

Chapter 4. Motives of migration and types of migration – the case of Polish emigrants in Iceland

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In order to analyse the rationale and the main types of Poles' migration to Iceland it is worthwhile to consider the pull-push model of migration movements, since the migration choices of a significant part of the participants result, in fact, from a number of coexisting pull- and push-factors. The latter include a high rate of unemployment and low salaries in the home country or unfavorable economic conditions in general, while the former are as follows: higher earnings, better social benefits, as well as the host country's financial stability (Dorigo, Tobler 1983). Obviously, the decisions to migrate are influenced by a number of variables and the individual choices to leave the country, whether permanently or temporarily, can hardly be explained by means of the simple combination of those two factors. Judging by the example of such countries as Ireland, being one of the destinations of the Polish economic migration in the recent years, it can be assumed that the pull-push factors may become reversed, depending on an improving economic situation in the home country, on the one hand, and on a economic crisis in the host country, on the other (Iglicka 2008).

The main reasons for the Polish migration to Iceland

According to the Centre of Migration Research (Kaczmarczyk 2006), the main reasons for the Polish migrations are economically-based and only the destinations change. Can we confirm that Poles' migration to Iceland is also of a solely economic nature? Yes, in most of the cases the basic criterion for choosing Iceland, especially before the crisis, was a high

probability of finding a job as well as the salary rate. “Three years ago the situation was that it was enough to go to a job centre to get something” (interview 50).

The money earned made it possible to make a good living, even in the case of jobs not requiring special qualifications, and often not even requiring the ability to speak the language.

Our research suggests, however, that not only economic issues were acting as the pulling factors. Some of the interviewees decided to visit Iceland for cultural or personal reasons. This applies mainly to young people not intertwined in family connections.

Because the situation in Poland was at that time (2001) difficult I thought it would probably be hard to find a job. A few months earlier I had read in a newspaper about au pairs – girls that go to foreign countries and take care of children. They learn about the culture of the country. I decided I perhaps should try that (interview 21).

Cultural issues seem to be an equally strong factor motivating to find out more about the country of destination and, as a result, to integrate better with the new social environment. The quote above shows that what the young woman coming to Iceland had in mind was a will to learn about a new culture. Her mobility from Poland to Iceland was an outcome of her determination to find a job on her own, not by using the social network of Poles already settled in Iceland. Currently, she is planning to stay there for good, since not only did she adopt the local socio-cultural model, but she also found it fully convenient. One can risk the claim that the degree of involvement in finding a job abroad may have some influence on the integrative abilities. Those who find a job on their own are more inclined to interact with the local population frequently and more intensively, and, as we know, integration depends on one’s milieu whether it is homogeneous in nature, i.e. purely Polish, or heterogeneous – Polish-Icelandic. Living and working among Poles results in the lack of need to adapt to the local people to a larger extent or interact with them more closely.

Another motif of Poles’ migration to Iceland is based on personal reasons. Quite often the emigrants’ stories are very touching: “My daughter has been here for 8 years. Me in Poland living on welfare. My

husband died, I lost my son even before leaving... In Poland I was broke down, no job, no nothing... a little money out of the dole..." (interview 38).

Here, the above mentioned key economic factor intertwines with reasons of personal nature.

Notably, a significant majority of Poles determined to visit Iceland in order to earn money always come to somebody. Most frequently these are family members – close or distant relatives, such as daughter/son, uncle/aunt. Thus, another motif and migration rationale can be observed, namely broadly understood family reunion. Right after the economic reasons, it emerges as a key factor for Poles' decision to stay, usually permanently, in Iceland. As far as the first family member's visit is based on economic grounds, the others, brought by him or her, come mainly due to personal reasons. This usually takes place after the first person has achieved a state of certain stability in terms of income and living conditions.

