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Polish immigrants in Denmark: From "beetroot girls" to skilled expats

Tracing the historical evolution and current dynamics of Polish migration to Denmark, showing how a once marginal and seasonal workforce has become the country's largest immigrant group, while highlighting ongoing challenges related to labour conditions, circular migration, and long-term integration.

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Introduction

PREMIUM _EU
BENEFITS OF MOBILITY

Polish immigrants in Denmark: From "beetroot girls" to skilled expats

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1. Introduction: state of the art on Polish diaspora studies in Denmark

For many years, the Polish community in Denmark remained somewhat on the margins of migration studies in Poland (Chojnacki, 1977). This was related both to the relatively small size of successive migration waves and to the time intervals between them. As a result, there was a certain discontinuity and limited organizational and institutional interaction between representatives of the so-called "beetroot emigration" and the refugees of the Second World War and the post-war period, as well as political migrants after 1968 and those from the 1980s (the Solidarity migration; cf. Śmigielski, 2022).

The first analyses of the Polish diaspora were produced by Danish scholars. Paradoxically, the pioneer of research on Poles in Denmark was not a Polish academic, but the Danish sociologist George Nellemann, some of whose works were even translated into Polish (1973). Nellemann conducted long-term (lasting 15 years) and extensive survey research (over 2,000 respondents) among the first and second generations of representatives of the beetroot emigration—seasonal workers employed in the harvesting of sugar and fodder beets on the islands of Lolland and Falster, as well as in Jutland and Zealand, many of whom settled permanently after the outbreak of the First World War (Nellemann, 1970).

Among Polish authors, particular attention should be paid to the research of Eugeniusz Kruszewski, a "March 1968"[3] émigré, who devoted his doctoral dissertation (defended at the Polish University Abroad in London in 1975) to the history of the beetroot

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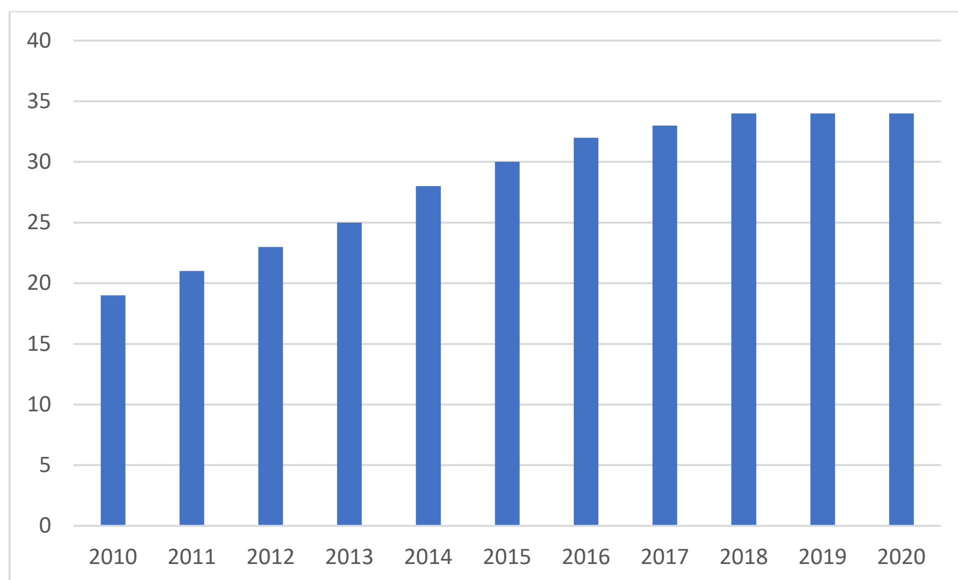
[3] March 1968 emigration was a wave of politically-driven, forced migration to Poland caused by antisemitic policy of Polish communist party (PZPR) in 1968-1972 period. Around 15 thousand Poles of Jewish ethnic origin – mostly intellectuals (academics, artists etc.) were forced to migrate to Israel, but also other countries in Western Europe and the US.

emigration (Later-Chodyłowa, 2012). He later founded the Polish-Scandinavian Institute in Copenhagen (1985) and for decades remained one of the leaders of the Polish community in Denmark (Kruszewski, 2017).

