], it would be perfect, our whole family close by, beautiful green areas, space.
>
> Moderator: And the plot, did you buy it or...?
>
> Participant: She inherited it. (MPL23_PL_M27)

This person was visiting his hometown preparing a wedding with his partner. They already bought a flat in a nearby big city and rented it out.

Considering returns due to housing possibilities to these remote areas have certain specificity. Namely: costs of living are lower and the opportunities are numerous. As home ownership is significant for Poles, especially in the context of starting a family, the housing potential of these sending regions may be tempting for the potential returnees. As one young person explained:

> Participant: My life decisions are strongly influenced by the goal of finally being able to buy a flat. Most of my decisions are now more economically driven, so that things like buying a flat or even a car become more attainable. Obviously, without a flat, it could be difficult to start a family. So at this stage of life, I look at things from that perspective. Naturally, a person would want to start a family, but at least for me, in order to do that, I want to have my own flat. It is a kind of stability. And the idea of returning to [home city] is something I am considering mainly because the cost of living would simply be significantly lower.
>
> Moderator: So you would buy a flat in [home city]? Or maybe rent one from your uncle through personal connections, to reduce your monthly living costs, and at the same time have the opportunity to buy something? Am I understanding that correctly?
>
> Participant: Yes, but I am not sure if it would be in [a nearby big city]. It would be either in [a nearby big city] or in [another nearby big city]. I have not really thought through the exact location yet, but I think I would prefer to buy a flat in a bigger city.
>
> Moderator: OK, OK, so this return to [home city] would mainly be to temporarily reduce your cost of living?
>
> Participant: Yes, yes. Unless I end up liking living there on a daily basis, then maybe I would stay, but that is a matter for the future. (MPL06_PL_M23)

As illustrated above, there are limits of attractiveness of these remote areas for younger generations. Nevertheless, house ownership in the context of family plans constitutes an important matter.

Children seem to have the biggest impact on the return decisions. According to the participants of this study, either having them or their education related decisions can significantly influence the decision to return. Sometimes, these important decisions are taken due to children's health as using health services abroad may be more challenging for migrants, especially migrant parents.

For example, one woman from Podlaskie reported returning to use extensive prenatal health care at home:

> At the time when I was leaving, a mild crisis was beginning in the UK. It was widely reported that the situation there was changing. My reason was also a bit different. It was more of a personal matter. Since this is a study, I will say it openly. I had trouble getting pregnant. I did all the tests. It turned out there was also a psychological block. The desire to have a child was so strong that it actually blocked me in some way. So I thought it would be a good moment to just let go of everything, and maybe it would work. And after two years, in fact, there were other factors as well, some very serious health issues, but among other things, that experience somehow released something in me. So I associate that with the move, and I think it helped us in some way. (MPL31_PL_F42)

Other children-health-related decisions included - allegedly wrong diagnosis or issues with communication to the doctors abroad. There were reportedly differences in expectations towards how the treatment should look like and worries that it turns out ineffective:

> Moderator: You mentioned that the doctors have a slightly different approach. Could you explain roughly what you meant?
>
> Participant: Yes, for example, based on my experience with my daughter, doctors there do not notice the problems the child is having. A parent, for instance, can see that something is wrong, that something is going on, but they do not offer suggestions or push things forward. You have to fight for everything yourself, and then the child just continues to grow, and either something gets done or it does not. For example, even things like spinal curvature and so on are seen completely differently in Poland. Polish physiotherapists, for instance, are excellent at identifying all kinds of issues. Over there, nothing has been done so far. And there is also the language barrier, especially when it comes to medical matters. Here, I can communicate more quickly and get things done more easily, you could say, in all these matters. Over there, I am not really able to express myself fully when it comes to medical issues, and I do not fully understand everything either. So that might also be part of the reason why I made this decision. (MPL07_PL_F36)

As this person, who returned due to this specific reason to Poland, explained, the language barrier also played a role.

The most pronounced reasons to return however, concerned children's education. It was reported to us that every stage of formal education, starting with preschool, triggered discussions about returning.

Living transnationally means that there is a decision to make - whether the child will start education abroad or return - or leave, if born abroad, for Poland to be induced in the Polish system. Children are conducive of long-term commitments, as this typical quote from a man working in the Netherlands shows:

> Later, our daughter was born. [...] And she stayed there with us for almost a year. With our daughter, well, let me tell you, at some point we had to make a decision. When it was time for her to start preschool, we had to decide — either Poland or staying there permanently, right? We did not want to cause too much confusion in her mind. And in the end, we realised that it was not really a country that felt friendly to us. So my wife came back, and within a year and a half the house was built, and our daughter started preschool here. (MPL15_PL_M43)

Decision making that concerns children is apparently of a great gravity and makes migrants weigh in other aspects of their living abroad. Even if there were other contributing factors, the education of children proves decisive. Migrants in our study returned at the start of primary school, and in one case left after a child finished high school and let her stay for studies abroad whereas the parents themselves relocated back to the region of their origin. The oldest child in the study who returned aged 16 graduating from a middle school in Germany to start a vocational school in Poland:

> My husband resigned from his job, or rather, not exactly resigned, but arranged to take an unpaid leave. And we made the decision to return. Our son had just finished school, it was a Realschule. He was facing the choice of a new school in Germany, meaning either vocational training or first completing the equivalent of high school. But he was actually the driving force behind our decision, because he really liked it here in Poland. He always has. (MPL18_PL_F53)

Apart from important biographical turning points, like children's education or completing construction, decisions to return were also made due to the aforementioned negative evaluation of the receiving region. We identified several narratives of "too much of diversity" in the western countries cited as an important factor contributing to the return decision. These sentiments intertwined the return stories, but sometimes they were pronounced like in the case of the aforementioned young person born in Germany to a couple that left from Silesia in the 1990' and who started vocational school back in Poland:

> Participant: So it was like this. We were starting to have enough of that flat, of living there. Because, you know, living under one roof with people from different cultures is difficult. Everyone smoked and so on, so there were a lot of unpleasant smells too. But that was not really the issue. It was more the noise and everything else. And the work was hard too.
>
> Moderator: Your parents' work? You were not working?
>
> Participant: No, I was not working. But still, we asked ourselves, do we really want to live here our whole lives and struggle like this? A person needs something out of life too, right? We kind of knew that things would probably not be as easy here as in Germany, but still, we have always felt better here. (MPL14_PL_M18)

Cultural diversity as per this narrative was perceived as burdensome, and inconvenient interactions with neighbors were constructed as tipping points. Other participants explained how they preferred coming back to - as they imagined - a homogeneous country.

