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## Which Polish migrant organizations in Europe can survive and thrive?

This issue of CMR Spotlight is devoted to Polish immigrant organizations, and a project aimed at assessing and identifying factors contributing to their current status in Europe (Germany, France, Great Britain, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain). If you want to know all about the organizations, read below and consult the new open access [book](#) ➡



*"Polish migrant organization in Europe. In search of a new model" by Michał Nowosielski and Mariusz Dzięglewski*

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# Which Polish migrant organizations in Europe can survive and thrive?

Key indicators of the situation of Polish immigrant organizations in selected countries

Mariusz Dzięglewski, Michał Nowosielski

Even though Polish immigrant organizations (PIOs) in Europe operate in differing circumstances in various countries, the data from our research project enabled us to make a general diagnosis of the factors affecting their situation. The organizations considered in our project were quite diverse, but the factor that most determined their current success was the time of their creation. This perception was common to the respondents regardless of their host country (with the exception of those countries where Polish immigration is a recent phenomenon). The organizations that the respondents called the “old” or “historical” ones were founded at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, or after the Second World War and into the late 1980s by successive streams of immigrants. The organizations the respondents called the “new” ones were mainly established after 2004, but some of the respondents included organizations created in the late 1990s in this category as well. One of the key differentiating characteristics of the two categories is the stereotypical perception of

the “old” organizations as having been founded by “fighters for independence,” that is, by “political” or “intelligentsia” migratory streams, whereas the “new” organizations involve economic migrants with low cultural capital. In the large picture, the division between “old” and “new” organizations is significant, as the situation of these associations—though there are many similarities—differs considerably.

The situation of PIOs can be diagnosed through a comparative analysis of data from all the countries included in the study. Such an analysis reveals the PIOs’ strengths and weaknesses and allows future opportunities and threats to be anticipated from the perspective of the organizations themselves. The normative character of such a diagnosis stems from two factors: on the one hand, from the need to include the perspective of immigrants and experts, and on the other hand, from the researchers’ belief in the potential use of such a diagnosis to create migration policies that would support the further development of such organizations, while preventing the negative consequences of the existing trends.

### Strengths

In the countries studied, the most important strength of PIOs is their **human capital (the core personnel) of the organization**. The core personnel includes chairpersons and board members. In PIOs, leaders who are charismatic and ready to devote themselves to the organization play a very important role, and board members are generally among the most engaged participants. The individuals constituting the core personnel of such associations are usually responsible, highly-skilled professionals. According to many of the respondents—who were both members and non-members—some associations are identified with their leaders.

**Well-developed cooperation with Polish diplomatic missions** (Graph 1) is another strength. The respondents considered embassies and consulates to be obvious

entities to support PIOs, and PIOs view such cooperation in a positive light. Diplomatic missions may act as the patron of cultural events or coordinate activities and are the main source of income (after membership fees) for organizations’ initiatives.

PIOs provide a **very wide and varied spectrum of services**, which are addressed to different audiences depending on need. These services may involve such areas as culture, education, legal advice, and psychological support. In many countries, the services complement each other and thus create a mutually reinforcing and varied range of opportunities.

The strengths of long-established PIOs (the “old” organizations) include the **dynamic activity of their umbrella organizations, their large number of members, dense networks of personal relations with members of institutions in the host**

Graph 1. The cooperation of PIOs with other institutions

| Organizations, institutions and other bodies                           | Percentage of PIOs declaring regular cooperation |
|--|--|
| Polish diplomatic mission in the country of residence                  | 72.4%  |
| Other Polish organizations in the country of residence                 | 55.9%  |
| Polish media in the country of residence                               | 31.5%  |
| Church and religious organizations in the country of residence         | 26.8%  |
| NGOs in Poland   | 23.6%  |
| Other organizations in the country of residence                        | 22.8%  |
| Government, central authorities and bodies in the country of residence | 22.8%  |
| Local authority  | 22.8%  |
| Other Polish organizations outside the country of residence            | 22.0%  |
| Local media  | 18.1%  |
| Polish government and public institutions in Poland                    | 17.3%  |
| Regional authorities and institutions in Poland                        | 15.7%  |
| Boards of foreigners, immigrants and integration                       | 13.4%  |