After 1989, Poles in Denmark became the subject of in-depth research by Edward Olszewski, who - besides detailed analyses of the history of the Association of Polish Catholics (Olszewski, 1992) - published a comprehensive monograph summarizing a century of Polish immigrant presence in Denmark (Olszewski, 1993). An important contribution was also made by Elżbieta Later-Chodyłowa, who, in addition to research conducted during the late communist period (1985), wrote a review article summarizing the state of research up to the first decade of the 21st century (Later-Chodyłowa, 2012). One should also mention Roman Śmigielski, an important Polish community activist, who published a historical overview article in Studia Polonijne on the 130th anniversary of the Polish presence in Denmark (2022).

During the most recent major wave of emigration from Poland—the post-accession migration (Grabowska-Lusińska and Okólski, 2009)—Denmark did not attract significant research interest. Exceptions include Piotr Dworzański's article on Polish doctors migrating to Northern Jutland (2016) and Katarzyna Szczygieł's MA thesis on the social navigation of Polish construction workers involved in building Copenhagen's new metro lines opened in 2019 (2019).

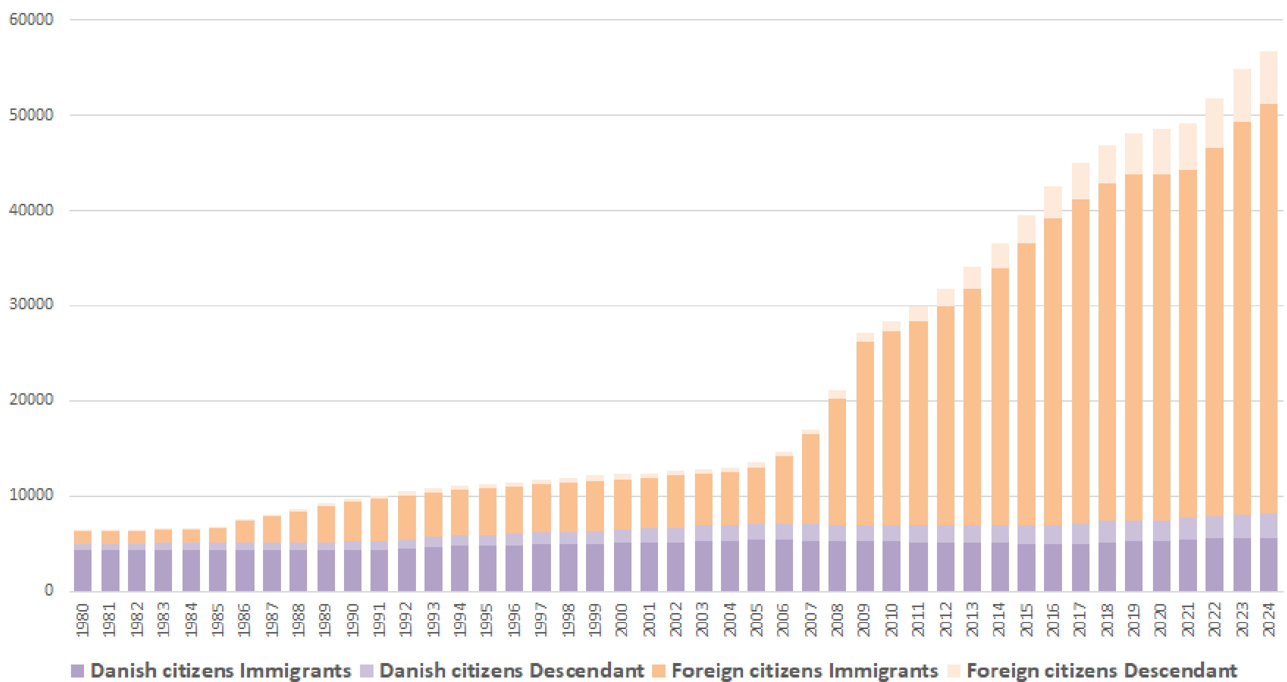
Figure 1. Polish immigrants in Denmark (Statistics Poland estimates)