Factors encouraging to stay in Iceland

The motives pushing people out of Poland and the ones pulling them to Iceland influence the choice of the latter as the migrants' destination. What is more, the pull motives have an impact on the decision to stay for good nowhere else but there. Despite the economic crisis which took place in Iceland, the income gap between Poland and Iceland is still substantial. The vast majority of the interviewees were for staying in Iceland regardless of the crisis. (We need to keep in mind that we did not reach people who had left, thus we know nothing about their opinion on the crisis.) They would point to a significant decrease in economic conditions: the fall in the Icelandic króna's exchange rate, reduced number of jobs and difficulties on the labour market. Yet, the will to stay in Iceland remained. Such behaviors comply with the observations made by Krystyna Iglicka (2010), who claims that hardly ever are the factors making immigrants return to their home country connected with the dynamically changing economic situation of the host country. Although some of the participants did not declare their will to stay in Iceland directly, it could be deduced from their lifestyle. "We've collected so much stuff that it's not possible to move now" (interview 43).

To others, going back to Poland would mean problems with finding a job due to the high unemployment rate in their home towns or villages, or due to their low professional qualifications, whereas the Icelandic system provides them with a safe and peaceful life, free from financial worries. Moreover, the reason why Poles decide to stay in Iceland even in times of crisis is the high level of social security, as well as the prospect of future retirement benefits. “They ask me, when I make calls to Poland, when I’m coming back. I say that I will once I get the Icelandic retirement” (interview 30).

On the one hand, such jocular statements serve as a means of dealing with the unpleasant reality of the crisis, but, on the other, they show how important the social security offered by the Icelandic state is to the interviewees.

An equally significant factor that apparently makes people stay in Iceland is based on cultural differences. Basically, all the participants pointed to the locals’ healthy attitude towards life, i.e. a much greater distance to everyday problems and the ability to set the right priorities. “Life here teaches you what a real problem in life is and makes you aware that you don’t have that many of them” (interview 33).

In addition, those for whom this factor was vital when deciding whether to stay abroad emphasized the negative aspects of the Polish work culture, such as enormous pressure and fear of “stepping out of line”. They praised social relations in Iceland, together with helpfulness they experienced on numerous occasions, e.g. in offices, which was contrasted with the negative approach to the customer in Poland.

Difficulties with adaptation – nostalgia over Poland

Despite a wide range of factors facilitating adaptation in Iceland, Poles have certain problems and doubts. Two of the most serious ones, which heavily affect the assimilation process and, as a result, also the social integration, are due to significant climate differences. These are the weather and landscape, the latter being completely different from the Polish one. (Let us note, however, that not all of our interlocutors recognized the issue as a problem). Those who were not entirely fond of the climate and environment would stress the winter depressions caused by the light deprivation, as well as the lack of trees and the very different

flora. Sometimes the interviewees would report a feeling of emptiness and homesickness. This nostalgic sentiment decreases slightly in cases when some or all other members of the migrant's family are in Iceland. Otherwise, the homesickness expressed by the participants was one of the reasons underlying the wish to return to Poland. Occasionally the nostalgia manifests itself in a very direct and explicit manner, i.e. as a longing for Polish food, a view from the window, while at some points it may be more latent:

I think it's as if I feel bad here 'cause I want to go back to Poland. It's a very strange feeling. But I feel good 'cause I'm here. I don't have to be here, I'm not kept here by force nor imprisoned, but I am here, it seems I want to be here. But I want to be in Poland as well, and this is something like schizophrenia, split personality (...) (interview 47).

Such a condition is reported both by people who want to return to Poland and those who associate their future with Iceland but are not able to detach completely from the life left behind in Poland. It is an emotional state typical for the first generation of immigrants which is the case in Iceland at the moment.

Motives for leaving – differences in the pull-push factors

The factors that make Iceland attractive as a host country for migrants also prove significant when it comes to decisions regarding a permanent stay. We can ask, however, whether the motives underlying the decision to leave Poland were the same for those who see their future connected with Iceland as for those who plan to return to their homeland. Or were the pull-push factors different for these two groups? In other words, did those who integrate well with the Icelandic environment and want to stay have the same reasons to leave Poland as those who want to leave Iceland and do not intend to integrate? Is it possible to predict one's level of integration as early as at the moment of departure from Poland, by taking into consideration the motives for leaving? Let us have a closer look at the reasons for which Poles declare their will to return to Poland within the context of the motives underlying their decision to immigrate.