It is important to mention that there are also failed returns as there are migrants who can not afford to return alike. Our research recruitment did not specifically target this group, which may be difficult to reach at the sending region. Nevertheless, the participants mentioned their failures to return or unsuccessful attempts by people who they knew. One person who resettled to Silesia recounted a story of his neighbors making a point that one needs to be financially prepared to return:

> For years everyone kept bragging that we would be the next Ireland, but I guess we are not there yet, are we? Several governments promoted the idea that Poland would become the next Ireland, that people would start returning to Poland en masse. I do not know, it seems to me that when people return, it is purely for sentimental reasons, not for economic ones.
>
> Nowadays, with social media, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or whatever, I see a lot of opinions from people who actually regret coming back. [...]
>
> There was this couple, our neighbours. They lived in England and returned to Poland around six or seven years ago. Two kids, two daughters. They started building a house. At first everything seemed fine, they had pounds saved up, everything was in place. But it seems they miscalculated, or maybe they were just overly optimistic. They thought they had enough resources, would use those, and earn the rest here.
>
> But you really need to be aware of how earnings and spending look here. When we moved back to Poland, we did the math. We would not have taken that step if we had not been absolutely sure that we could afford what we were building here. If I had to take out a loan, first of all, I would not get one because I have no work history here. And second, I would not be able to sleep at night with the stress. So I simply would not have done it.
>
> As for our neighbours, the construction has stopped. The woman started drinking, left [name of the neighbor] here with the kids and went to Germany to try to earn some money to finish the house. They have since divorced. They took out a loan secured by both their family homes, his here and hers in [a village nearby]. Now they are no longer together. He stayed with the children. The house is unfinished, the loan was being disbursed in stages, the bank has stopped releasing funds, and now there is deep disappointment. (MPL20_PL_M42)

Pointing to stark differences in wages or work opportunities as well as reportedly social media narratives about return, this man juxtaposes his success story built on cautious calculation and preparations with an alleged failure of a family in an unfinished house he pointed to from his window, just across the street.

At the backdrop of this unfortunate story it is important to report the attempts to return other participants told us about, that were not possible to materialize due to different factors that included lack of comparable job offers and earnings as well as spouses' pursuing career goals abroad.

Financial remittances and investments

Apart from the potential to return, migrants can have a significant economical impact on their regions of origin. It is a well established and described fact that migrants ring

financial remittances back to their sending regions. It is no different in the case of this study. Such remarks were almost universally present in the interviews:

> What it gave us was simply a financial boost that allowed us to take a step forward. While most people were just living month to month, those who went abroad were able to support themselves financially, to buy something extra, to develop something, and so on. So in that sense, financially speaking, people are investing here, taking care of their homes. And in most cases, that is only possible because they earn more abroad than they do here. (MPL18_PL_F53)

Likewise, it was typically reported that on the return visits, migrants would spend money due to differences in prices. For example on services, food and household goods:

> It was always like that — spending money, buying things. Holidays, or shopping for Christmas, or even just everyday things. Even when we were going back there, we would do our shopping here because it was cheaper. Everything, even household items like a bigger mattress or something, we would take it all with us. Usually food — mostly Polish food. (*MPL26_PL_F35*)

It is however important to note, that these migrants also notice that the price differences started to flatten. Yet, the salaries - as it was indicated - do not necessarily follow the suite:

> Participant: Let's be honest, most people come back with some savings rather than with debts — though of course that happens too. But if someone returns having made some money, then... Well, now prices in Poland have gone up too. That can be surprising. The prices here really shocked me after I came back, for example. I thought it would be a lot better in terms of cost of living. But it is not.
>
> Moderator: And when you came back, what kind of things were you buying?
>
> Participant: Well, when I returned to this flat, obviously I had to buy things for lunch and so on. One time I went out to get groceries for breakfast, and suddenly fifty zloty was gone. I got maybe three bread rolls, some sausage, a few things... Just a small plastic bag, and that was it. Compared to earnings here, and earnings there — for one hour of work over there, I could buy much more. (MPL25_PL_M29)

Apart from spending on consumer goods, migrants also invest in the regions of the origin, making more significant purchases. The following quotation sums it up, as it shows how the spending objectives would pile up, making the decision to return, both firm and perpetually postponed:

> But the thought was always there that we would return to Poland. That we were earning money because things were constantly moving forward here. Our parents lived here. My father passed away, but my mother is still with us. We were regularly sending money to Poland, and our parents were hiring professionals. We had paving stones laid, put up a fence, and then step by step, the building next to it was going up. We were constantly investing whatever we earned.
>
> We kept our weekly wages for living expenses, for ourselves. And back then, from one week's pay, you could cover a whole month, rent, food, everything. And the rest we could send to Poland. Really, my mother would sometimes say, my God, where do you get all this money from? And we could afford to keep sending money and doing what we had planned, making our dreams come true, one step at a time.
>
> And we always used to say, OK, just the fence and then we are coming back. Just this one more thing. And I will tell you, as things got done, those few months turned into a year, then two, then three. (MPL33_PL_FM_40-45)

Investing in property, very often co-owned by ancestors and to be inhabited, as well as buying and having property constructed are common themes in the interviews. Helping the family out to improve their life conditions was also pronounced:

> You come back and you see that they are getting older. Their health is not quite the same. For example, my dad orders coal for the furnace right when I come home on holiday, so that I can help him bring it in, or even do it all myself. Before, that was never even a topic. He wanted me to come home and just relax. So those were already signs.
>
> Back in 2021, I had already started making some investments. I persuaded them a bit, helped them financially. We got rid of the furnace and installed a heat pump in their house, put solar panels in the back. You know, so that everything could run on its own, without relying on physical effort. (MPL20_PL_M42)

Eventually, investments in construction, as another participant noticed, are also investments in the regional economy. As the goods and services are bought locally, the revenue contributes to the sending region, whereas the money come from abroad:

> We invest all our resources in Poland. I think that is a significant benefit for this region, or for Poland in general. [...] Everyone is investing in some kind of property, or something similar. And of course, when you are building a house, you have to make all sorts of purchases. We do not buy those things in Germany. We buy them in Poland. So the local market benefits from that. (MPL35_PL_F50)

Economic contributions by migrants in the form of cash or investments, constitute obvious benefits for their family members, housing infrastructure in the region as well as the providers of construction services and building materials retailers.

Skill transfer and entrepreneurship

Apart from financial remittances, there is however less tangible contribution that the migrants make when returning to the regions we studied. They include entrepreneurship, language expertise and transfer of skills or know-how.