Source (GUS, 2021)

Additionally, low research interest likely stemmed from Denmark's relatively limited popularity as a destination after 2004. In 2010, the number of temporary Polish emigrants in Denmark was estimated at 19,000, and in 2020 at 34,000 (Figure 1).
However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, Denmark became a more significant destination for Poles. country: in 2023 nearly 47,000 Polish immigrants (i.e. foreign-born persons) resided there (Figure 2).

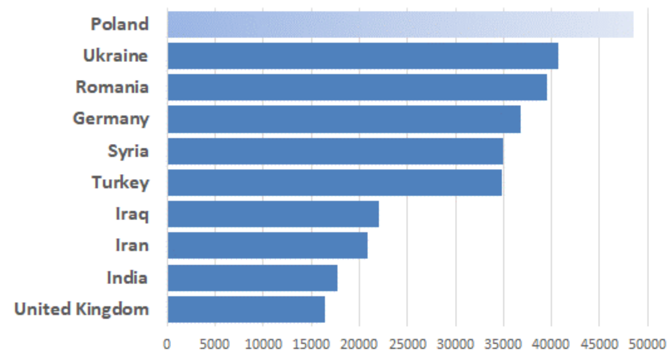
Figure 2. Population of Polish origin by citizenship and ancestry in Denmark in 1980-2024



Source: Danish population register (DST 2024).

As of 1 January 2024, Denmark was home to 56.7 thousand people of Polish origin. Of these, 8.1 thousand held Danish citizenship—5.6 thousand immigrants and 2.5 thousand descendants—accounting for 14% of the Polish-origin population (Figure 1). The remaining 48.6 thousand did not have Danish citizenship (43 thousand immigrants and 5.6 thousand descendants). This represents a substantial increase from roughly 6.5 thousand in 1980, meaning the Polish-origin population in 2024 was about 8.7 times larger than in 1980.

Figure 3. Ten largest foreign origin immigrant groups in Denmark in 2024



Source: Danish population register (DST 2024).

It is important to bear in mind that Denmark is relatively a small country when it comes to population size. Consequently, it is important to put these numbers into relative perspective. In 2024, Denmark hosted 48.6 thousand Polish immigrants, making Poles the largest immigrant group in the country (Figure 3). They were followed by Ukrainians (40.7 thousand), Romanians (39.6 thousand), and Germans (36.8 thousand). Other sizeable groups included immigrants from non-Western countries, notably Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.

The main pull factor for Poles has been the development of the construction sector in Denmark, including major infrastructure investments. In the past, this included the expansion of the Copenhagen metro; currently, it is the Fehmarn Belt tunnel connecting Rødby on the island of Lolland with Puttgarden on the German island of Fehmarn. Approximately 1,500 workers are employed on this massive project, the majority of whom are Poles. Thus, history has come full circle—after 130 years, Lolland has once again become an important destination for Polish migrants.

This working paper aims primarily to present the latest migration processes and the situation of contemporary Polish emigrants in Denmark. We draw both on register data from Statistics Denmark (DST) and qualitative data collected during our team's fieldwork in April 2024 within the PREMIUM_EU project. The chapter is structured as follows: first, we present a brief history of Polish emigration to Denmark. Next, we focus on the most recent post-accession period. The chapter concludes with a discussion of future research perspectives, limitations of our analysis, and recommendations.

