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## **The Hollow Land? On the Politicisation of Emigration from Poland**

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### **Abstract:**

“The citizens of the Fourth Republic” was the slogan proudly displayed across electoral billboards of the Law and Justice party (PIS) accompanying the pictures which showed young and prosperous people in undefined but attractive Polish landscapes. But exactly who were going to be the happiest Polish citizens of the ‘Ivth Republic’ after the 2005 elections? Migrants, the satirical portal JoeMonster.org proposed. It was sufficient to add ‘Germany 2007’, ‘the United Kingdom 2007’, ‘Italy 2007’, ‘Spain 2007’ to subvert the original meaning of the billboards. This was just one spectacular example of specific ‘war’ between the PIS and its political adversaries over the post-2004 wave of Polish emigration. In a country, where emigration has always been tied to deep political crisis, current emigration has once again been used as a tool of inner political struggles.

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While the opening up of UK, Irish and Swedish labour markets for Polish citizens at the time of the entry of Poland into the EU was welcomed by the whole spectrum of political elite, the positions of politicians on the causes and consequences of out-migration from Poland soon started to diverge. Particularly important for the rising temperature of the public debate was a documentary movie ‘A Bar at Victoria Station’ showing the bad living conditions of lowly qualified Polish workers in London. The topic was, however, only openly put on a stage at the end of 2005 when crucial changes in Polish political scene took place. After the parliamentary elections the PiS (the right-wing euro-sceptic party of the Kaczyński twin brothers) won and formed a coalition government with the right-wing and nationalist League of Polish Families (LPR) and the populist Self-defence party. This coalition government was formed after unsuccessful negotiations with the Civic Platform (PO), a more centrist and euro enthusiastic party. The PO became an opposition party. Since then migration and Polish identity have become some of the key topics around which there has been political polarisation.

## **“Seven out of Ten Poles Live in Stress... the Rest Lives in London”**

The Ministry of Labour likes to put the figure somewhere around 600,000 whilst the liberal leaning *Gazeta* or *Wybocza* put it anywhere between 2-3 million (citing sources such as the OBOP - All-Poland Accord of Organisations of the Unemployed), but whichever number is used – it is high enough to seem to justify the growth in interest of the media and politicians on emigration. Not surprisingly such terms as ‘the Great Emigration’ or ‘the Biggest Resettlement in Europe’ are used. The historical comparisons are justified by the high numbers. While ‘the Great Emigration’ refers to the migration wave of political, cultural and academic elites from Poland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ‘the Biggest Resettlement’ (in Polish ‘największa fala emigracyjna’) implies that the current situation is seen as more serious than that of the 1980s.

There are indeed political disagreements about the numbers. Generally one can say that opposition parties and their voters exaggerate the figure of migrants and the negative impact of migration on the Polish economy and social relations. Additionally, members of the opposition parties suggest that many of the migrants have actually moved for political reasons. On the other hand members of ruling parties often try to underestimate emigration and some of their statements, as I show below, could be even perceived as humiliating for people who have moved abroad. The government further stresses that emigration has only a minimal influence on the national economy.

In Poland there has been a steady growth in GDP and consumption rate, together with a dropping unemployment rate. The positive macroeconomic indicators are however, according to the opposition, just a weapon of governmental propaganda. The opposition politicians stress the weight of global prosperity, the good starting point prepared by former governments and – last but not least – high emigration. Migrants’ money transferred back to Poland increases consumption and thus GDP growth – or so opposition politicians say. And, they add, that the figure of unemployed is decreasing not because of employment creation but because of the dramatically increasing number of emigrants.

The government firmly denies the scope of emigration. Although aware of the difficulties to calculate the exact figures, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Anna Kalata, shows that they are definitely lower than the often quoted two million and claims that there are no more than 600,000 Poles working abroad. Additionally – according to the minister – migrants are mostly people who had worked in Poland before they moved. This would mean that the influence of migration on the unemployment rate is negligible. However, the government’s statement on the topic is not fixed. President of the Republic Lech Kaczyński, during a briefing in London said: “We know that there are those who have succeeded in the UK, who have jobs and who are doing very well thank you very much, especially considering the differences between the wages in the UK and in Poland. But these people are registered as unemployed in Poland, so they are living a fiction and they are raising the unemployment figures in Poland while they are doing very nicely here in the UK”. The requirements of

Labour Agencies mean that the registered unemployed have to be present once a month at the Agency, furthermore unemployment benefit is rather low, so the assertion of Lech Kaczyński is misleading. For sure he has no official data to prove it. The Ministry of Labour plans to investigate the issue this year. Continuing along the same lines as the playing down of migration, there is also as a partial denial of labour shortages caused by emigration. The Minister of Labour argues that it is simply a media construction “that there are no longer any physicians, programmers or construction workers in Poland. We have 450,000 unemployed programmers and 100,000 unemployed construction workers registered in Labour Agencies!”

