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*Labour emigration in social debate
and public opinion
(the case of Białystok)*

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Labour emigration in social debate and public opinion (the case of Białystok)

Summary

The article presents an analysis of the public opinion in the context of the high intensity of labour emigration and the expected increase in economic immigration to Poland. In the paper, three issues can be discerned. The first one concerns the role of public opinion in the formation of social attitudes. The second deals with the results of empirical studies on the labour emigration and immigration on the example of the survey on a random sample of junior high school and high school students in Białystok. The third part consists of reports from academic debates on the subject “Exodus – an interest of ours or of others?” organized by students of the University of Białystok in 2007. The article shows a particular moment (reflects the atmosphere) in which labour migrations become a subject of the social reflection in the environment of young people on the verge of their adult life, planning their future and making decisions about labour emigration.

Opinia publiczna a zjawiska emigracji zarobkowych na przykładzie Białegostoku

Streszczenie

Artykuł pokazuje znaczenie opinii publicznej w kontekście wysokiego nasilenia emigracji zarobkowej oraz oczekiwanego wzrostu imigracji ekonomicznej do Polski. W tekście można wyróżnić trzy wątki tematyczne. Pierwszy dotyczy roli opinii publicznej w kształtowaniu postaw społecznych, drugi zawiera wyniki badań empirycznych na temat emigracji zarobkowej i imigracji na przykładzie badań ankietowych wśród wylosowanych uczniów szkół ponadpodstawowych w Białymstoku. Trzecia część tekstu dotyczy relacji z cyklu debat studenckich zorganizowanych przez studentów Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku w 2007 roku pod hasłem: „Exodus – nasz czy cudzy interes?” Artykuł ukazuje pewien moment (odzwierciedla atmosferę), w którym emigracje zarobkowe stały się przedmiotem refleksji społecznej w środowiskach młodych ludzi, stojących na progu dorosłego życia i planowania dalszej swojej przyszłości, w tym podejmowania decyzji związanych z emigracją zarobkową.

Introduction

The notion of public opinion is so popular that it seems unnecessary to define it. In common parlance public opinion is “what the majority of people think” (Oxford 1980, p. 589), however in sociology the approaches to this notion differ and are closer to the encyclopaedic definition of public opinion as “the collective opinion of many people on some issue, problem etc., especially as a guide to action, decision, or the like” (Webster’s 1989, p. 1162). One of the definitions from the Polish “Encyclopaedia of Sociology” (Nowotny 2000, p. 17) states that public opinion is an “opinion which has an influence on public life, functioning publicly opinion”. A standard sociological textbook defines public opinion as an “expression of attitudes on matters of public policy which are communicated to decision makers” (Schaefer 1989, p.585), while a sociological dictionary presents a more technical definition: “the collection of people’s opinions on topics of public interests, and the analysis of these by statistical techniques using a sample from the population in question” (Abercromie, Hill, Turner 1994, p. 340).

Public opinion on a given topic is formed when the topic is presented in terms of a social problem and subject to the public debate. A topic can be a subject of the public debate when the following basic conditions are present:

- Facts of social importance, provoking discussions and controversies.
- Public awareness of these alarming facts, i.e., somebody has to study the facts and to disseminate information.
- A forum, a specified time and place, where a public discussion is possible (e.g., through mass media).
- The discussed topic should have its own interested public which notice a connection between the debate and everyday life and personal private decisions.

Cooperation with the mass media is an essential condition for making the debate public. According to Tomasz Goban-Klas, an expert in mass media, the organization of public debates with the participation of mass media has many limitations (Goban-Klas 2004). Few people have the privilege to participate in public debates or have other possibilities of publicly expressing their opinion . A different, but equally important, question is the skill of presenting and defending their view-points by participants of the debate. During debates the attention of the audience is often attracted by smart or brilliant speeches

rather than by sober, to-the-point arguments.

In recent years a considerable and growing interest in migration issues has been observed. These topics have been present in newspapers, political statements and even teachings of priests. The information concerning emigration of Poles or immigration to Poland is interspersed with demographic forecasts which show very unfavourable changes in the demographic structure due to population ageing and a low birth rate leading to depopulation. It is hardly surprising that in this context the news on emigration from Poland, which is often referred to as an “exodus”, has been accompanied by an alarming tone.

The labour emigration from Poland increased in the period directly preceding the change of the political system in 1989. In the 1980s labour emigration was such a common phenomenon in some regions (e.g., a central part of Silesia including Opole, and Podlasie, north-eastern part of Poland with the centre in Białystok) that most families had at least one of their members working abroad (Frejka, Okólski, Sword 1998, Jazwińska, Okólski 2001). In such cases the labour emigration phenomena are crucial for understanding the local communities (Cieślińska 1997, Osipowicz 2002).

The present interest in emigration is related to Poland’s accession to the European Union. Labour migration has become much more intensive due to open borders of Western countries and the possibility of legal employment (at much higher wages than before) in some of them, and due to high unemployment level in Poland with little hope for a change. The dilemma “to stay or to leave” has become very relevant, especially for unmarried and well-educated young people looking for jobs and good living conditions.

The common knowledge about migration is in general fragmentary and access to public debates on this subject is limited because time and place of these debates are not always convenient.