Source: institutional survey (CAWI, N=190)

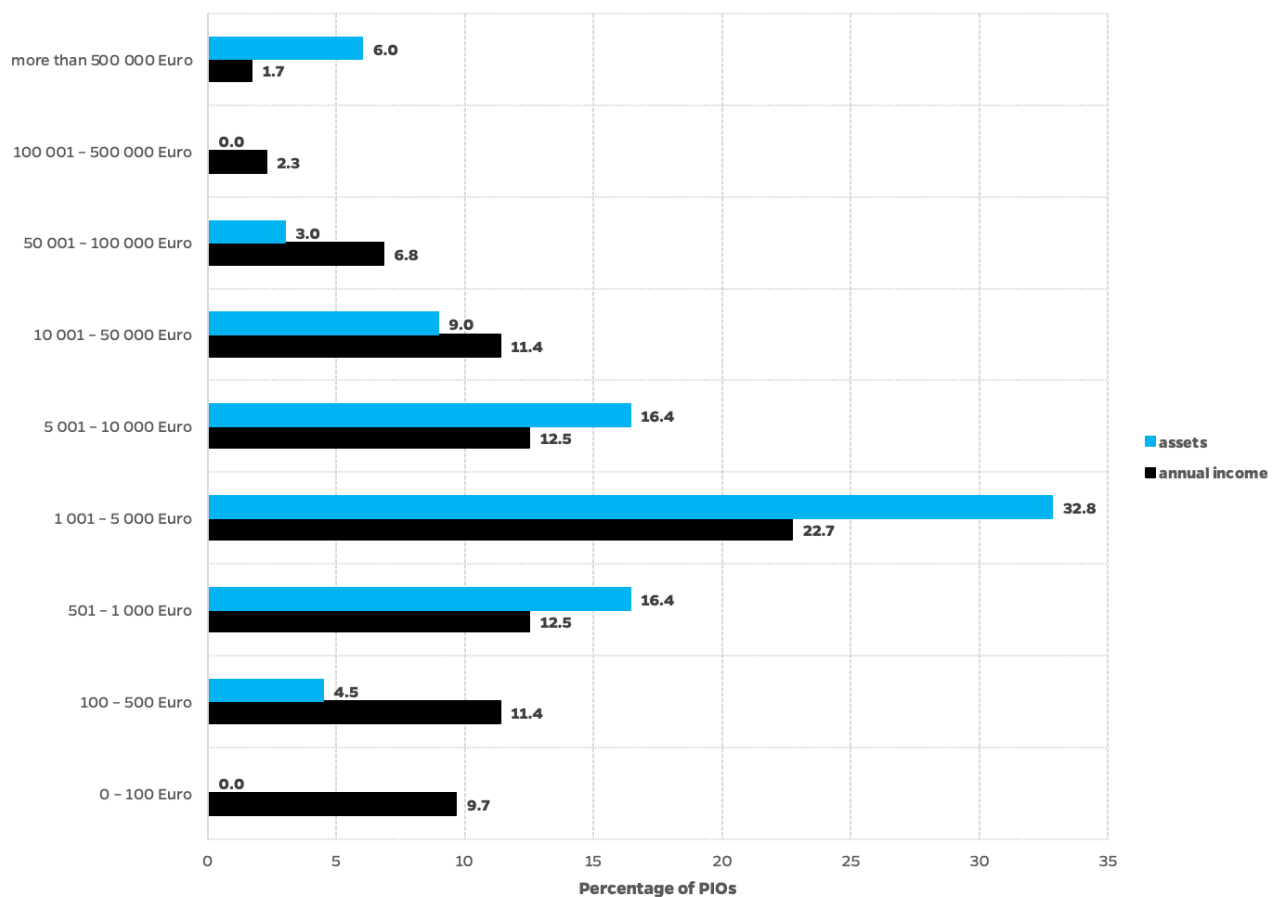
country, and the recognizability of the organization in the local society. In the case of the organizations established in the last two decades, their strengths include innovative patterns of associating (virtual communities), a high degree of openness in regard to integration with members of the host country, and the professionalization of their activities, which is especially evident in the case of organizations with a business profile.

**Weaknesses**

The main problem of PIOs in the countries studied is their **weak economic situation** (Graph 2). This situation is the result of many factors, such as very low income, a lack of assets, and a lack of stable financing, and hence a lack of financial liquidity.