Economically motivated migrations are not merely about the migrants' ability to secure themselves a proper standard of living, but also about the

costs and profits for both the host and the home countries. On the one hand, the latter loses human capital, as well as the means invested in the migrant's education, on the other, it benefits, as the migrants transfer money they earn back to the home country, in benefit of the sending country's economy. According to the World Bank, Poland occupies a high (10th) position with regard to the transfer of money by migrants (Iglicka 2010). However, as many researchers from this field point out, the money from the migrants' transfer is to a large extent spent on consumption, not investments.

Regardless of the home country's benefits and losses, one must not forget about the host country's profits, since its economy is provided with cheap labour for occupations that the local people do not want to undertake.

If migration decisions are analyzed from this perspective, it could seem that when a migrant decides to return home everybody loses. Why do they return then? The most frequently quoted reason was sentiment. In some cases it was quite plainly expressed nostalgia over the family home or the opportunity to use the mother tongue in a "natural" way. Often it was a wish to come back, however, without any explicitly stated goal or need. Some considered going back with the economic capital accumulated during their stay in order to invest it in their own business in Poland. Here emerges another reason why Poles decide to migrate back home – financial issues. These do not always mean, however, that the migrant was successful and returns to arrange for him- or herself a better life thanks to the acquired wealth. Sometimes financial reasons are a sad necessity: "I am on this well-deserved dole of mine and simply being on this dole I'm looking for a job. If I don't find anything I'll have to go back to Poland, 'cause I will have nothing to live on" (interview 28).

Despite the fact that in some cases the return to Poland was mentioned as an alternative for the inability to manage on the Icelandic job market, still, it was sentiment that was the most frequently listed factor motivating people to go back home. The role of the nostalgia over Poland, however, is not to be overestimated. It was declared explicitly by a dozen of participants, and in most of the cases these were mere declarations that had no impact on reality, as every year the interviewees would postpone the date and the decision to go back to Poland, being, at the same time, immersed into their daily struggles in Iceland.

Were then the motives for leaving Poland the same for those who now are willing to return to Poland as for those planning to stay in Iceland? For both groups the reasons that mattered at the moment of departure were of economic and personal nature. What may be puzzling, however, is the fact that none of the people who currently declare their will to stay did consider the cultural matters as push or pull factors at the moment of migrating. Interestingly, only one of the interviewees expressed the fear of the Katla¹ volcano's eruption, and this circumstance was taken into account in the decision making process concerning the return to Poland.

Our research confirmed the popular claim that at present the basic push factor for Poles is of financial nature. Nevertheless, the participants usually mentioned this factor along with personal reasons which, obviously, were varied: to one person these meant a difficult family situation, e.g. illness or deaths of relatives, to another it could be a friend's invitation, yet for others – personal resolutions to try living abroad. The reasons why the interviewees decided to leave Poland could rarely be limited to one motif, usually it was a combination of several aspects, among which the personal and economic ones were most frequently pointed out. Moreover, the cultural and institutional aspects were mentioned with an emphasis on the high level of bureaucracy in the home country, as well as the pressure and tensions caused by the pace and style of living. Many participants pointed to a family member's stay in Iceland as the reason to go there. Some would call their act of migration from Poland a result of chance or a coincidence.

So far we have discussed people who wish to either stay in Iceland or return to Poland. However, a part of the interviewees, though not as numerous as the other two groups, considered going to other countries in order to continue their adventure with migration. In the case of these people the declarations were not very strong, however, and should rather be treated as one of the possible prospects, they were some sort of a "Plan B". To the participants it was more of an alternative in case the Icelandic economic and environmental situation were to change. Those people would, as a rule, reject the idea of going back to Poland, being more inclined to try their luck abroad. However, it needs to be emphasized that

¹ The research was carried out during the eruptions of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, which, as a rule, precedes the eruption of the larger Katla.

the declared, prospective emigration does not acquire any specific shape and seems to be an uncertain “song of the future”.