Researchers studying migration (sociologists, historians, demographers, economists) are also partial to render their results accessible to the broad public. They organize conferences and express their opinions in mass media. Another way to popularise migration issues are competitions for schoolchildren. One of the main organizers of the competition entitled “Young people on economic emigration” was the Warsaw head-office of the National Bank of Poland. The information concerning the competition was announced in local newspapers. The competition was organized for junior high school and high school students separately and consisted in writing an essay on one of the two subjects: “Is labour emigration a good option for young Poles?” (for younger students) or “Does the opening of job markets for foreigners have a positive influence on the development of Polish economy?” (for high school students).

Migration issues have their permanent place in main sociological debates at the Polish

sociological congresses, which are organized every three years. The previous two congresses showed an increase in the interest towards these research topics. In 2004 one research group on migration was organized, while in 2007 several different research groups dealt with migration issues. At the same time migration has become a subject of academic debates organized by students. One should not be surprised by this fact. For students and graduates emigration from Poland can turn out to be the most feasible chance of finding a job and gaining financial independence. Moreover, students belong to strategic groups which will take the lead in public life in the near future. Therefore, their opinions and decisions concerning emigration should be analysed attentively.

Nowadays the possibility of emigration is considered as something both natural and feasible by young Poles. An additional factor enhancing migration tendencies is an increasingly prevailing pressure to learn foreign (Western) languages since an early age. Another stimulus is the fact that a lot of former obstacles (unattainable passports, visas, invitations etc.) have been removed and emigration has become much easier.

In this paper I would like to turn my attention to migration issues in surveys carried out among junior high school, high school and higher education students. The survey among junior high school and high school students, based on a random sample, was carried out in 2005 and the survey among higher education students (an intentional sample chosen with respect to a course of studies) in 2007. Both surveys were carried out in Białystok and comprised the problems connected with labour migration. The surveys were performed by two different, independent research teams. A common feature of both surveys were public presentation and popularisation of the obtained results (conferences, meetings) and attempts to make the survey results a subject of a public debate. It may seem that these attempts were successful as migration issues have been extremely popular and topical recently. Although the opinions from Białystok academic debates and the surveys' results will have a rather small influence on decision-makers but the type, size and direction of labour migration flow will depend on personal decisions of today's students.

1. Social and individual costs of emigration

Emigration is, due to its nature, a difficult life experience for migrants and their families. Stories from migrants' lives testify to it. The main difficulty of the migrant experience consists in **social and psychological costs** borne by emigrants and their families. The socio-psychological costs range between social contacts and family life on one side and professional and public life on the other side. The most common price for emigration is separation from the family (including the closest relatives: husband, wife, children, parents), friends and acquaintances. The absence of relatives during the stay abroad, alien environment and new hardships of everyday life have a severe bearing on emigrant's frame of mind and his health (Mostwin, 1991). At the same time, staying away from one's relatives augments the probability of leading an unordered personal and family life. Considering the example of Podlasie towns characterized by high emigration (Mońki, Siemiatycze), an increasing number of divorces and growth of juvenile delinquency have been observed (often it concerns children of emigrants deprived of the proper parental care because of the absence of a parent). The price for migration (especially long-term migration) is often the breakdown of marriage, a serious threat of children's educational and social problems and a necessity to leave ageing parents without care.

The second aspect of social costs of migration is a **depreciation of an emigrant in professional and public life**. Absence from a home country means that a person does not participate in the life of the local community and is not active in employment environment. A common practice associated with work abroad is undertaking the least prestigious blue collar jobs, often in the secondary sector of the labour market. Labour migration, although motivated by aspirations for the improvement of one's social status, usually (with few exceptions) leads to social and professional degradation. The barrier against doing jobs less respected than those one has been trained for is weakened by the existing belief concerning high financial profits that can be derived from work in more developed (in comparison with homeland) countries and by the popular views such as "all work is honourable" and "travel broadens your mind". An additional disadvantage is a break in carrying on one's own profession. Quite often it leads to a complete loss of the acquired qualifications.

With the growing overall educational level of the Polish society, the number of well educated emigrants speaking foreign languages increases. Therefore, these emigrants have better possibilities to find jobs abroad consistent with their qualifications. Medical doctors are a typical example of emigrants working abroad in their profession (Walewski 2007, p.44). In their case emigration does not mean professional regress, but quite the opposite. However, as I mentioned above, this is not a common

practice. In any case, an emigrant faces social problems including the experience of cultural differences and social isolation (Morawska 2001). A worker, even one having a satisfactory job, is often alien and isolated. The full integration with the receiving society is seldom possible in the first generation of immigrants. Then, an integration with the society of the receiving country in the second generation means that today's immigrants can lose communication with their children because they lack common relations to important reality of homeland.