The most direct nonmonetary, economic contribution we identified was starting a business or moving a venture to the region of origin. As a labor market specialist from the local self government in the Western Pomeranian told us discussing migrants' reasons to return:

> They are tired of the climate there, tired of the society, or they just want to return to their roots. In some cases, they have earned enough money and now want to come back, build their own homes, and start their own businesses. That is the most common scenario. However, it is not a widespread trend, not large in terms of numbers, these are individual cases.
>
> For example, this year, actually, no, last year, we had two people who returned from the UK. Both applied for grants to start their own businesses, and both received them. This year, I know of two people from Norway who did the same. So these are isolated cases. (EPL02_M41)

As explained by this expert, the prevalence is not high, but certainly such a phenomenon exists. Indeed, in the very same location, we were able to talk to a restaurant owner, who after leaving his small town worked in another big city in Poland and later interrupted his career as a chef and left for Iceland to train at some excellent restaurants of the island. Upon return, he reportedly had a clear goal to open his own business:

> It was more like, I had these really great tools I'd managed to work out, and I just decided I wasn't going to keep living the way I had been. All that effort wouldn't have made any sense otherwise. I mean, I could've just gone to the Netherlands, smoked weed, picked tulips, and it would've been the same. What I really wanted was for that whole emigration thing to be a lesson.
>
> And when I came back, I decided I wanted to go back to my family home. Back to my hometown, which is way smaller than any of the bigger cities in Poland. I just wanted to feel that calm again, the kind I also got a taste of in Iceland. So I told myself, I've got these skills and tools, and I'm not going to go work for some restaurant. I felt like all that experience I'd invested in shouldn't go to waste.
>
> So I said, alright, I'll just stick it out for six months working at a bakery. It was winter then. And I had this plan that I'd open my own food truck. (MPL03_PL_M32)

It started with a foodtrack with a local self-government subsidy. At the time of the interview he was running the most highly rated restaurant in the town with a distinctive character and a progressive concept. His foodtrack business grew into a proper restaurant. In the study we also talked to individuals who opened a gluten-free cafe or a car repair shop with high precision tools.

Another instance of entrepreneurship in the remote region is more serendipitous, as the decision was not to start business anew, but to relocate it due to family reasons: stayer parents' health:

> My dad got really sick and needed urgent heart surgery. We happened to be on vacation in Poland at the time, and I ended up driving around with him to different doctors, including in the regional capital. It turned out that either he'd have surgery within a month or he wouldn't make it through the summer. So my wife and I went back to the Netherlands, I packed up my laptop and whatever else I needed for work, and came back here.
>
> Right where we're sitting now, there used to be an old barn and my grandma's house. While my dad was recovering from the surgery, and then spending a month in a rehab center, I sorted out the paperwork, had the buildings torn down, and got things moving. My wife and I worked on the house design together.
>
> In October 2022, we left the Netherlands for good and came back to Poland. A month later, in November, we broke ground on the new house. Not quite two years later, we managed to move in, and this is where we live now. I moved my one-person business from the Netherlands to Poland, registered it here, and that's what I do for work now. (MPL20_PL_M42)

In this case, this person is in the migration infrastructures sector having gone through the ranks of a Dutch company and eventually starting doing business with them. He used his migration experiences to make a living.

Other uses of migration experience for business purposes include the utilization of the language of the region where people would stay, work and pick it up. Examples of such an application of this fundamental skill included returns to the West Pomerania for a Danish company work:

> A company opened here as part of the wood industry cluster, it's a Danish business called [company name]. They're in the furniture sector, making components like cabinets, desks, that kind of stuff. And there were actually a few people who came back from Denmark, from that same company, and started working at the local branch here in [local town]. They were Polish. They'd gone abroad, but then they came back. And yeah, they ended up taking the job here. These are mostly people from around here. It's usually locals who come back, people originally from this region. (EPL02_M41)

Throughout the study we heard some other cases of the use of language - eg. as a teacher. For example, this person worked as an accountant in a German company that closed during the Covid pandemics. After they came back to their region, she casually checked job offers and applied for the one that required German language.

> We were just thinking, like, it'll work out somehow, right? Like, we'll find something for sure. And actually, the next day after we arrived, I checked the internet and saw that they were looking for someone with German here in [town]. I applied right away, we set up an interview, and within a month I started working. So we got here in August, and I started the job on the first of September. (MPL18_PL_F53)

Language is certainly an asset of migrants who return to the region. It is seldom as needed as in the case outlined above, but it constitutes the fundamental skill many bring back to the region of origin upon return.

Linguistic skills are by far not the only competences that return migrants can remit back to the regions of origin. Often, even manual or low skilled labor produces new skills, work organization or ethics perspectives and experiences. As discussed in the section above about reskilling, some of the skills can be formally certified:

> Participant: For example, I got certified on this lifting machine with forks, that's what they trained me on. Now I'm waiting, supposedly there'll be an opportunity to get certified on a forklift. Technically, I'm not sure if I should say this, I already drive one, but without a license for now. I'm just waiting, the company's supposed to organize the course and training.
>
> Moderator: And that's at the workplace?
>
> Participant: Yeah, right there in the warehouse.
>
> Moderator: Do they pay for it, or do you?
>
> Participant: They pay for it.
>
> Moderator: But you get to keep the papers, right? So if you change jobs, you'll already have that.
>
> Participant: Yeah, exactly. I already got one certificate actually, for a machine called a "spiderman." (MPL23_PL_M27)

For a curious observer, working in seemingly lowskilled jobs can also open an opportunity to learn and observe: the technology, organization of work or management styles. As one of the younger participants recalled from his seasonal experiences, he would observe how the farm we was working on operated:

> Participant: I was looking at how the work in the fields was organized, how everything was synced up. Like, while they were planting one type of tree, they were uprooting another. It all worked together in this kind of perfectly planned way. You could really see it. They had tons of fields. I think that guy was one of the biggest landowners in that region. And there were really a few dozen fields to manage.
>
> I got to watch a bit, like through the window, how things looked in their office. How they organized the layout of the fields. I learned how advanced it all is, technology-wise. They had tractors that could literally drive themselves, the routes were GPS-programmed. It was all pretty complex.
>
> Moderator: Were you doing that just out of curiosity, or...?
>
> Participant: Out of curiosity, pure curiosity. I always imagine stuff like, what if we implemented that in Poland, you know? And when it comes to comparing the Polish countryside to the Danish one, I think, well, I haven't really been around the Polish countryside for a while, but I feel like over there, it's a lot more advanced. (MPL06_PL_M23)

This kind of potential knowledge and know-how transfer requires specific attention and reflexivity, but due to the downskilled nature of many migratory experiences, may be attainable for Polish migrants.