Among the weaknesses of PIOs are **internal divisions**, which generate tensions even if they do not lead to open conflict. Such divisions may be based on generational,

Graph 2. Annual income and assets of the organizations studied (%)<sup>a</sup>



<sup>a</sup> Estimated income and assets for 2015. Just over half of the PIOs declared that they were not in possession of any assets (N=97).

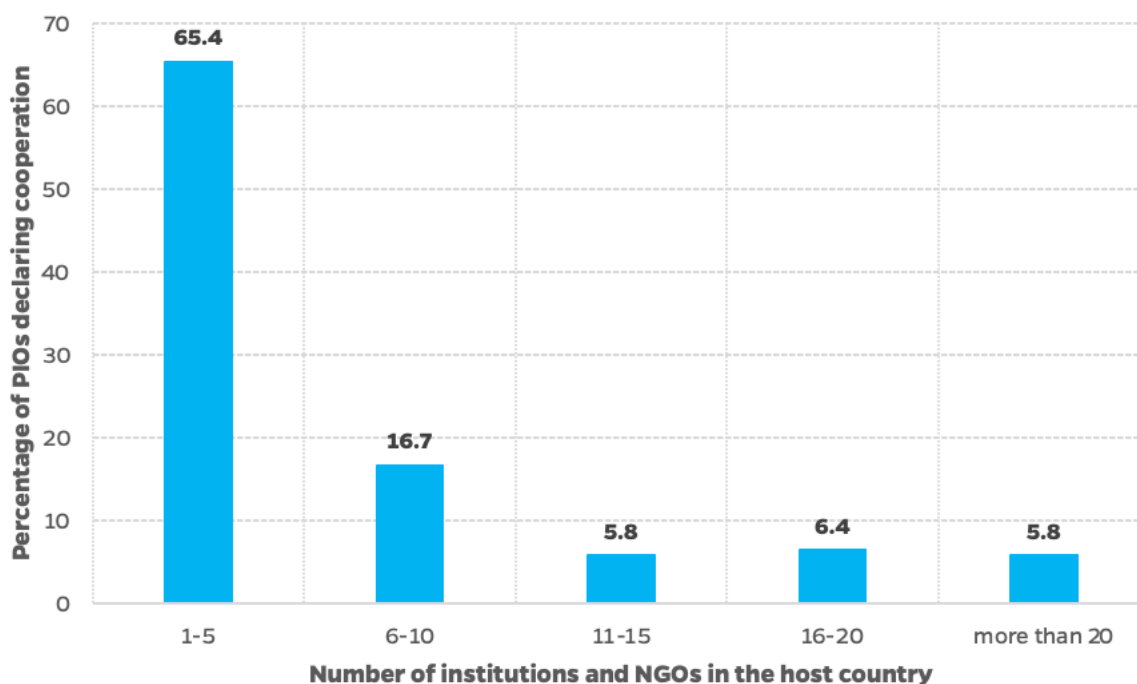
Source: institutional survey (CAWI, N=190)

political, ideological, or class differences and impact the perception of an organization’s goals and way of functioning. Despite their declarations of cooperation, PIOs can generally be characterized as distancing themselves from other Polish associations in a given country. Cooperation is usually superficial and rarely leads to the common achievement of statutory goals. The level of integration and coordination among organizations in the selected countries is low. **There is no country where one umbrella organization is widely accepted as representative of the Polish community**, despite the fact that there are federations consisting of numerous associations.

However, usually in countries where such organizations exist, there are two or more associations competing with each other for the right to represent the Polish community. The consequence is the invisibility of PIOs in public debate.

PIOs can be characterized as having a **weak degree of cooperation with public institutions and NGOs in their host countries** (Graph 3). Some organizations, depending on their profile, length of activity, and host country, have developed effective cooperation with local institutions. Such cooperation may involve benefitting from funds, free access to premises, and having non-Poles as board members. From the

Graph 3. Number of organizations said to cooperate with PIOs in the host country (N=156)



Source: institutional survey (CAWI, N=190)

perspective of local NGOs, Polish organizations are almost totally invisible and rarely cooperate.