2. International migrations on the example of Podlasie

Social and demographic processes always take place in a definite geographic and temporal space. Therefore, one cannot tear oneself off the realities given by time and place. A typical direction of migration is an emigration from peripheral regions to centres of civilization (Popławski 2005). The factors repelling the population from a peripheral region can be miscellaneous. On the example of Podlasie, a peripheral region in Poland, one can indicate the following main reasons for labour emigration:

- **Economic factors** associated with persistent unemployment, limited possibilities of finding a job, a lack of a diversified offer of employment, medium or low level of wages and salaries, high labour costs, and a lack of facilities for undertaking individual economic enterprises.
- **Political factors:** permanent corruption and affairs in the political life, compromising of many politicians, a lack of responsibility of the power elite for their mistakes, general conviction about a domination of personal interests among the political elite, small hopes for a change of this situation.
- **Social factors:** migration tradition of a region, social and family connections with earlier emigrants, an established practice of the chain migration, a relatively good social position of emigrants and their families in local communities.
- **Psychological factors:** an ambition to test oneself in a new environment, an ambition to prove to the sending community one's own resourcefulness and enterprise (especially when migration is connected with economic success), an acquaintance with ethnic and cultural diversification in a borderland region, an experience of contacts with foreigners, the acceptance and approval of the lifestyle of immigrants.

An alternative for international migration is usually internal migration, directed to large towns. In the case of Podlasie this phenomenon is more frequent than in other regions and intravoivodship net migration from rural to urban areas is relatively large¹ (GUS 2004, p.428). However, intravoivodship migrations are not able to solve the problem of a search for good salaries.

The largest town in Podlasie is Białystok numbering almost 300,000 inhabitants. The town is characterized by ethnic diversity, a rare feature in Poland. This is one of the main reasons to call Białystok a borderland town (Sadowski 1995). The geographic location of Białystok and ethno-cultural

¹ Data from „Demographic yearbook of Poland” (GUS, Warszawa 2004), show that positive net intravoivodship migration to urban areas occurs only in Podlaskie (+529) and in the neighbouring region of Warmia and Mazury (+72). All other voivodships have negative balance.

specificity of this town are conducive to the presence of immigrants from behind the Eastern border. This is possible because the town is relatively “inexpensive”. One can notice rather friendly attitude of the Białystok inhabitants toward labour immigrants from the East. Their presence contributes, without a doubt, to lower prices of services and goods in the region. At the same time, it contributes to the lower attractiveness of Białystok as a place of paid work, as compared with other regions of Poland and, especially, with other countries.

3. Migration experience in families of junior high school and high school students

It is not possible to directly observe the phenomenon of labour emigration, its causes and consequences. Sometimes one can notice minor outward details concerning the effects of emigration (abandoned houses, advertisement in newspapers like “urgently for sale because of a departure”, etc.), but the social factors remain hidden. In a small town or in a little community observations are easier to carry out; it is easier to grasp a small and homogeneous environment. The observation of such a phenomenon in a big town is much more difficult, although the scale of labour emigration is larger. Sometimes it is not easy to localize spatially the dwelling-place of people leaving for paid work abroad. Labour emigration continues to be a subject associated with many unknowns. On occasions of various sociological surveys we constantly try to gather information about labour migration in different environments. One of the investigated groups consisted of families of school pupils. We assume that migration experiences in the family environment of schoolchildren enhance the interest in labour migration abroad. As far as the public opinion is concerned, one can assume that answering the survey questions concerning labour migration is a form of developing an opinion on this subject. Thus, sociological investigations have a double meaning: sociologists collect empirical data while various groups and persons have a possibility of expressing their opinions on current social topics.

In April and May 2005 a large survey was carried out in Białystok on a random sample of about 1600 pupils from junior high schools and high schools². 1563 questionnaires were qualified to the statistical analysis (Dmochowska 2006, p. 50). The main subject of the survey were questions concerning healthy lifestyle, but several questions dealt also with labour migration. Two questions concerned labour migration of parents (“Have your parents ever worked abroad?”, “Are your parents currently abroad?”), one question concerned migration plans of an interviewed pupil (“Do you plan to work abroad in the future?”), and the last question concerned an attitude to the employment of immigrants in Poland (“Should foreigners, in your opinion, arrive to work in Poland?”).

Surprisingly enough, the questions about labour migration of parents caused some problems. The answers to the first question (“Have your parents ever worked abroad? If yes, then where?”) posed difficulties for statistical analysis. More than a half of the respondents (n=904) answered that none of their parents worked abroad, but only 127 pupils answered that their father had never worked abroad, and 364 pupils answered that their mother had never worked abroad. Therefore, the negative answer to

² The survey was organized and financed by municipal authorities (Urząd Miejski, Wydział Spraw Społecznych) in Białystok and supervised by dr Joanna Łada.

this question (that at least one parent has never worked abroad) was given by as many as 1395 persons (almost 90%). It means that in the prevailing majority the labour trips abroad have rather an individual character (if father works abroad, then mother stays home, and vice versa). Only 168 pupils (about 10%) answered that both father and mother worked abroad. A closer analysis of the answers to this question shows that the intensity of labour migration among parents of the respondents is much higher than the initial statement. The distribution of answers to this question, taking into account the direction of labour trips, is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Directions of labour trips abroad of parents of junior high school and high school students in Białystok.