Categorization of migrants' behaviors

The Polish diaspora in Iceland is very young. The interviewed people's stays amount on average to a couple of years, with the longest stay slightly exceeding ten years. Therefore, it is hard to compare this community with any other, for certain mechanisms have not had time to develop yet or, due to the country's unique character, they evolve in a different, specific way. One can attempt, however, to adopt certain typologies characteristic for other Polish diasporas. My main interest in this chapter is focused on various motives that underlie people's decision to, firstly, leave Poland, and secondly, to stay in Iceland, migrate back or continue the migrant model of life in other countries. In order to systematize these decisions I made use of the migrant typology developed by the Centre for Research on Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism, an organization investigating also Polish immigrants in London (Eade, Drinkwater, Garapich 2007). There were four types of Poles' behaviors identified.

The first type is called “stork” and refers mainly to a seasonal worker, i.e. one who commutes between the home and the host countries, whose stays in the latter are rather short and usually last up to a couple of months. Due to the considerable distance between Iceland and Poland and, consequently, high costs of flights, as well as the particular character of the jobs offered in Iceland, this type basically does not appear in our research. As a matter of fact, there were people whose stays were limited to a few months, but, having returned to Poland, they decided either not to go back to Iceland or their next trip was planned better and aimed at a longer stay. Thus the “commuting” behavior of the seasonal workers hardly applies here.

Another type is “hamster”, whose aim is to accumulate a given sum of money that would allow him or her to meet a certain need in the home country. The migrations of “hamsters”, according to CRONEM, feature longer stays in the host country and the acquisition of wealth necessary to reach the migration goal. This type was represented in our study, as Poles would often mention the economic reasons of migration, i.e. the opportunity to earn and accumulate money necessary to bring into life

specific plans in Poland, such as paying back loans taken in Poland, paying for the children's studies, which was the case for one of the participants, buying a flat or facilitating the setting up of an own business in the home country. In the case of Polish migrants in Iceland, however, this model is often distorted. A significant number of people, having accumulated the means they had initially planned to, postpone their decision to leave to a vague future. Thus, there were people among the participants who originally had intended to stay in Iceland for a year or two, but this time got extended to as many as ten years. Even though the interviewees declared their will to return to Poland, their determination in this respect was poor.

The third category of a migrant is referred to as "searcher", and is associated with the lack of strict plans for the future. Such people rather look for new opportunities to act. It seems that this type reflects the character of migration decisions of Poles in Iceland. Many participants were not explicit about their decisions, i.e. whether to stay in Iceland, return to Poland or choose another form of migration. Usually their stance on that matter was flexible, they were open to suggestions and ready to consider various scenarios for the future.

The last type are "stayers". By definition, they are determined not to return to Poland, unless "for the old age" and also very mobile within the host country. Many of the interviewed Poles would start their migration adventure in Iceland from the fishing industry in villages spread along the coast, now they work and live in Reykjavik or in the surrounding area. The representation of this type in Iceland is numerous.

Conclusions

The analysis of the motives making Poles stay abroad or go back to their motherland may result in drawing a few basic conclusions. Firstly, some participants live as if torn between the new reality, in which they function on an everyday basis in Iceland, and the sentiment, or nostalgia, towards Poland, which is reflected in them maintaining contacts only with Poles, having Polish satellite TV, as well as other elements associated with "Polishness". As one of the participants points out, "The majority of Poles are partially in Poland. . . They are stuck in some soap bubble. They have never moved for real" (interview 43).

People torn between Iceland and Poland do not feel the need to integrate with the country they live in, and their adaptation is limited to a basic level, as a rule, solely the economic one, connected with the labour market.

A separate category is formed by people who declare “living in Iceland” as their basic migration goal. They gradually immerse into the Icelandic society in sociological, political and cultural terms.

Another phenomenon worth mentioning is the declared and constantly postponed will to return to Poland. Despite the fact that the first generation of immigrants keeps expressing the will to return, the act of putting off this decision makes them slowly soak into the new reality. They adopt, which is self-reported, habits typical for Icelanders, such as a distanced and calmer attitude towards life. They send their children to Icelandic schools, which means that the second generation of Polish immigrants is growing up, and their integration and assimilation will be of a different nature.

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