2. The History of Polish Emigration to Denmark (1893–2024)

Poles began arriving in Denmark on a larger scale at the end of the 19th century. Due to rapid industrialization, there was growing demand for agricultural labor, particularly

in dairy production and sugar beet harvesting. Danish farmers hired intermediaries who recruited workers from Polish territories, mainly Galicia. Women were preferred due to the nature of the work. It is estimated that between 1893 and 1914 nearly 100,000 seasonal immigrants arrived in Denmark—many multiple times—of whom approximately 75% were women (Śmigielski, 2022). They mainly worked on sugar beet plantations, hence the widely used term "beetroot migration" or "beetroot girls."
Their work was extremely demanding and physically strenuous, involving constant bending. Migrant women lived in labor barracks in sparsely populated rural regions, including Lolland, Falster, Jutland and Zealand (Olszewski, 1993). Particularly in the early period, they were vulnerable to exploitation by intermediaries. Over time, however, socialist trade unions and Catholic priests intervened in their defense, leading to the adoption in 1908 of Denmark's first law regulating immigrant labor: the so-called Polish Act (Polakloven). It guaranteed minimum standards for employment contracts (in both Danish and Polish), minimum wages, accommodation conditions, and even accident and sickness insurance (Nellemann, 1973).

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 caught immigrants by surprise. Denmark remained a neutral country, but the road to their homeland (at that time Poland was under the occupation of Germany, Austria and - in the case of migrants living in Denmark – Russia) was closed. Therefore, most of the "beetroot girls" were forced to remain in Denmark. Many formed relationships with Danish men; due to lack of documentation and their Catholic faith, these unions were often not formalized. Interestingly, to this day the Danish expression "to live in the Polish way" refers to cohabitation without marriage, which is quite an ironic legacy, given the women's religiosity. As early as 1897, St. Bridget's Church in Maribo was established, largely funded by Polish immigrant women (Olszewski, 1993).

After the war, most Polish women settled permanently in Denmark. At that time, a dynamic network of Polish institutions began to develop. These were not only churches and chapels, but also the secular organizations. The first was the Association of Polish Workers, founded in Nakskov in 1925. It quickly expanded, establishing branches in Nykøbing Falster, Maribo, Næstved and Copenhagen. Polish Houses were established in Nakskov (1933), Nykøbing Falster (1934) and Maribo (1936), serving as social and cultural centers (Śmigielski, 2022).

During the Second World War, Denmark was occupied by Germany. Initially, the Polish government-in-exile in London instructed the diaspora not to engage in resistance. However, in 1940 the organization Felicja was formed under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior in London, later transformed into the Secret Polish Organization in Denmark. It gathered intelligence and facilitated escape routes from occupied Poland. In 1944, the organization was dismantled 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 in the Danish resistance cemetery near Copenhagen (Kruszewski, 2016).

After 1945, Polish immigration lost momentum. Post-war arrivals included displaced persons, liberated soldiers and former forced laborers. The community fragmented into two factions—one loyal to the London government and another cooperating with the communist authorities in Poland. The next wave consisted of Polish Jews forced to leave after March 1968 (3–4 thousand persons), followed by the "Solidarity migration" of the 1980s (about 2,000 persons). Although numerically small, this group became organizationally active and assumed leadership roles. Altogether, migration between postwar period of 1945–1989 is estimated at around 10,000 persons (Śmigielski, 2022). In 1980, approximately 6,500 persons of Polish origin lived in Denmark.

After 1989, Denmark did not attract significant Polish migration. Even after EU accession in 2004, Denmark maintained transitional labor market restrictions for A8 citizens, including Poles, until 1 May 2009. One exception were Polish students attracted by favorable study conditions—about 1,900 in 2006 (Money.pl, 2006). After restrictions were lifted, arrivals intensified: by 2010 Polish temporary emigrants numbered about 19,000 (GUS, 2021), while Danish statistics recorded nearly 30,000 persons of Polish origin, 20% belonging to the "old diaspora."

With construction growth—including metro lines M3 and M4—employment in construction rose from 145,000 (2012) to 195,000 (2022). By January 2024, the Polish population reached 56,700, including 8,100 Danish citizens. Many worked in vocational or low-skilled occupations.

Research by Aalborg University's CARMA center found that migrants from new EU member states perform the most demanding and hazardous construction tasks and are often exposed to exploitation (Overgård et al., 2023). Many are employed by Polish

subcontractors, with conditions not always meeting Danish standards (Arnholtz, 2021). During COVID-19, crowded worker hotels contributed to infection spikes.