Where did the parent of the respondent work abroad?	Respondent's mother		Respondent's father	
	Number of answers	Percent	Number of answers	Percent
Belgium only	61	20,9%	63	12,0%
Belgium and other countries	17	5,8%	28	5,3%
Italy only	29	9,9%	14	2,7%
Italy and other countries	6	2,1%	14	2,7%
Germany only	48	16,4%	128	24,3%
Germany and other countries	8	2,7%	47	8,9%
USA only	35	12,0%	72	13,7%
USA and other countries	0	0,0%	7	1,3%
<i>other countries</i>	88	30,1%	154	29,2%
Total	N=292	100,0%	N=527	100,0%

The data in Table 1 concern only those parents who ever worked abroad. In general, 292 pupils' mothers (18.7%) went abroad to work. The number of fathers working abroad is much higher and equals 527, which amounts to 33.7% of all investigated pupils' fathers. Thus, almost every fifth mother and every third father of teenagers has in his life story a labour trip abroad.

Therefore, many pupils know from personal experience reasons for international migration and its influence on family life.

The most popular destinations of labour migration of the investigated pupils' mothers were:

1. Belgium (61+17=78), i.e., **26.7%**
2. Germany (48+8=56), i.e., **19.2%**
3. Italy (29+6=35) i.e., **12.0%**
4. USA (35) i.e., **12.0%**.

Fathers worked mostly in the same countries as mothers (in a different order), namely:

1. Germany (128+47=175), i.e., **33.2%**
2. Belgium (63+28=91), i.e., **17.3%**
3. USA (72+7=79) i.e., **15%**
4. Italy (14+14=28) i.e., **5.3%**.

The fathers of the investigated pupils worked in Germany three times more frequently than the pupils' mothers³ (Kępińska 2005, p. 297). Twice as many fathers worked in the USA. Women outnumbered men as far as work in Italy was concerned. A part of the pupils gave more than one answer to this question, stating that their parents worked in different countries. There were **88** answers (30.1%) of this kind concerning mother's work abroad and **154** answers (29.2%) concerning father's migration.

Table 2. The country of the present labour stay of pupils' parents.

The country of the present labour stay	In what country is your mother now?		In what country is your father now?	
	n	%	N	%
Belgium	24	33,3%	22	22,3%
Italy	14	19,4%	3	3,1%
Germany	8	11,1%	10	10,4%
UK	3	4,2%	9	9,4%
USA	11	15,3%	35	36,4%
Other European countries	11	15,3%	14	14,6%
Other non-European countries	1	1,4%	3	3,1%
Total	N=72	100,0%	N=96	100,0%

The next question concerned the present state of the labour migration. We asked whether the pupils' parents work abroad now, and if so, in what country do they work? We received the following answers: 72 pupils (4.6%) stated that their mother presently stays abroad, and 96 pupils (6.1%) stated that about their fathers. Therefore, parents (either father or mother) of only every tenth respondent worked abroad during our survey. One can notice a smaller difference between the number of men and

³ The predominance of men in labour migration from Poland to Germany is a well known phenomenon. Ewa Kępińska connects it with a structure of the job offers in Germany.

women working abroad at present (Table 2) in comparison with the answers concerning the past (Table 1). It does not necessarily mean that the number of women working abroad increases. Another explanation is that men usually work abroad longer than women.

A majority of respondents' mothers were working in Europe at the time of the survey (83.3%, n=60), usually in Belgium or Italy. The fathers' place of employment was also usually in European countries (although less frequently than mothers) (60.4% n=58), the most frequently in Belgium. However, every third respondents' father working abroad stayed in the USA.

4. Migration plans of young people

One can expect that public debates on migration should be interesting for the young people who were the subject of this research (Cieślińska 2006, p. 174). Many pupils experienced labour trips of their parents abroad, many of them plan to work abroad themselves. In fact, those who do not plan any labour migration are rather an exception. In our survey the following answers were obtained to a question on their plans to migrate in the future:

“Do you plan to work abroad in the future?”

1. *“Yes”* - 46.1%, *n*=718.
2. *“No”* - 6.6%, *n*=103.
3. *“I do not know”*, 47.3%, *n*=736.

We see that almost half of the respondents plan to work abroad, even more respondents are undecided, but only 6.6% of pupils (103 persons) do not intend to work abroad in the future.

In another survey carried out among students in 2007 (Toczydłowska, Otoka 2007, p.12), the question was formulated differently and the following answers were received: 68% of students planned a trip abroad (2/3 of them planned to leave for economic reasons) and 32% of examined students did not plan to leave in the near future (within the next few years).

It is worthwhile to compare our results with a survey on a similar subject carried out earlier, in 1992, on a nation-wide sample of young people. The results of that survey have shown that only 5% of young people did not intend to leave Poland (in 1991 only 2%). At that time as many as 63% of respondents planned to leave to work abroad, and 15% planned a permanent stay abroad (Fatyga 1993). Therefore, although results obtained in our survey are still not optimistic as far as the problem of keeping human resources in the country is concerned, these results are much better than the previous research results. However, nowadays it is much easier to go abroad and the plans for migration have a higher probability of realization.

Interestingly enough, in our survey we noticed that migration plans of young people are correlated with their value hierarchies. For those planning labour emigration, the most important values are health (21.6%), happy family life (19.4%) and reciprocal love (15.6%). The respondents who do not plan to emigrate mentioned the same values, but in a different order: reciprocal love (22.3%), happy

family life (15.5%), health (9.7%) and friends (9.7%). The correlations were statistically important ($\chi^2 = 91.3$). It seems that in this case, those planning migration show considerable realism, because good health is crucial for successful economic migration.