### **Fleeing Iraq, Afghanistan and Poland**

On the whole, for people in power in Poland there seems to be no interest in discussing concrete statistical data because this would be perceived as a kind of affirmation of oppositions’ reproaches, consequently more space is given to specific disinformation and ideological questions related to migration. On the other hand, politicians from the opposition and media critical of a government serving itself other statistical data, continue to show the ‘catastrophic’ situation regarding Polish migration. The opposition’s reproaches and government’s answers to them are based often on residual and selective data but particularly, on public fears. These fears are stimulated by medially created picture of a “hollow land” – Poland depopulated by migration. Indeed it is possible to read that more Polish children are born in UK than in Poland (and that they speak better English than Polish) alongside reports that some parishes in Poland have seen a drop the number of Sunday services whilst more and more worshippers stay abroad.

The opposition creates a social context in which every single migrant is a measure of public resistance against the government. The leader of PO said that majority of current migrants are going to come back after PiS give up power. In Trybuna – left-wing daily newspaper we may read the dramatic statement: “Today people don’t ‘move’ from Poland, but run away from here. Like from Iraq, Afghanistan or Somalia.” Citizens who have negative attitudes to the PiS-Selfdefence-LPR coalition take part in this kind of discourse in a big way. Thousands of parallels comparing Poland during the communist period and contemporary Poland may be observed on internet discussion lists.

The Cabinet and – particularly - its supporters deny the existence of a political context regarding today’s emigration, on the other hand however, they enter this kind of discourse by accusing migrants of holding a ‘non-patriotic attitude’. Even the Catholic Church joins these warnings. In a special Polish bishop’s letter on emigration it was written: “We want to encourage every compatriot to remain a Christian, a Catholic and a Pole everywhere, even in emigration”.

## **Feckless Migrants and Helpless Jokes**

Naturally this kind of public debate must drift into domain of political satire. A well-known example is the joke: “What is a difference between communist Poland and ‘the Fourth Republic’? During communism society lived in Poland whilst the [independent] government resided in London, and now – the government resides in Poland whilst society moves abroad.”

In the billboards transformed by the satirical portal JoeMonster.org mentioned at the beginning of this article there was one more notable aspect. The spectators could only see the citizens’ backs. Whilst the migrants were looking ahead a brilliant future, the way they were displayed could also be interpreted as a kind of exclusion from society, remoteness from the everyday life of Poland. It was a gesture of alienation. Such a break of communication was also highlighted in a very famous declaration by president Kaczyński. During his briefing in London, he said: “As regards unemployed Poles and homeless Poles in London and the UK, I believe that there are a number of people, not only from Poland but from other countries from the new European Union who are feckless naturally, but they still seek a better life and so they go abroad, and currently the UK has become a destination of choice for such individuals”. Then the president’s office later made it clear that Kaczyński said ‘helpless’ not ‘feckless’ and the responsibility for this misunderstanding lies with the interpreter. Nevertheless many high qualified, well educated Poles living in UK and other countries of the EU regard this misunderstanding as a specific symbol of the current ruling coalition’s attitude towards migrants.

The free flow of people on the more and more open European labour market is thus a starting point for the ideologically oriented and inconclusive public debate in Poland. The competitive political players put today’s emigration in a context of historical traumas and preserve a picture of emigration as something dangerous and abnormal. Labour emigration – more and more often temporary, seasonal or just part of a career in a foreign corporation – is described on the one hand as an escape towards political and social normality - on the other hand as a national betrayal. With such a politicisation of the discourse, it is impossible to imagine a public debate which would provide a clearer understanding of the diverse aspects of this new wave of migration in the sea of the global labour market.