

THREE GENERATIONS OF POLISH MIGRANTS IN TWO DECADES



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Nearly 20 years after Poland joined the European Union, Poles continue to emigrate, yet the nature of this migration differs considerably from that observed after 1 May 2004.

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The history of Polish emigration has come full circle, with some of today's departures, though fewer in number, echoing those from back before Poland's entry into the European Union. Generally speaking, the past two decades of Polish emigration can be segmented into four distinct periods.

The first officially began on 1 May 2004, with Poland's accession to the EU, but some shrewd individuals had already started moving to the United Kingdom or Ireland, to set up businesses or to be poised "on the starting line" as soon as working without permits became legal. EU accession heralded both a quantitative and qualitative shift in migration from Poland. In 2004, according to the Central Statistical Office, a million people were living abroad temporarily; a few years later, this figure surpassed two million. But it wasn't just the numbers that changed – unusually for migration history, the main destinations and profiles of the emigrants also shifted.

Previously, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the primary destinations for Polish emigrants had been Germany (topping the list) and the United States. These two countries had been vying for the position of the preferred destination for Poles ever since the first major wave of emigration in the nineteenth century. Post-accession, they were surpassed by the United Kingdom, and the transatlantic migration channel

shrunk significantly. Migrants from areas like Mońki in the Polish region of Podlasie, where entire neighborhoods had been built, funded by "greenback" earnings brought back from the US, began to favor the pound or euro. The map of Polish migration expanded to include previously unconsidered countries like Ireland, which, before accession, was liked but seen as an exotic "emerald isle" unreachable by direct flight from Poland. Post-accession, it rose to become the third most popular destination for Polish migrants, after the United Kingdom and Germany.

This shift in preferred migration destinations reflected the fact that the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Sweden granted immediate access to their labor markets for Poles. Moreover, the British Isles were experiencing an economic boom, as highlighted by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in Warsaw just days before the expansion, announcing half a million unfilled jobs in the UK. This, however, was not the sole reason why many chose the UK or Ireland. New opportunities motivated entirely new demographics to emigrate. Before EU accession, those who went abroad for work had primarily been middle-aged, moderately-educated males from smaller towns, often leaving their families behind in Poland. They typically went to Germany (with Italy also being popular among women), and after a few weeks or months, they returned home, only to leave again later. Researchers described this pattern as "incomplete migration" – migrants who did not fully settle in either country and eventually found themselves disconnected from life in both.

London Over New York

The allure of the new post-accession opportunities in the British Isles, on the other hand, drew in young

people irrespective of gender, many of whom were either pursuing higher education or already held degrees. Their aim was not to support a family back in Poland but rather to seek new experiences, immerse themselves in the “mythical West,” master the language, and perhaps put away a sum of money for goals associated with adulthood. Sociological research, such as that reported in the book *Emigracja ostatnia?* [Last Migration?] by Izabela Grabowska and Marek Okólski, indicates that those heading to the United Kingdom and Ireland were generally younger, more likely to be highly educated, and originated from larger cities as compared to those migrating to Germany or the Netherlands. Their departure was often marked by uncertainty about the length of their stay or their next steps – whether to return or perhaps set their sights on yet another, more distant destination. In this initial, overwhelmingly optimistic phase of post-accession migration, researchers noted the indeterminate and liquid nature of people’s migration plans.

The United Kingdom and Ireland replaced the United States as destinations on the map of Polish migration. The vast, multicultural expanse of London offered an easier and more accessible experience than New York, free from the hassles of visas, work

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permits, and costly airfare. Furthermore, the number of Polish students at British universities surged, as being European Union citizens relieved them from having to face high tuition fees. Meanwhile, migration to Germany not only persisted but intensified, as it became possible to offer services despite initial labor market restrictions. The gradual opening up of labor markets in other European countries, such as the Netherlands, Norway, and Iceland (the latter two are not EU members but are part of the European Economic Area), contributed to an increasingly diverse and fluid European migration landscape.

This period of optimism in intra-European migration came to an abrupt halt in 2008, with the onset of the economic crisis affecting many European countries, including the British Isles. This crisis forced some, like those in Ireland’s faltering construction sector, to leave, while others contemplated more long-term decisions: whether to return home or wait out the downturn. Above all, it dampened the enthusiasm of many who had been on the verge of moving to the UK or Ireland.