Migration plans of pupils were also connected with their attitude towards faith and religious practices (although the correlations were not very high, $\chi^2 = 11,36$). Among the respondents planning international labour migration there were more people who were hesitant and undecided about their religiosity (Table 3) than people participating in religious practices (Table 4).

From Table 3 it follows that those pupils who do not plan labour emigration are more frequently decisive in religious matters. Most of them declared the following: “*I am religious*”, “*I am deeply religious*” or “*I am unreligious*”. The rarest declarations in this group were “*hesitant in religious matters*” or “*undecided*”. These results seem to be quite consistent. The respondents who were undecided about their migration plans were also undecided about religious matters. This small example probably indicates a characteristic feature of some respondents, who consequently admit a lack of a decisive opinion, irrespective of the question.

Table 3. Migration plans and attitude towards religiosity.

Do you plan to work abroad in the future?	Relation to faith				
	Deeply religious	Religious	Hesitant, but bound to the religious tradition	Indifferent to religious matters	Atheist (unreligious)
<i>Yes</i>	43,1%	45,4%	45,6%	53,8%	45,0%
<i>No</i>	10,2%	7,1%	4,2%	4,4%	8,3%
<i>I do not know</i>	46,7%	47,5%	50,2%	41,8%	46,7%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
N= 1547	n=167	n=877	n=285	n=158	n=60

$$\chi^2 = 11,36$$

Table 4. Frequency of participation in religious practices and migration plans

Do you plan to work abroad in the future?	How often do you participate in religious practices?			
	Every week	Every month	Several times in a year	Never
<i>Yes</i>	44,2%	44,4%	48,5%	55,0%
<i>No</i>	8,1%	5,6%	4,7%	6,2%
<i>I do not know</i>	47,7%	50,0%	46,8%	38,8%
Total	n=719 100,0%	n=369 100,0%	n=301 100,0%	n=129 100%

$$\chi^2 = 10,79$$

From Table 4 it follows that respondents planning labour emigration or who are undecided have more lax attitudes to religious practices than those who do not plan to leave to work abroad. If the investigated pupils follow their declarations, then the persons less engaged in religious practices and faith will more frequently leave for abroad. More religious youth will more frequently stay in the home country.

5. An attitude of students to labour immigrants

Emigration and immigration are two sides of the same phenomenon. However, emigration and immigration are not identical, even when they concern the same people. A more complete picture of migration can be obtained looking from both perspectives - emigration and immigration. This was the motivation behind asking pupils about their attitude to immigrants: “*Should foreigners, in your opinion, arrive to work in Poland?*”. The obtained results show that every third pupil has a positive attitude to the immigrants’ work in Poland answering “yes” (33.5%, n=515). A smaller number of pupils answered “no” (29.8%, n= 459). However, the most frequent answer was “*I do not know*” (36.7%, n=564). It turns out that the attitude to immigrants is correlated with the respondents’ marks (test $\chi^2=26.6$, a statistically meaningful dependence). The better a student performs at school, the more frequently his/her attitude to labour immigration was positive and vice versa; the worse marks, the greater the bias against foreign employees (Table 5).

Table 5. School marks and attitude to foreigners’ work in Poland.

<i>Should foreigners, in your opinion, arrive to work in Poland?</i>	Excellent marks: 5-6	Good marks: 4	Average marks: 3	Low marks: 1-2
<i>Yes</i>	43,2%	37,8%	29,4%	24,1%
<i>No</i>	24,7%	25,8%	32,5%	39,8%
<i>I do not know</i>	32,1%	36,3%	38,1%	36,1%
Total %	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
n	n=162	n=563	n=680	n=133

Opinions of pupils on the foreigners’ work were also correlated with the pupils’ sex ($\chi^2 =57.0$). The positive attitude was more frequent with girls than with boys, whose attitude was often negative (Table 6).

Table 6. Attitude to foreigners' work and the respondents' sex

<i>Should foreigners, in your opinion, arrive to work in Poland?</i>	Respondent's sex	
	Female	Male
<i>Yes</i>	38,4%	29,6%
<i>No</i>	20,2%	37,8%
<i>I do not know</i>	41,4%	32,5%
Total	n= 693 100%	n=864 100%

We do not notice other statistically important dependencies concerning answers to this question. One should admit a considerable bias in Polish public opinion concerning labour immigration to Poland. Poles usually extend respect and hospitality to foreigners, but young people's answers concerning immigrants' work are, to some extent, slightly worrying. Only every third respondent declared the positive attitude to the paid work of immigrants.

6. Academic debates

Higher education students are more likely to realize their migration plans than schoolchildren who have got more time to change their preferences. For the former, labour migration is a feasible option. First, being of age, they can work abroad during their holidays. Second, studies are the last and deciding stage of education preparing young people for professional work. The questions concerning where to work, in what capacity, whether to leave Poland or stay at home, arise already during the studies. The questions are urgent and need prompt answers. Students organize debates and discussions in order to acquaint themselves with different arguments for and against labour emigration which might testify to the fact that they seriously consider leaving for abroad. On the other hand, these debates may, to some extent, popularise life choices associated with working abroad.