**The lack of permanent premises** is a significant problem for many organizations. Only a few organizations own headquarters. The majority operate from the private dwelling of one of their members. For the majority of organizations, having their own headquarters is considered an unattainable goal, and those organizations that do have their own premises often face difficulties in maintaining them.

While the general membership of PIOs is stable, with a slight tendency to increase, in the case of the historical associations we observe the opposite trend. **These**

**organizations are aging and the number of their members is shrinking** due to the natural passing of their older members. The trend is not eased by the inflow of new immigrants from Poland, because the services offered by these organizations are not attractive for the newcomers.

Another weakness of PIOs that should be mentioned is **their lack of paid personnel** (Graph 4) and the low level of activity of their members.

**Opportunities**

**Those PIOs with a professional profile** tend to be dynamic; their mode of operation may suggest opportunities for future development. Such organizations—which were also established in previous periods of

Graph 4. Personnel and employment plans: paid personnel and volunteers (percent of organizations)

| Country     | Volunteers | Paid personnel     |                 | Plans for the next year |               |
|-------------|------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------|
|             |            | Permanent position | Occasional work | Employment              | No employment |
| Sweden      | 45.5       | 8.3                | 8.3             | 0.0                     | 27.0          |
| Norway      | 37.5       | 25.0               | 37.5            | 37.5                    | 25.0          |
| Ireland     | 89.5       | 63.2               | 5.3             | 26.3                    | 42.1          |
| UK          | 66.7       | 52.4               | 19.0            | 23.8                    | 47.6          |
| Netherlands | 54.5       | 8.3                | 16.7            | 0.0                     | 41.7          |
| Germany     | 69.6       | 8.3                | 16.7            | 9.1                     | 36.4          |
| France      | 59.6       | 16.7               | 27.1            | 8.7                     | 41.3          |
| Spain       | 90.9       | 18.2               | 18.2            | 10.0                    | 70.0          |
| Italy       | 65.4       | 11.5               | 26.9            | 4.0                     | 44.0          |
| Mean        | 64.3       | 23.5               | 19.5            | 13.3                    | 41.7          |

Source: institutional survey (CAWI, N=190)

Polish immigration—have been founded in almost every country by members of the youngest migratory streams. The aim of such organizations is to integrate people in a given profession, for instance engineers, psychologists, or doctors. These organizations are based on networking and do not need permanent premises for their activities. They are distinguished from the “old” professional organizations in that they operate mainly on the basis of new information and communication technologies.

For many PIOs, including the aging historical organizations, an **increasing openness to the new needs of varied audiences** could increase their viability. A significant number of organizations are making an effort to learn about these needs and meet them. They are adjusting their services to the requirements of newly arrived post-accession migrants, second- and third-generation migrants, and mixed families. Some of the associations are addressing their activities not only to members of the Polish community but also to migrants from other ethnic groups and to the host country’s population.

The rapid inflow of a significant number of post-accession migrants has been stimulating the development of Polish associations. New organizations, especially in countries where Poles have not been present long (e.g., Ireland), are creating **new models and patterns of associating**. Such organizations are based to a large extent on

communication through new technologies (social media, instant messengers). Their structure is flat and not very formal. By creating virtual communities, they activate large numbers of engaged individuals.

### Threats

The evident **atomization** among organizations is a serious threat to PIOs. Organizations ignore cooperation and concentrate on their own activities and audiences. This behavior leads to the creation of separate social enclaves in organizations which exist in close proximity but are not interested in each another. Atomization impedes or makes impossible the creation of a single umbrella organization that could represent the whole Polish community in a given country.

The **inability to create a single umbrella organization** means that PIOs and the whole Polish community residing in a given country may be pushed to the periphery of the public sphere. The invisibility of PIOs in the public debate can be observed even in those countries where Polish migrants constitute the most numerous group of foreigners.

Another threat to the existence of PIOs is the gradual **aging of their most dedicated members**, especially their leaders and board members. Due to young migrants’ reluctance to get involved in such activities, PIOs are usually managed by individuals over 35, who serve as leaders several terms. An aging membership is especially evident in the “historical” organizations, where loss of

members is significant and the influx of new members is at too low a level to ensure the entity's survival.