Soft skills, or less direct transfers of knowledge or work ethics were not seldom discussed by our interviewees. For example, relations with clients were reportedly adapted as an

aftermath of migration. As a woman told us, who had a career in automotive industry in the UK together with her husband before they opened a car repair shop in the West Pomeranian, they invest in the a welcoming and a cozy atmosphere, beyond the mere technical service they provide:

> I focus mostly on the whole atmosphere around the company. So, I try to keep things clean and organized, make sure the reception looks nice, so that when a customer comes in, they can have a coffee, and it doesn't feel like some typical backstreet garage. I want the customer to feel comfortable. I try to talk to everyone once they arrive. We're always smiling, friendly to everyone. I don't even know if you can call that a "standard." To me, it just seems like a basic standard these days. We're aware, we're educated, we know how things should look. And honestly, I think at this point, it would just be kind of inappropriate to behave any other way. (MPL10_PL_F40)

In a similar vein, but in the gastronomy sector, an aspiring chef brought a concept of an open kitchen to a small town in the north of Poland. His learning experience he had in Iceland allowed him to replicate the whole philosophy behind the concept. As he explained to us:

> Since I spent about 14 hours a day basically in front of guests, dressed up in a suit and tie, with all the elegance, class, and manners, I managed to carry that into my own place. The way you behave, the awareness that someone is always watching you, even when you're just preparing a meal, or how you express yourself, all of that. It's a great kind of discipline and learning experience. Most of all, it taught me hospitality. And that openness really helped shape the place I managed to create.
>
> Also, since I have students here from the local school, I want to show them that work ethic really matters. The rules, the way you do things, even slicing an onion or whatever else, it should be done as if it's a kind of art. You do it properly, with care, with attention to aesthetics, because people are watching, and it has to come across as convincing. So what we try to teach here is also about building self-confidence. (MPL03_PL_M32)

Importantly, this excerpt suggests that the transfer of this particular innovation is not limited to the newly opened restaurant, but is actively spread further as the chef provides training to the local vocational school.

Overall, as confirmed by the observations from the local labor market expert, some return migrants do bring back skills and work experience to the region. Supposedly, their professional experience is turned into entrepreneurship, as some recreate their professions on their own:

> The people I know who came back mostly started their own businesses. For example, if they ran some kind of business abroad, now they're doing the same thing here. Car mechanics, construction work, or more broadly speaking, marketing. Some of them bring things like public relations or social media management from the West, and that kind of business doesn't depend on location. I can run it from anywhere. They come back here because their parents are here, they start companies, and they keep working for clients they met, say, in the UK, or find some local ones. So they're also working online. COVID made a lot of things move online too, so that's part of it. (EPL02_M41)

Important to note, for some the relocation is possible due to the remote nature of work. Among the return migrants in the study, we did have three cases of such remote work for clients who they acquired prior to the comeback.

Not all attempts at transferring the skills or business ideas are successful though. We collected stories of ideas that never materialized or businesses that simply failed. For example, an architect who left for the US and did not make it there, inspired by the experiences abroad intended to reskill upon return in the early 2000's and start a pastry business:

> Related to how my husband and my profession really constrained me. When I came back from the States, I thought I'd do something different. Things didn't work out over there, so I figured they might not work out here either. I thought I'd make muffins, which at the time weren't really a thing in Poland, not like now when there's all sorts of amazing stuff available. And he told me absolutely not, that he wouldn't agree to it at all. That I didn't finish that kind of school just to end up in the kitchen making cupcakes. Even though I probably could've made way more money doing that back then. But he didn't let me. (MPL32_PL_F50)

Seemingly a rational solution given the lack of market demand for architects in her small hometown (she eventually became a clerk responsible for spatial planning), the idea to transfer an innovation, yet below her educational level, was discouraged by her husband.

Return entrepreneurship does not automatically lead to success. A wife of a man who keeps working in Germany after she had returned with children years ago to a Western Pomeranian town told us a story of a failed business start-up:

> So we came back with the thought that we were really coming back, and we had a bit of money saved. My husband wanted something, I don't quite remember how it was, but I think we were considering buying a plot of land, maybe a house. But we didn't have enough to cover the whole thing, so maybe something smaller. Honestly, we didn't really know what to invest that money in. And then, I'm not sure, maybe that's when he started trying to set up some kind of business, but I think it didn't really work out. There was always something, something came up. In the end, we were basically left with nothing, and he had to go abroad again. (MPL35_PL_F50)

Migrants returning to remote regions very often transfer their skills, competences and gained experience in the form of small entrepreneurship. They come back resourceful and skillful, which does not automatically mean they are efficient business planners and administrators.

We also identified challenges related to the recognition of skills acquired abroad upon return. Due to discrepancies in the recognition of educational outcomes, four years of incomplete vocational education in Sweden proved to be unacknowledged within the Polish educational system:

> Moderator: You finished secondary school, and also – what kind of school was it, the nursing one? But you did not complete it, only...
>
> Participant: I did not finish it. In general, I did not finish it there, but when I wanted to complete it in Poland, they told me the law had changed in Poland, I do not know exactly what it was, and they could only recognise it as a healthcare assistant qualification. So I could not just complete it, I would have had to start those four years over again. But with the documents and qualifications I now have, they can only classify me as a healthcare assistant.
>
> Moderator: And what do you think about that?
>
> Participant: Well, I do not want to use a bad word.
>
> Moderator: You can use whatever bad word you like, or a nicer one too, whatever you prefer, really.
>
> Participant: Well, it is a bit unfair, is it not? For young people who have started something and then do not have the option to finish it, the state itself is saying no. (MPL26_PL_F35)

There are different types of skills remitted back with people who migrate, of which many are channeled through entrepreneurship. In specific cases, issues with recognition may inhibit the transfer of new competences. Nevertheless, as per our interviews, there are competencies - from hard and certified, like language or forklift license to soft and almost intangible like work ethics or philosophy that people who migrate potentially bring to their home regions.

Social remittances

Outside of the core economic contributions, either monetary or in skills, migrants also can bring back attitudes and social innovations that may further resonate in the community (Meyer and Ströhle 2023). Whether or not migrants, including return migrants can actually remit these values or patterns of behavior, remains unclear - yet we were able to identify areas such as: ecological consciousness, healthy lifestyle, fair rules or safe driving. It must be noted that the majority of people we talked to in the Polish vulnerable regions were not able to produce a reflection of what they might have picked up or how they may have been transformed by the migratory experience. Conducive to reflexivity, this may also be in line with the degree of social isolation and focus solely on work, that not many would consider themselves as agents of change.

Nevertheless, some reported changing attitudes in the area of ecological consciousness. Discussing food, air pollution or waste segregation, they explained how leaving abroad influenced their change of views:

> In Germany, they really prioritize ecology, and you can feel the difference in air quality. Our town here, compared to a much bigger city over there, felt both nicer and cleaner. I used to buy a lot of organic food too, and even though I only worked part-time and my husband didn't earn much as an electrician, we could still afford it if we gave up a few things. Here, the prices are just, I don't know, kind of outrageous. And you only really find those kinds of shops in [city nearby], and they're tiny. When I go to buy meat now, I keep wondering what kind of meat it really is, especially after hearing all the scandals on the news. I don't know whether it's better to buy from a small butcher or just get it at Lidl. These are the kinds of everyday dilemmas I have. They might seem trivial, but in this sense, I felt better cared for in Germany. (MPL17_PL_F42)

This quote highlights the difficulty of making the difference at the consumer's end. Sustainable food is considerably more expensive in Poland and despite an apparent change of attitude, the circumstances may not allow for a change at the origin region.