The series of debates on labour emigration organized by students from the Association “Kuznia Talentów” (attached to the Faculty of Economics at the University of Białystok), started at the end of February 2007. The debates were carried out under the banner “*Exodus. Our or foreign interest*”. The information about debates was disseminated through colour posters at the University premises, by news in the local media and by the Internet (on the Homepage of the University of Białystok). The discussions about migration were one of the attractions of the Faculty Days. Another debate was organized by the Sociology Student Circle during the annual Week of Arts under the banner “The last one switches off the light or the labour emigration of young Poles”. The debate was organized in May, just before holidays when the departure season starts.

The organizers planned to devote one of the first debates to economic questions. However, it turned out immediately that the topic of labour migration, although economic by definition, has many other aspects. The group of experts included professors of economics, a sociologist, representatives of local authorities and of the staff of the “careers office” attached to the University of Białystok. An opening address presented preliminary results of the survey carried out among students (Toczydłowska, Otoka 2007 pp.7-17)⁴.

The situation on the labour market was indicated as a key to understanding migration. The investigated students estimated the unemployment level as higher than the actual, although they

⁴ The survey results presented during the first debate concerned students of the economic faculty (n=91) and focused on problems of labour and unemployment in the region, activities of the investigated students on the labour market, and the students' participation in migrations. In my article I use final results of the survey, comprising the total sample (430 respondents, from 19 to 26 years old), published in the technical report: K. Toczydłowska, Ż. Otoka, "Exodus – nasz czy cudzy interes?", *Stowarzyszenie Kuznia Talentów*, Białystok 2007).

admitted that they had no problems with finding a job (more than half of them, 55.7%, believed that one can easily find a job). The students of economics participating in the survey thought that the unemployment exceeded 18% while, according to the GUS (the Central Statistical Office) data, the unemployment level in February 2007 was 13.6%. In the case of the total sample (N=430) the students' opinions on unemployment differed from the official GUS data even more. According to the respondents, the unemployment in the region was as large as 20.85%. The researchers were rather surprised by that divergence. The respondents evaluated the local labour market much more pessimistically as compared to the actual situation. The experts noticed that the pessimistic evaluation could be justified because the job offers available usually did not match the financial aspirations and professional qualifications of the people looking for a job. Such offers are not taken into account. It turns out that university education is not really advantageous for finding a job both in Poland and abroad. More job offers are directed at manual workers who are needed for simple jobs, which do not require long education. One in three respondents (33%) have already worked abroad.

In the light of the survey results, the accession of Poland to the European Union is perceived by students as an extension of the labour market. More than half of the respondents (54.8%) believe that the situation on the local labour market in our region has improved after accession to EU, 40.1% think that the situation is the same, and only 5% indicated that the situation on the labour market has changed for the worse (Toczyłowska, Otoka 2007, p. 11).

The problem is, however, that labour abroad is still connected with professional degradation. A typical example is the employment of college or university graduates, in the "old" EU countries, in simple manual jobs like washing up, cleaning or construction work. However, there is a wider choice of good job offers when the immigrant has a good command of the language of the receiving country and when the employment has been arranged prior to the departure. In that case the immigrant goes to a definite place in order to take up a job possibly commensurate with his professional qualifications. The experts warned students against unprepared emigration. The more planned and prepared the departure, the more satisfaction from the employment abroad. From the Białystok students' survey it follows that only 41% of the respondents made any preparation prior to the departure - mostly language courses, verifying information about the receiving country and searching for jobs abroad. One of the experts said that the greatest disappointment with the labour migration is expressed by those who had left Poland without contacts, without the command of the language, and without money. During their stay abroad they experience marginalization from the very beginning because they cannot manage by themselves, they lose in the confrontation with the host community and often end up in the street as homeless, unemployed and helpless.

The economic experts have indicated that a remedy for the bad situation on the Polish labour market would alleviate the process of labour emigration. In other words, very bold reforms of the economic system are necessary and, especially, the idea of the welfare state should be seriously revised. Labour emigration is usually not caused by a lack of jobs, but rather by low salaries (at least lower than the expectations of the people who are looking for a job). Thus, one can hope that an appreciation of the Polish currency and higher salaries on the Polish labour market will reduce the emigration flow. The graduates or undergraduates have another problem: a lack of offers matching their formal qualifications. Most of the experts participating in the debate believed that self-employment will help solve the problem of unemployment. This proposal would be attractive and recommendable, provided that people with university degrees have suitable professional experience (which is not common) or qualifications, which would enable them to start their own businesses. This is not the case, however. Nowadays, young people frequently study at faculties, which are attractive in terms of studying, but not attractive in terms of labour market demand. Graduates from such faculties have difficulties in getting jobs as there is no demand for them. Cost-free education remains within the reach of the majority of young people. It seems to exempt them from reflections upon labour market demand as far as the application of acquired knowledge is concerned.

During the discussion attention was drawn to high labour costs (it also concerned self-employment) which have caused labour to become a kind of “luxury”, accessible only to people with a relatively high income. Indeed, suppose that a young man can earn 1000 PLZ per month at the beginning of his career. Every month he has to pay more than 700 PLZ (obligatory social insurance and taxes), even when working on his own. Subtracting the labour costs from earnings we arrive at less than 300 PLZ, which is highly insufficient to make a living.