Our 2024 fieldwork in Copenhagen, Rødby, Nakskov, Haslev, Næstved and Rødbyhavn confirmed similar problems. Unionization among Polish workers remains extremely low, which makes it very hard to effectively secure their working standards and wage arrangements. Many Polish workers in fact could hardly be perceived as long-term immigrants in Denmark. Instead, they adopt a circular migration pattern, which usually includes four weeks of intensive work in Denmark, followed by two weeks in Poland. Such migration strategy is obviously hindering integration, as the interaction between Danes and Poles both in workplace and beyond (during scarce social activities) remains limited.

After Fehmarn Belt tunnel completion, the concrete prefabrication factory in Rødbyhavn is expected to remain in place, which in turns offers economic stability and abundance of relatively well-paid, permanent jobs. This opens a window of opportunity for such places as Lolland, which is a depopulating region. Danish authorities at the local and regional level are fully aware of this opportunity. They had created several initiatives aimed to attract settlement of immigrants and their families. The most notable one is the Lolland International School in Maribo, which offers teaching program in English, as Dannish language remains a serious obstacle in the first stages of adaptation in the country.

Despite their presence, Poles have created relatively few new organizations due to their geographical dispersion. Churches offering Polish-language religious ceremonies, especially St. Anne’s Church in Copenhagen (Petersen, 2024), remain important. The Museum Polish Barracks in Taagerup (est. 1984) preserves the heritage of the beetroot migration and attracts over 1,500 visitors annually (Picture 1).

Picture 1. Polakkasernen Museum in Taagerup

Source: Konrad Pędziwiatr (picture taken during fieldwork in 2024)

Among newer initiatives, the Polish Construction Club within the national union 3F plays an important role. It provides training, raises awareness about the workers right but also encourages socio-cultural integration and the acquisition of Dannish language. It provides also an important social platform for socializing during the picnics and barbecue parties. On the other hand, a Polish restaurant and grocery shop run by new generation of Polish migrants - Polka Cafe in Næstved - serves as another cultural hub, hosting events such as performances by Czesław Mozil[4].

Besides construction workers (ISCO 7, 8, 9) and eldercare workers (ISCO 3), Polish students and skilled professionals—especially scientists—are present, particularly in Copenhagen. The pharmaceutical sector (Novo Nordisk, Leo Pharma, Lundbeck)

[4] Czesław Mozil is a Polish artist, musician and singer. He has spent most of his childhood in Denmark as a child of Polish-Ukrainian immigrants, and then made a considerable artistic and commercial success in Poland.

attracts specialists. Women are slightly more represented among skilled professionals (ISCO 2).

3. Final Conclusions

The Polish diaspora in Denmark has a long history dating back to the 19th century. Its dynamic growth is closely linked to Poland’s EU accession in 2004. The number of Poles increased from just over 10,000 before accession to over 50,000 recently. Many migrants remain invisible in official statistics, due to their circular mobility. They are also not visible in a public sphere, as they came mostly with a focus on work, and live in the proximity of construction sites, often far away from major urban settlements. The actual number of Poles living in working in Denmark may be in fact higher than those displayed in the official statistics. This is also possible due to EU laws, as many of them remain delegated to foreign work by Polish (i.e. registered in Poland) companies.

Continuous inflow of new Polish immigrants increases the survival prospects of older diaspora organizations, though some have reduced their activity or moved them online. Churches offering Polish-language services remain key meeting places, especially during Christmas and Easter, gathering Poles, Polish Danes, and others connected to Poland.

However, their long-term integration prospects remain uncertain. In our study, the majority of respondents demonstrated very limited proficiency in the Danish language. Many openly admitted that they were not motivated to learn Danish, as they perceived their stay in the country as temporary and intended to return to Poland in the future. In addition, numerous participants pointed to a sense of social distance separating them from their Danish colleagues. Among approximately 30 respondents, only two reported maintaining regular contact with Danish friends, co-workers, or neighbours.

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