An interesting observation was made by a senior citizen who had a recent seasonal experience in a greenhouse in the Netherlands. She spoke about how the discipline in the common living spaces may have influenced the way people keep their homes tidy and segregate waste:

> You know what, you can still really see the difference when people come back, because a lot of them do, they go abroad, renovate their apartments, or help out their kids. It really makes a difference. And I can see it in how people behave too. Even something simple, like sorting out the rubbish, people really do that over there. Or keeping the apartment tidy, because inspections happen, they come and check things. It really teaches people something. You start realizing that you need to make your bed in the morning, because someone might come check. Or with clothes or whatever else. So I really think all of that pays off in the long run. (MPL22_PL_F65)

Some persons reported changes in their lifestyles that allegedly improve their health. One such example was a return migrant from Germany, who told us about getting the stares from local people due to their alleged different values attached to spending leisure time:

> We still go on these long walks with our walking stöcke, nordic walking, and people look at us like they think we've got nothing better to do, since they see us out there pretty much every day. That's what I imagine they think, because whether it's Saturday or bad weather, we still go. But I notice that here, people seem more focused on their homes. Everything has to be spotless, everything has to be just right, but when it comes to their health or taking time for recreation or physical activity, that seems to come second. (MPL18_PL_F53)

Addressing a broader problem of (not) caring about one's health in the community, she was unsure if their example can make a difference.

A different example of transferring of patterns of behavior came from a woman whose ex husband and son are truck drivers in Sweden. They apparently drive safer than prior to their migratory experience, habitually applying the rule they picked up there:

> Moderator: And do you think that when your former husband or your son go over there, they pick up any of the habits from there? Or is that not really possible when you're driving a truck?
>
> Participant: No, they do pick up habits. Like safety at every pedestrian crossing. That wasn't really a thing when he was still in Poland, but I've noticed that now he always stops at every crosswalk. That's a habit from Sweden, it's mandatory there.
>
> Moderator: So even when they're here, driving a regular car, they still...
>
> Participant: Yes, they still stop at every crosswalk, because it's the rule over there. And they've just picked it up. It doesn't matter if someone just walks up, they stop. Even if the person is still a bit away from the crosswalk, they'll stop anyway. It's just become a habit, right?
>
> Moderator: Is that good or bad?
>
> Participant: It's good, actually. They've really taken it on. And also, speeding isn't really a thing for them either. That too has sort of become second nature. Yeah.
>
> (MPL09_PL_F52)

Stopping at the crossing is also mandatory in Poland, but as this quotation suggests, it is not necessarily commonly internalized. This is why this woman interprets it as an adapted concept, also rating it a positive change.

It is not easy to detect social change in an interview as it requires a degree of reflexivity on the part of the participant. It is especially true when it comes to elusive or intangible qualities like kindness. A return migrant from the UK reflected upon interactions she had in public spaces, noticing a pattern:

> Recently at [energy company], I was switching an invoice from my company to my husband's, and I walked into [energy company] at five to five. It turned out they closed at five, and I noticed the lady had already locked the door. I said, "Oh gosh, I'm so sorry, I didn't realize. Maybe I'll come back tomorrow," and she said, "No, no, because you came in with a smile and you're very kind, I'll help you." And at the employment office once, I heard the same thing. They helped me because I came to ask, not demand. I walked in with a smile, and I think I actually picked that up in England. [...] Even now, when I go to a wholesaler or wherever, I buy something and I pay, I say, "Goodbye, have a nice weekend," and a few times people have asked me if I just came back from abroad or if I had lived somewhere outside of Poland. Wishing someone a nice weekend was seen as something a bit unusual. (MPL10_PL_F40)

She claimed to have observed and adapted this polite way of being while living in the UK. According to her, being kind prompted questions about whether she came from abroad, an indication that kindness is not necessarily a norm here.

We also identified possible social remittances in the area of childcare and upbringing. A parent who recently returned from Sweden, discussed many differences she notices

comparing herself to fellow Polish parents. One such area would be nutrition. In her case it is the attitude that remained unchanged, but the behavior altered due to the circumstances:

> I try to dress my kids for comfort, not for looks. I explain to them that they'll feel better that way, and that's what matters. [...] The kids also eat differently now. It's tough, because when they're sitting with their grandparents and there's meat on their plates, while I've got fish, of course they'll go for the meat. That's hard for me sometimes. Overall, what can I say, that Scandinavian lifestyle, I can't change it. [...] Like I said, the lifestyle was different, definitely different. The kids used to get sweets once a week, we had that Swedish candy day, we'd go to the store, they'd pick something for themselves. Unfortunately, we don't really do that here anymore. (MPL26_PL_F35)

As with the first example of sustainable food buying, healthy eating patterns may be transmitted, but also can be eventually abandoned upon return. It prompts a question whether the regions have capacity to absorb migrants as potential agents of change.

Last, but not least, connected to the aforementioned reluctance to diversity expressed by some migrants, we also noted a backlash. In some cases, the migrants can be adversaries of change, picking up values selectively or entirely backlashing. The same person who told us about conscious food shopping, expressed a set of conservative views on family structure:

> I hope that things will improve a bit when it comes to ecology too, that it will catch on. But when it comes to morality, I'm not so sure. There are a lot of divorces. I see a lot of second marriages, kids that are kind of mine, yours, ours. It feels like the family structure is kind of falling apart here in Poland. But then again, that's more of a global thing, with the internet and everything. It's like family is no longer seen as such a core value. It's becoming less and less important. (MPL17_PL_F42)

Her other reservations concerned progressive catholicism in Germany or scepticism about migrants from non european backgrounds. It demonstrates how the transmission of values may be selective.

Migration capital and personal development of (return) migrants

Scrutinizing the micro level of individuals who migrate, one can also analyze gains migration enables to the mobile individuals. These individual accumulations may be in turn utilized for the benefit of the region. Looking through the lens of migration or mobility capital helps illuminate how the migratory experience as such can be converted into personal development (Saksela-Bergholm et al. 2019).

Firstly, migrants often exhibit a high degree of mobility preparedness. They may have additional plans in place, alternative options abroad should local opportunities fall through, and a range of potential destinations they are prepared to consider:

> I'm staying until the end of the year. I hope that in January I'll either get myself together or simply pack up again, because that's what my life looks like – it's very spontaneous. I'll just pack and go somewhere again. This time on my own. So it might be a bit harder, but I already have some experience, so… (MPL05_PL_F23)

This is also associated with practical knowledge of how to travel, pay abroad and other mobility experience related skills. They are arguably connected to another feature that can be tied to the migration capital, namely, an openness to experience. One person who migrated to the US following her father, recounted observing him constantly challenging himself and searching for the new and unknown:

> But I could observe that my dad was working, and even today, in the way I go about things, I sometimes think of my dad who went out into the big world, right. And he did really well there. He wasn't afraid of many things. So why should I be afraid to take on certain challenges here. There were many observations like that, for example, and I even talk about it, that they were saving money, but not in a way where, you know, he was the kind of person who liked to try different things, my dad. And it wasn't like he went looking for the cheapest chicken in the store. I know it sounds a bit funny. He tried new things, tasted different foods, he had no problem spending money on something nice. He made use of what was available in the moment. It wasn't about just saving everything and stuffing it in a sock. (MPL32_PL_F50)