Young people admitted that they simply feared to start a business of their own. A female student tried to convince others that working on one’s own is not difficult. She made an argument that one can get an advantageous financial support for business start-up. Yet the question of who would run a business for several years until it starts bringing in profits remains. Nowadays (February 2007) business activity resembles an expensive hobby that is difficult to develop without a constant inflow of cash from an external source. This probably explains the paradox why some people are overworked, having full-time jobs and running private businesses, while others suffer constant unemployment.

An advantage of employing young and inexperienced candidates could be a relatively low salary they may be paid. However, this is not possible due to high labour costs and increasing financial demands of young people. Moreover, low salary offers are often comparable with unemployment benefits and, therefore, hardly attractive for anybody.

Sociological observations (Prof. T. Popławski) indicate that family businesses manage better on the market. Suggestions have been made that family based companies are economically profitable. The problem is, however, that the family as a form of social life is going through a crisis. Young people postpone getting married; we observe voluntary singleness, a trend for living alone or planning small families (one or two children). Labour emigration additionally deters people from realizing their family plans. We arrive at a vicious circle: lack of employment opportunities and families of one's own (postponing procreation) aggravates the unfavourable situation of young people. Indeed, from the discussion it followed that single people are more exposed to social exclusion, marginalization and poverty than married people. On the other hand, participation of married people in international migration also has some evident drawbacks. Typically, married men and women usually emigrate alone leaving their spouses behind. According to the statistical data from the towns with high intensity of international migration (Mońki, Siemiatycze in the Podlasie region) such a pattern of migration increases the probability of a divorce. Yet in a large article in a local newspaper the part of the discussion devoted to the family dimension of migration was completely unrecognized.

During the debate, attention was drawn to different profitability levels of emigration, namely, micro-reasonableness and macro-reasonableness. What is profitable to an emigrating individual does not have to be profitable to the emigrant's sending country and vice versa. Emigration can be very profitable for an individual who makes the decision with a profit maximizing objective in mind. On the other hand, the loss of human capital is not advantageous to the state and the nation,. For instance, emigration has immediate negative consequences for the state budget, as an exodus of members of working-age population means a loss of taxpayers.

The economic debate was very heated and not only experts, but also many people from the audience actively participated in the discussion. At the end of the debate one of the participants noticed that the discussion, in principle, encouraged students to emigrate. In a local newspaper (Kurier Poranny)⁵ one could find an alternative summary of the debate. The main topics of the debate were said to be the *reasons for intensive emigration of young people abroad and methods to keep them home*. In the second part of the article opinions of merely two experts were cited - a sociologist Tadeusz Popławski Ph.D. and an economist Robert Ciborowski Ph.D.

Prof. Popławski noticed that *“migration of people is a natural and inseparable element of every society. Nowadays, it becomes a pathological phenomenon in our country, especially in our region. Under our eyes, young, ambitious and educated people leave for abroad. The result is that the*

⁵ „Kurier Poranny” 3.03.2007, supplement „Obserwator”.

economies of Great Britain, Ireland, and other countries open to foreign labour force flourish; and we pay for that"⁶. In his statement for the newspaper Prof. Popławski focused mainly on the Polish educational system which is not adapted, in his opinion, to the needs of the labour market. Students are not taught practical skills and useful knowledge. *"As a result young people are not able to operate on the labour market. Discouraged by their own ignorance and constant passiveness, they choose countries where it is easier to get a job and receive higher earnings"*.

Prof. Ciborowski, an economist, noticed that *"the situation on the labour market has not changed for many years"*. Therefore, the problem of migration is very dangerous also in the economic context because the only solid capital in Poland are its citizens, particularly young people who, unfortunately, look for the best environment for their development also abroad. The economist supposes that a possible recipe to amend the emigration flow is the development of self-employment. He adds, however, that *"in Great Britain one can establish a firm in 15 minutes; income tax is 10%. What about Poland? Setting up your own firm takes up to two months, and the income tax is 19%"*⁷. Therefore, until these numbers change, we cannot expect that young people will stay in their homeland.

The next debates considered sociological, psycho-philosophical, legal and practical aspects of emigration. Experts in particular fields related to those topics were invited. The participants of the last debate were not only experts (mainly researchers), but also high municipal officials, including the president of Białystok. The debate was intended as a summary but it turned out that it was difficult to sum up the current phenomenon. Both, advocates of emigration and their opponents, were quite unwilling to change their positions. Some experts had pessimistic opinions on the consequences of mass emigration but others disagreed. One of the experts, a professor of economics and a businessman in one, argued (Galbraith 1987) that migration is one of the most efficient methods of fighting poverty. Therefore, he treated emigration of young Poles as a positive phenomenon.

As previous debates had shown, the participants of the discussion agreed that the situation on the labour markets in Western Europe was very good for young Polish people. They can easily find jobs, although mainly blue-collar ones, because *"young people from the West are too lazy and too fastidious to work"*⁸. However, students would like to learn something abroad as well. Yet one of the debaters strongly questioned the educational character of labour migration. She asked rhetorically what a student or a university graduate can learn on construction sites. In her opinion **economic objectives of emigration exclude educational objectives**.