New Directions in Europe

The end of the crisis in the British Isles and the opening up of German and Austrian labor markets to the “new” EU citizens in 2011 marked the third phase of post-accession migration from Poland. Although emigration from Poland picked up again, it did not reach the intensity of the early post-accession years. Despite a more optimistic outlook in Poland, especially regarding unemployment, Poles continued to notice differences in job quality and employment conditions, such as mandatory health insurance, workplace amenities, and compensated overtime, when comparing Poland with countries like Germany or the Netherlands. While it might be premature to talk about a new “generation” of emigrants after just a decade, this new cohort did harbor somewhat different aspirations. For them, learning languages and interacting with foreigners had become part of everyday life. They ventured to London, and increasingly to Berlin, in search of life experiences, to “find themselves,” and to begin adult life away from their parental homes.

As time passed, many migrants who had left in their twenties as singles transformed into thirty-something parents. Researchers observed a shift towards more stable life projects among them, with a tendency to settle down in their host countries. By 2017, a record 2.54 million Poles were living abroad temporarily, according to the Central Statistical Office. Having children, and particularly their start in the local education system, serves as a strong anchor in a destination country, complicating the decision to return. New generations have emerged: Poles born in Poland but raised abroad (known as “generation 1.5”) and those born outside Poland and raised there (“generation 2.0”). These children naturally integrate into the society and culture of their new home countries, which, unlike for their parents, are the central settings of their everyday lives. Consequently, the commitment of parents to preserve a sense of Polish heritage, language, and culture in succeeding generations takes on added significance. An important role in this is played by Polish schools abroad, where children and teens can study school subjects in Polish to a standard that makes possible their continued education in Poland. However, only a small fraction of Polish children attend these schools abroad, with challenges not just in availability but also in the appeal of the curriculum and the readiness of youth to dedicate time (often weekends) to additional schooling.

Brexit: A Turning Point

Brexit marked another significant milestone in the saga of post-accession migration, with the June 2016 referendum leading Britain to opt out of the European Union. The immediate privileges for Europeans in the



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UK remained unchanged, yet the welcoming atmosphere had already been marred by the anti-immigrant rhetoric. Before the UK's official exit from the EU in 2020, there was a noticeable decline in the Polish population due to both departures and a significant reduction in new arrivals (a trend that affected other EU citizens as well). Furthermore, Brexit's timing alongside the COVID-19 pandemic compounded its impact. A points-based immigration system was introduced, requiring EU citizens to apply for a visa for their first job in the UK, aligning their treatment with that of individuals from other continents. Additionally, tuition fees at British universities escalated to levels comparable to those in the United States, prompting young Poles to reconsider their options across the Atlantic or within the EU, where education costs are considerably lower. Among those who chose to remain in Britain, there was a notable acceleration in purchasing property and acquiring British citizenship.

The relatively low rate of return migration to Poland underscores that post-accession migration was not a fleeting phenomenon but a process leading to permanent resettlement abroad. The longer individuals spend away from Poland, the more challenging the decision to return becomes. Factors driving return migration include homesickness, family members left behind, the high cost of living abroad, unmet expectations, or the completion of a life chapter. Many migrants had initially left without a firm grasp of the language or understanding of the legal, social, and economic context of their destination, often working

in roles below their skill level with limited opportunities for advancement. For some, returning emerged as the most viable path. However, return migration does not always signify a permanent move back. Researcher Anne White has drawn attention to the phenomenon of "double return migration," where individuals who initially left Poland for a trial period return but struggle to reintegrate and eventually choose to migrate again, this time with intentions of permanent settlement elsewhere.

The Brexit referendum is seen by some scholars, including the authors of one of the chapters in the recent book *30 wykładów o migracjach* [30 Lectures on Migrations], as bringing the era of post-accession migration to a symbolic close. While migration from Poland persists, it now occurs on a diminished scale. The demographic profile of current migrants more closely mirrors those from the pre-accession period – typically men with limited education from rural areas and small towns. Nowadays, fewer individuals leave without clear professional or educational objectives. Rarely do those with higher education degrees or ongoing studies accept positions abroad that underutilize their qualifications. Migration from large cities is uncommon unless driven by specific goals, such as further education, internships, or, if financially feasible, a gap year. Poles today are no longer impulsive migrants lured by the prospect of education and employment abroad without adequate preparation. Instead, they are navigating the European migration landscape with greater awareness and intention. ■

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