Such experiences, especially in interpersonal relations, are also reflexively processed. A young person working with international clients now, told us that based on his encounters in Scandinavia during his seasonal spells, he is now able to adjust the register of business conversation to the expected interaction style:

> I know, or maybe I just realize, that they are a bit more relaxed in business relations, that there's none of that formality like in Polish B2B, where you have to address someone as "dear sir," but over there, they're more on a first-name basis, and you can really notice that. They're more easygoing. For example, I had the chance to talk to a guy from Finland, and he really was calm, no tension at all — we just had a few conversations, and that was it. I actually expected it to be like that. If I hadn't gotten to know those cultures, I probably wouldn't have expected it and would have been more stressed out. (MPL06_PL_M23)

According to the study participants, also generic features were gained through migration, like self efficiency, self confidence or interpersonal skills. As one of the participants from Podparpackie explained based on her experiences in Italy:

> Well, I had to earn something, and I had these options, either I'd just sit around, or I'd go somewhere, meet someone, something would happen, something would be going on. I didn't want to just sit there, you know, because I could always go work at a bakery or in a shop if I wanted, that was always an option. But once you go abroad, and you can see it in people, once someone leaves the country even once, they gain a kind of confidence. Especially if you go to the same place again and already know people, the whole community. Those Italians are really friendly, everyone says ciao, asks how you're doing, and so on. A lot of Poles used to work there, too. And overall, yeah, it was really nice. (MPL24_PL_F38)

Migration equips not only active migrants, but also those who stay behind. For example, a woman who raised her sons while her husband worked abroad, admitted that she was

forced to learn household reparation basics that used to be traditionally performed by men in Poland:

> I said, come on, I taught them both how to cook, they know how, and I told them they'll be cooking for their mother when she's old, right? I taught them all those practical things, because back in my day, you had to do everything — fix an outlet, replace a pipe, all those things, do it yourself — so I taught them all of that. Because my husband, well, he was never around, so who else was going to do it? (MPL09_PL_F52)

For her the absence of the male counterpart created an opportunity to deny established gender roles and furthermore, teach traditionally cross-gender competences, like cooking, to her sons.

Migration capital is valued by migrants, when making working conceptualizations. They associate it with independence and openness to experience. One person declared that she intends to be passing the migration capital to her daughter:

> I'll be encouraging my daughter to go abroad as well, and I think she'll be on board with it and go without hesitation. I would never want her to be dependent, you know? You have to go, experience a different culture, meet new people, learn how to handle different situations, find your way through them. Sometimes, you know, you just need to have your own mind. I had a lot of those moments myself. (MPL24_PL_F38)

People who migrate derive generic skills and attitudes from the very experience. This migration capital is both difficult to grasp and potentially valuable. Regional recognition of such capital and ways of converting and channeling it to the community may be key ways of benefiting from migrant returns.

Social capital

Apart from skills and competences, people who migrate also acquire acquaintances creating networks. They may offer access to resources, like housing and jobs, as well as support (White & Ryan, 2008). Typically created exclusively within diaspora, these are especially valuable during mobility, when anchoring in the receiving society is not extensive. According to our study, migration social capital is also activated when migrants return to their origin regions.

Transnational ties are cultivated with visits back to the migration destination, the networks may comprise family or friends. The networks are reportedly meaningful and can be reinforced also with important rituals, like wedding or baptism:

> But since our daughter is still there, we travel often. We try to go every three months, either we fly over or she comes here. So when we go, we already know they're waiting for us, they know where we'll be, so we meet up. It's nice to know that someone is always waiting for you somewhere. Just yesterday some friends called to say their second daughter was born this April, and they're baptising her on July 23rd. They asked me to be the godmother, so that was really lovely, very touching, that people we met there still trust us like that. We've already moved back, we only meet occasionally, and yet they still have that kind of trust to ask me to take on such a role. (MPL10_PL_F40)

Simultaneously, these migration networks comprise Polish migrants of whom some also return to the country. Through this process, the returnees inherit an extensive network of acquaintances nationally. This same return migrant from the UK, was able to list many friends scattered around the whole Poland:

> In the meantime, we met some great people, and some of them also returned to Poland, which makes us happy, because now we have friends in [city 1], we have friends near [city 2], we have some in [city 3]. In a few months, we'll have friends near [city 4] as well. One group of our friends is now near [city 5]. A friend from my very first job, whom I met back in 2007, is coming back.

These latent networks of trusted connections can be activated. For example, a businessman who relocated from the Netherlands to a small village in Silesia told us how she hired a former colleague whom he trusts:

> I have an office in [city], and I'll tell you this, the office stands empty, because [name], who works for me, has two children. [Her partner's name], even though they returned to Poland even earlier than we did, is still working for the same Dutch company he worked for when they moved to Poland, except now he works remotely from home. [...] And since I have the kind of job I have, and [name] has two kids, why should I ask her to go into the office in [city], when honestly, tell me how many people walk in from the street nowadays looking for a job? Everything happens online. Signing documents happens online. I told her, "[Name], if it works for you to do this from home, I have absolutely no problem with it." She can go to school, go to preschool, the job gets done, and the rest doesn't concern me. We really have a very relaxed arrangement. I'm glad she works for me, because I knew her — she was the first person who came to mind. I trust her so much that I'm completely at ease.
>
> Moderator: And you worked with her in the Netherlands, right?
>
> Respondent: I worked with her. She started as a regular employee. I was the coordinator, and she worked in the same place as [wife's name], then in [company], and then she got promoted and worked in our office as an assistant to the account manager. And then later, [name] was born, then [name]. And when I first met [name], maybe a year or two later she told us, "I really want to have a Dutch husband, but I want to live in Poland." And she made it happen. (MPL20_PL_M42)

This long description demonstrates a deep and cordial relationship (knowing the name of the husband, names of the children) and a history of cooperation, where he derives the trust from. Return migrant networks can be vast and high quality relationships that can be activated when needed. As such, they also constitute the capital of the regions that are otherwise remote and do not present many opportunities for networking.

Evaluation of the origin

In order to understand how migrants, and especially return migrants may contribute to their regions of origin, it is also important to make an assessment of these localities as perceived by people who migrated from there and possibly returned. The comparisons with the situation abroad are inevitable, so the sending regions are assessed on the backdrop of their western counterparts by migrants. Additionally, the regions are evaluated in time - moment of departure being the reference point.

Transformations in the origin

When asked how the regions changed over time, migrants referred to Poland as such, such as the general economic situation, costs of living or development of infrastructure such as roads or buildings. According to the study participants, Poland has changed profoundly. As this person who first left in the mid 1990' admitted, the gap between Poland and Germany, where her husband still resides, is insignificant now:

> When I left, there was a big difference between Poland and Germany. Even simple things — now we have everything, but back then, even just going into a store, you could see how much we lacked. Now, there's no difference at all. Now, Germans come and are surprised, they're honestly shocked. There are many Germans who still believe we live in thatched-roof cottages, unfortunately. (MPL35_PL_F50)

She validated her observation with reported reactions of Germans, who are allegedly surprised with how Poland developed in general.