⁶ Citations from „Kurier Poranny” 3.03.2007, supplement „Obserwator” (translated by the author).

⁷ Citations from "Kurier Poranny" 3.03.2007, supplement "Obserwator" (translated by the author).

⁸ An opinion from the audience during the debate.

During the sociological debate, the invited sociologist Prof. Andrzej Sadowski (Dean of the Faculty of History and Sociology) pointed out that working in the West has become a fashion among students. *“It is not only well perceived, but even necessary to go to the West. Such trips are immanent to youth culture. The cultural attraction is additionally enhanced by the ease of mobility. Usually either the mother, other relatives or an acquaintance of a potential migrant already work in the West and prompt the arrival: “come, we have jobs”. A young man needs money. Young people can leave because they are not burdened with a family.”*⁹

During the philosophical and psychological debate the discussion included questions concerning the influence of emigration on the psychic condition of a migrating individual. The students simply asked whether *participation in migration changes anything?* One of the invited experts, doctor of psychology Andrzej Dakowicz, explained that *“emigration experience affects people in different ways, depending on the individual’s personality; but if one faces difficulties abroad, e.g., in finding a job, then such an experience may be aggravating, as it enhances a conviction about one’s own inability to manage in life.”*

The legal and political debate was dominated by the problem of tax regulations, as one of the invited experts represented the Tax Office. She clearly stated that staying abroad does not exempt anyone from tax obligations. Living and working abroad is connected with the necessity of paying taxes in the home country. As far as taxes are concerned, the crucial point is the taxpayer's place of residence. In the case of migrants, another criterion is also applied, namely the so called “centre of personal matters”. If this “centre” (e.g., a flat, a family) is in Poland and one can suppose that the emigrant will return home, then it is necessary to pay taxes on income earned abroad in Poland. Several days later in a local newspaper one could find a short note on the taxation of the income earned abroad where those remarks were confirmed¹⁰. The state strives to keep citizens home binding them by means of taxes. Yet at the same time the citizens are being discouraged from temporary, seasonal migration, and permanent migration becomes a preferential option: *“if you come back, you will have to pay the tax on income earned abroad”*.

The debate entitled *“The last one turns off the light”* was also organized by students and drew a very large audience. One of the experts, showing statistical data, tried to disprove of the exaggeration of the migration problem and to shake off popular opinions concerning the scale of labour migration. He presented surveys' results and data indicating that fewer people (as compared to commonly shared opinions) emigrated from Poland. That particular debate was intended to close the discussion on labour

⁹ A fragment of unauthorized statement by Prof. Sadowski (translated by the author).

¹⁰ „Kurier Poranny”, 26.03.2007, p. 10.

migration but, similarly to the former debates, it revealed further questions which have no simple and quick answers.

Conclusions

International labour migration has become one of the main topics systematically appearing in the public debate. It seems that one cannot ignore or conceal this issue as it concerns a very large number of people. Moreover, it concerns people who are young, well educated and very important for the future of the state. Discussions about migration have become an indirect form of a critical examination of the state's authorities, who lose human capital due to poor governance. Public opinion has an effect on government policy. In this case, however, it is difficult to foresee the direction of this effect, as public expectations towards politicians have not been clearly specified yet.

The activity of students who have taken up and popularised the topic of labour migration has made this issue both noticeable in the local media and of interest to the public opinion. The debates organized by students, with participation of research workers, politicians and representatives of local authorities, have shown that young people want to discuss this topic. The subject is not easy. Young people search for answers concerning their own future. They want to make decisions in a rational and unconstrained way. Actually, emigration is a result of pressure, rather than a free choice. It becomes a necessity when graduates cannot find employment or when too low salaries do not allow to realize life plans and to set up families.

Labour emigration is not only a subject of social debates, research and articles in the press, but its evidence appears also in movies, television and theatre. A popular TV series "Ranch", broadcast every Sunday in prime time on the main channel of the Polish public television, also touches the problem of migration. The main female character is a child of emigrants. As an adult she returns home to her grandmother's estate. The return to her homeland allows her to find her own place in the world and the lost sense of life. The series shows a world of ordinary people from remote provinces, who also experience labour migration. The process is presented as an opportunity to increase one's living standards after returning home.

One can have an impression that the tools which form public opinion, such as debates, TV programmes and press articles, are purposely used to exert an indirect influence on migration processes and on individual decisions. Even news services present many examples from the life of labour emigrants. Emigration is not a new phenomenon. In Poland it has lasted for many years, but only in recent months, after Poland's accession to the EU, it has become an object of keen interest. It seems that a turning-point in the approach to labour emigration was the discovery of labour camps in Italy, where seasonal workers from Poland were treated as slaves. This was a striking example of dangers,

sometimes even mortal ones, resulting from the participation in labour migration.

In the present demographic situation (fast ageing of the society and fertility below the replacement level) mass emigration of young people is especially threatening to the state. The state, abandoned by dynamic, young and well educated individuals, will not be able to fulfil its rudimental tasks. This “quiet dismantling” of the state can effectively lead to its fall. Unfortunately, labour migration becomes more and more popular and the society becomes accustomed to this phenomenon. In such a situation changing pro-emigration attitudes can be difficult.

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