Due to the low level of engagement of ordinary members and their reluctance to do voluntary work for the organization, the burden of the association's activities generally falls on the shoulders of the board members. They are thus overloaded with work, and the excess of obligations may lead to the **burnout of the organization's most dedicated members**.

The lack of a stable source of financing, dependence on the grant system, and economic instability are serious threats to the maintenance of organizations. In extreme cases, lack of resources (e.g., for the maintenance of an organization's premises) may lead to **debts and hence to suspension of the organization's activities**.

One evident threat to PIOs is their concentration on internal integration within the Polish migrant community and their **underestimation of the benefits to be derived from integration with the society of the host country**. In extreme cases, such a direction of the organization's activities may lead to the isolation or even ghettoization of the Polish migrant community.

All the above-mentioned key measures of the situation of PIOs in the countries studied are presented in Graph 5.

### Research project

This CMR Spotlight is based on the results of the project "Polish immigrant organisations in Europe" which was conducted in the years 2015-2020 and supported by the National Science Centre (grant number 2014/14/E/HS6/00731). The objectives of the project were twofold: diagnostic – assessing the situation of PIOs in nine European countries and explanatory – identifying historical, social and political factors affecting this situation. The fieldwork consisted of a quantitative approach – an institutional survey among PIOs (N=185), a CAWI (N=5000) among Polish immigrants in the selected countries, as well as qualitative studies – case studies of PIOs (N=9x5), interviews with representatives of the institutions of the country of residence involved in planning and implementing an integration strategy (N=9x7), experts (N=9x7), as well as representatives of the country of origin responsible for Polish diaspora policy (N=25). Apart from that, a thorough desk-research was conducted about immigration and integration policies of the countries of residence, as well as dynamics and history of Polish migration to those countries and the development of PIOs. That allowed an in-depth analysis of the PIOs' situation in each of the selected countries.

For more information on the project see: [www.poie.uw.edu.pl](http://www.poie.uw.edu.pl).



Graph 5. SWOT analysis of the situation of PIOs in the countries studied

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>STRENGTHS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the human capital of the core personnel of the organization, the charisma and dedication of the leaders and board-members</li> <li>• the support of, and well-developed cooperation with, Polish diplomatic missions</li> <li>• the wide and varied spectrum of services provided</li> </ul> <p><i>Organizations with a long history (France, UK, Sweden):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the dynamic activities of umbrella organizations</li> <li>• the large number of members</li> <li>• social networking with institutions of the host country</li> <li>• recognizability in local communities</li> </ul> <p><i>Organizations with a brief history (Ireland, Italy):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• innovative patterns of associating (virtual communities)</li> <li>• a high degree of openness toward integration with members of the host country</li> <li>• the professionalization of activities</li> </ul> | <p><b>WEAKNESSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a weak economic situation: very low income, unstable sources of financing, lack of financial liquidity, lack of assets</li> <li>• the weak engagement of ordinary members, lack of paid personnel</li> <li>• lack of one umbrella organization recognized as being representative of the Polish community in relations with the government authorities of the host country</li> <li>• internal divisions based on generational, political, ideological, professional, or class differences</li> <li>• lack of coordination and cooperation among Polish immigrant organizations</li> <li>• weak cooperation with public institutions and NGOs in the host country</li> <li>• lack of permanent headquarters</li> <li>• the aging of “historical” organizations</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the dynamic development of organizations with a professional profile</li> <li>• openness to new needs of varied audiences (newly arrived post-accession migrants, second- and third-generation migrants, mixed families).</li> <li>• the stimulation of activities, new patterns of associating introduced by the inflow of post-accession migrants</li> </ul>  | <p><b>THREATS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• atomization among Polish immigrant organizations</li> <li>• inability to create one umbrella organization due to deep generational and ideological divisions; reluctance to confederate and weak support from Polish institutions in this respect</li> <li>• aging leaders and management of organizations (the concentration of power in the hands of the leader, lack of young people on management boards)</li> <li>• danger that the “historical” organizations will disappear due to their aging membership and maladjustment of services to the needs of the next generations of migrants</li> <li>• the danger of “burnout” in the case of the most dedicated members of the organizations</li> <li>• danger of activities ceasing due to a lack of financial stability and liquidity</li> <li>• lack of openness to integration with the society of the host country (ghettoization)</li> </ul> |



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