Other participants observed the developments in salaries, job offers, industry and infrastructure. Many people who commute on the shuttle basis reported much better roads that enable them comfortable rides to work and back home. The development of the regions of migrant origins was universally acknowledged and praised.

Perceived downsides of the origin

Despite the positive perception of progressive economic transformations, and generalized optimistic view of Poland and the regions, when assessing their particular situation, migrants in our study referred to economic downgrade after return, few jobs available to them, local people's attitude, bureaucracy and pollution.

Notwithstanding economic growth, the salary gap experienced after return is rendered "drastic":

> Financially, there is a huge difference. If we were to convert our earnings from the UK to what we now make here, the gap would be drastic. Back there, we were sometimes able to save more in a single month than we now earn monthly. But we don't convert pounds into złoty, because we know it would drive us crazy. (MPL10_PL_F40)

It can be interpreted that one has to afford to come back. This particular family reportedly achieved their economic goals and aspirations. They own a house in the UK, where their adult daughter now resides and they were able to use savings to invest in a house and a car repair shop where they now run their own business.

To illustrate the salary gap one can cite a mother of a driver working in Scandinavia. Even if factually exaggerated, the perception of difference is key:

> Moderator: So why do people leave?
>
> Participant: To earn money. Because you can't earn as much here as you can there.
>
> Moderator: So what happens when they come back?
>
> Participant: Well, alright, here the most you can earn is, say, 8–9 thousand, unless you're some kind of banker or a company director. But my son, for example, gets 19,000 [PLN] net. And what? He only works two weeks, then two weeks at home. Right? So anyone would go for that, wouldn't they? (MPL09_PL_F52)

This further extends the discussion about the disadvantages of the sending regions' labor markets. Reportedly, the job supply is limited and does not resonate with the youth well. People of the younger generations tend to search for their options outside of the region that offers two possibilities: one factory and an army unit.

> Mhm, it is a very serious issue because, honestly, the scale at which people are leaving for the Netherlands, and not just the Netherlands, but also Belgium and Germany, is huge. I personally have plenty of friends from this town, people my age, even younger, who are going there for various reasons: studies, education, work. I could name dozens, even several dozen people I know who are now in the Netherlands. The outmigration of young people is definitely not a good thing, because we are talking about healthy, working hands, right? Maybe if a few more warehouses or companies were opened here, people would not be leaving like that. Maybe then they would be paying taxes here, not in the Netherlands. In the long-term perspective, it would actually be better if they stayed and worked here. But the problem is, there is hardly any work around. There is just one factory in [town] and a military unit. So you have two options: if someone does not want to join the army, they go to the factory, or they leave for a bigger city in Poland. (MPL23_PL_M27)

A return migrant from Sweden who followed her husband reported being unemployed having searched for jobs and volunteering at a military service to keep herself occupied:

> Right now, I am unemployed, ever since I returned from Sweden. I came back from Sweden and have been looking for a job. To avoid falling into depression, I signed up for the Territorial Defence Forces here, just to keep myself occupied. Life in Poland felt a bit overwhelming after the return, so my first initiative upon coming back was to enlist in the voluntary military service. I really enjoyed it, but at the same time I was searching for a job, and in Poland it's difficult for employers to hire someone who is in the military, because it involves being away on deployments. Employers simply want someone they can count on to always be available. So, I resigned, and later I had an internship with the police, and now I am currently looking for a job. (MPL26_PL_F35)

These two factors combined: comparably lower salaries and little offers to choose from makes the regional labor market unattractive to people who live in the shuttle arrangements, who spend at home, but earn abroad. Many admitted that they would very much want to return for good, but they can afford taking a basic salary job having reached a certain living standard.

Another downside some participants pointed out considers people's general attitude. Contrasting it with the kindness and openness of locals abroad, some Polish migrants claimed that the compatriots at home are noticeably less kind. Comparing the interactions in the Netherlands to the ones they get are involved in back in Silesia, where they returned because of education of the daughter, a wife of a shuttle migrant said:

> Participant's wife: For three or four years after returning, I still wanted to go back there. I did not want to be here.
>
> Moderator: Why?
>
> Participant's wife: Because people here are mean. Really, here. Life over there is easier, people help each other, there is no envy. I do not know, for example, "you have a flower like that and I do not" – there is no such thing there. We happened to meet really great people, the neighbourhood we lived in was wonderful.
>
> Participant: But it should be added, there were no other Poles there. We were the only Polish family.
>
> Participant's wife: At first, people would not even say hello to us.
>
> Moderator: Why?
>
> Participant's wife: Because Poles had arrived. That was the opinion. But later, when they got to know us a little better, it was really great. (MPL15_PL_M43 wife)

Combined with a boundary making narrative detaching themselves from Polish people, they assessed their current neighbors based on perceived envy. Amidst past experiences of an affirmative reception in a rural Dutch community, Poles are rendered unhelpful. Similar comparisons were made to Danes or Britons and Italians by other participants.

Somewhat hostile reception and bureaucratic culture of the offices is perceived as another downside of the Polish regions. Many people noticed and acknowledged

changes in the positive direction, but still described contacts with local administration and other officials with disappointment:

> Although when we started building our house and I thought I would handle all the paperwork myself, we went to the environmental department in the [city] office because we had to convert the land from green areas, and I spent five minutes there with my father before arguing with all the women working in that department. One of them told us she would not serve us, and the one at the end of the room finally began to assist us. We stopped going there after that. The man who prepared our design took care of it all for us. But ultimately, a great deal has changed in Poland when it comes to communication with people, even those one does not know. (MPL20_PL_M42)

Last, but not least, air pollution was mentioned by some individuals as a serious disadvantage of living again in a Polish region. They blamed local people for not caring about it as well as administrators for not acting upon the fact that many households are still heated with coal stoves:

> What I do not like, and what we perhaps did not fully realise before returning, is that people here still burn coal, and the air quality is very, very poor, at least in this neighbourhood. There is still not much attention paid to it, even though it really has a significant impact on well-being and health. I do not understand why more is not being done in this area. (MPL18_PL_F53)

Taken together, the most serious reservations about the regions of origin from the perspective of returning migrants concerned the similar issues that played a role when they decided to leave: differences in salaries and job opportunities. Allegedly, there are improvements in these areas, but they are yet to meet the expectations.

Perceived advantages of the origin

When returning, either just to visit or as a shuttle migrant, or for good, people produce good reasons to do so, and also justify their choices. When asked about the advantages of their regions of origin, migrants pointed to different quality of life themes, like proximity to nature or slower pace of living, but also to the visual renewal of the architectural landscape as well as the emerging entrepreneurship. Despite the critique of the economy described above, the costs of living – comparably lower - were cited as an important advantage of the Polish regions.

By the virtue of being remote, sparsely populated and essentially rural, the regions we studied were appreciated because of the proximity to the natural environment.

> Participant: It was what it was, we made the decision and came back, because we are now settled in a nice place. We have a lake nearby, which we missed, we have a forest, we go there with the dogs or take our bikes. On Sundays we visit one set of parents or the other. That is what we wanted, what we missed, and now we have it. Life feels different. I think we live more peacefully here.
>
> Moderator: In a good or bad sense of the word?
>
> Participant: In a good sense. We no longer have the pressure we used to feel. Perhaps if we had not had such a highly responsible job, we would not see the contrast so clearly, but because the job was so demanding, we feel that life here is calmer. I think our life here feels more natural, because we live in a pleasant place and we now have all the things we missed during those years abroad. Every holiday we would come back here just to go to the lake, to go for a walk, or take a bike ride. We enjoy the fact, for example, that our parents can come over with lunch, that my father can bring fresh eggs from his chickens, or that my mother-in-law brings vegetables from her garden. So yes, life is more peaceful and more natural here. (MPL10_PL_F40)

The associations with "natural" life in a broader sense, including riding bikes, having homemade food, contributed to the perception of these areas as peaceful oasis. Comparisons were made to big-city intensity and pressure:

> Overall, it is also comfortable enough for me that I would not want to feel that big-city rush, that constant hustle. I prefer this kind of freedom, where everything is close by and that means I can just show up, do my thing, and I do not have to spend hours stuck in traffic, and that is honestly really nice. (MPL03_PL_M32)

Additionally, some attention was devoted to the fact that the regions improved visually. The architectural landscape in the sheer sense of renovation. Many stories dating back to the 1990' or 2000' revoke decaying facades and unattractive buildings. This has noticeably changed and - according to the narratives we collected - is widely appreciated:

> Now, it has become beautiful. They renovated it, it is truly a very nice town. It used to feel more grey and gloomy to me, back when we used to live there, but now the park, all of it, the roads are renovated—it really is a very nice place. A great deal has changed. (MPL01_PL_F46)

This connects to the general perception of development - investments in facilities, public spheres, hospitals or schools. One participant, who was born in Germany and returned to Silesia with his family, referred to the discourses he would hear from his parents about the pre-transformation landscape:

> Participant: Well, from what my parents said, it was different during the PRL era, right?
>
> Moderator: So why do you think things have improved?
>
> Participant: I think it's because of the European Union. The EU really supported Poland a lot. For example, our school has just built a hall—a hall for repairing agricultural machinery—for 5 million. In the past, I don't think that would have been possible, but now it is, thanks to these funds. (MPL14_PL_M18)

The family stories are supported by first hand observations framed by them. Investments in the public facilities are rated positively and they matter in everyday life experience of the return migrants.

Despite the general disappointment with the economic situation not being up to the expectations as well as general negative views on the local labor markets, some return migrants noticed and appreciated emerging entrepreneurship in her region in Western Pomerania:

> We've always liked [city], but now it's even nicer and more attractive. It seems to me that there are many more opportunities, and some better types of jobs have become available that people have managed to find. More companies have been established, some by our peers or people who finished school with us back in the day, and they're running them quite well. They've managed it all pretty successfully. (MPL10_PL_F40)

Some voices were very enthusiastic, like this one from Silesia, coming from a woman who found job in a matter of days after return:

> One can observe significant progress in terms of the number of companies that are thriving and, as a result, have genuinely achieved wealth. This has come through years of development, and when we used to come here on holiday, I wasn't really aware of it, but now I can see clearly that some of these businesses, which started to do well, have reached a very high level. Previously, we couldn't imagine coming back, mainly because we were afraid that we'd return to the same point we had left — with no opportunities for development, no prospects for earning a living, simply no options at all. That was probably the main reason why thousands of young people from this region left, because there were no opportunities here. Perhaps even ten years ago those opportunities still didn't exist. I'm not exactly sure when things began to change, but I believe it was with Poland's accession to the European Union that these developments really began. (MPL18_PL_F53)

Finally, the lower costs of living were appreciated as an advantage of living in the Polish regions. In comparisons to bigger cities in Poland living in these regions is significantly cheaper, especially in the housing costs:

> Just as I used to completely resist the idea of moving back to my hometown, now I am starting to see some clear upsides, though I think that is mostly true in my case and probably for people who work remotely. When you are earning a remote salary, the option to pay something like a third of what I am paying now in rent and have your family close by, people who can help out in different ways or just be around, starts to look pretty appealing. I mean, it is better to pay 800 złoty than 2,500 a month. So mainly from a financial point of view, I think going back to your hometown does not seem like such a bad idea. (MPL06_PL_M23)

Finally, the economic downgrade is acceptable given the non-materialist gains these regions offer. As one second-generation return migrant put it, the lifestyle can be "richer" despite having less money:

> Not richer when it comes to money, I wouldn't say that, but richer in terms of lifestyle. Because when someone moves out and lives, I mean, in an apartment, and then moves into their own house, it really is better. You've got more space, peace, your own space, your own yard and so on. And we didn't have that there, and that's something we always wanted. (MPL14_PL_M18)

At the backdrop of an exhaustive past in the receiving region, an idea of slowing down, not being bothered by others and being fully in charge of one's life.

Conclusions: What facilitates or hinders contributions to the sending region

If migrants are to contribute to the sending regions, they either remit finances or return. Decision to return is taken when there is a right time - when the migration goals are met or where a decision regarding education of offspring ought to be made. Facilitating returns for migrant children seems a reasonable strategy to foster returns.

Property ownership and development is also associated with returns. Making it easier to run construction remotely and to facilitate the bureaucratic process (rendered one of the major downsides of the sending/returning regions) may help migrants to decide to return.

Skill transfer and return entrepreneurship are potentially significant contributions of migrants from vulnerable regions. Skill recognition and facilitated transfer (e.g. identifying talent and enabling its transmission) may foster contributions to the receiving region.

Similarly, social remittances that include ecological and sustainable mindsets, healthy lifestyles and kindness can be recognized and disseminated in the community.

Also, the migration capital people who migrate acquire through the very movement, that includes generic skills and attitudes like being mobile or open minded,

can be promoted in the community with the use of migrants resourcefulness in this regard.

Some migrants may be well connected transnationally and amidst other returnees in the country. Their networks and trust may be used in favor of the region.

When evaluating their homeland, migrants acknowledge the positive shift over the years, including visual renewal of spaces. They do not appreciate the downgrade in earnings and scarcity of job supply as well as uncivil people, air pollution and overt bureaucracy. Whereas, they appreciate the natural environment of these regions and a slow pace of life associated with it as well as (fellow) entrepreneurs making it in the region. Fostering these positives and mitigating negatives may work towards better engagement of these migrants in the regions.

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