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The Pole's Card (pol. Karta Polaka) has evolved over the last fifteen years from an instrument of diaspora policy towards an effective tool of migration policy. Marcin Gońda and Magdalena Lesińska analyse the amendments in the provisions concerning the Pole's Card and discuss their impact on the migration situation in Poland, presenting the most updated data.



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# The Pole's Card as an instrument of migration policy

**Macin Gońda and Magdalena Lesińska**

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The Pole's Card (pol. Karta Polaka) has evolved over the last fifteen years from an instrument of diaspora policy towards an effective tool of migration policy. Marcin Gońda and Magdalena Lesińska analyse the amendments in the provisions concerning the Pole's Card and discuss their impact on the migration situation in Poland, presenting the most updated data.

## Introduction

When the Pole's Card was implemented in 2007, its primary aim was to enable people of Polish origin living in the former Soviet Union countries to maintain contact with Poland through easier entry and several rights during their stay there. Over time, however, the set of privileges has been broadened not only to facilitate entry and settlement in the territory of Poland but also to obtain Polish citizenship more easily. Since 2016, access to the Card has been expanded to people of Polish origin living all over the world. These changes were accompanied by an unprecedented interest in receiving the Pole's Card, which made it a significant instrument of migration policy ([Lesińska, Héj 2021](#)). The Authors analyse the motives behind the amendments to the provisions of the Act on the Pole's Card and

their impact on Poland's current migration situation.

## The Pole's Card: the origins

According to the [Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(2015\)](#), there are 15-20 million Poles and people of Polish descent living outside Poland, making the Polish diaspora one of the largest in the world. It consists of three main groups ([Lesińska, Popyk 2021](#)): (1) 'old' diaspora, which includes mostly descendants of economic migrants from the mid-19th and 20th centuries, particularly in the USA (around 9.7 million people) and Western Europe (several million); (2) kin-minorities living in neighbouring states - mostly in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine (circa 1 million) – as a result of ground-breaking historical events and changes of state borders throughout the 20th century (after World War II and the collapse of the USSR); and (3) 'new' ('post-accession') diaspora that resulted from emigration to other EU countries after 2004 and that may number up to 2 million Poles staying abroad for a long time.

Polish diaspora policy is composed of several measures targeted at various communities abroad and aimed at maintaining the links with

Poles abroad, strengthening Polish diaspora organisations, managing the network of Polish schools abroad or arranging various initiatives to preserve the cultural distinctiveness of Polish communities abroad. One of the priorities for Polish authorities is to create conditions for returning to Poland, mainly for kin-minority members in the post-Soviet states.

Over the years, the repatriation program was intended to serve the latter purpose but was limited to Polish communities living in the selected countries. The Repatriation Act of 9 November 2000 entitled only people of Polish descent from 8 out of 15 post-Soviet republics (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and the Asian part of the Russian Federation) to obtain Polish citizenship and settle in the homeland. Daily life in these countries was perceived as the harshest and therefore Poles inhabiting there were privileged to return to Poland in the first place (cf. [Nowosielski, Stefańska 2018](#)).

It shortly turned out that there was a need for a complementary legal instrument that would facilitate the arrivals in Poland and contacts with the homeland of Poles from other post-Soviet countries (members of the largest Polish minorities in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine in particular). Moreover, the repatriation system proved to be ineffective – only a few hundred people returned to Poland each year (cf. [NIK 2014](#); [Łucka 2021](#)). In result, the Pole's Card was introduced in 2007 and was addressed to kin-minorities residing in all 15 post-Soviet republics. Similar documents confirming the ties of their holders with a given

nation ('ethnic' identity cards) had already been adopted, among others, in Slovakia and Hungary ([Kopyś 2012](#); [Sendhardt 2017](#); [Lesińska, Héjj 2021](#)).

### **The Pole's Card: the evolution**

The Pole's Card was introduced by the Act of September 7, 2007 and granted persons of Polish origin from all successor states of the USSR privileged entry and rights during their stay in Poland, including the right to study, work and access to selected public services. In the following years, the Act was amended three times, expanding both the set of rights of the Card holders (the incentives to settle in Poland were significantly strengthened) and (since 2019) its geographical scope: it was broadened to people of Polish origin living around the globe.

The most important changes introduced by subsequent amendments to this Act are presented in table 1.

The political narratives that accompanied parliamentary works on subsequent amendments to the Act on the Pole's Card show that the perception of the purpose of this document has evolved over the years (cf. [Gońda, Lesińska 2022](#)). Initially, the Pole's Card was perceived only as a document symbolically confirming Polish origin and facilitating contacts with Poland by simplifying entry and stay for people of Polish descent from the post-Soviet space. Over time, in response to the growing labour market needs (labour shortages) and deepening demographic problems (low birth rate and depopulation), the Card started to be considered by the

Legal act	Main provisions
<p><b>Basic Act of 2007</b></p> <p>Act of September 7, 2007 on the Pole's Card (<i>Ustawa z dnia 7 września 2007 r. o Karcie Polaka</i>)</p>	<p>Persons entitled to receive the Card: people of Polish origin living in all 15 post-Soviet republics</p> <p>Conditions for receiving the Card:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrating the relationship with Polishness through at least basic knowledge of the Polish language as well as knowledge and cultivation of Polish traditions and customs,</li> <li>• submitting a written declaration of belonging to the Polish nation in the presence of a consul or other authorised person,</li> <li>• proving that at least one of the parents or grandparents or two great-grandparents were of Polish nationality or had Polish citizenship, or presenting a certificate issued by the Polish diasporic organisation confirming active involvement in activities for the benefit of the Polish language and culture or the Polish national minority for at least three years.</li> </ul> <p>Main rights of the holder:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• free entry into the territory of Poland,</li> <li>• free residence visa,</li> <li>• the right to work in Poland,</li> <li>• the right to register and run a company in Poland,</li> <li>• the right to study (on all education levels),</li> <li>• free access to healthcare (in emergency situations),</li> <li>• discounts for rail travel,</li> <li>• free admission to state museums.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Amendment of 2008</b></p> <p>The Act of 24 October 2008 amending the Act on the Pole's Card (<i>Ustawa z dnia 24 października 2008 r. o zmianie ustawy o Karcie Polaka</i>)</p>	<p>Extension of the group of people entitled to receive the Card:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• people who can prove Polish nationality (and not only the fact of having Polish ancestors) or having Polish citizenship in the past,</li> <li>• stateless persons living in the countries of the former USSR.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Amendments of 2016</b></p> <p>Act of November 15, 2016 amending the Act on the Pole's Card and the Act on foreigners (<i>Ustawa z dnia 15 listopada 2016 r. o zmianie ustawy o Karcie Polaka oraz ustawy o cudzoziemcach</i>)</p> <p>Act of May 13, 2016 amending the Act on the Pole's Card and certain other acts (<i>Ustawa z dnia 13 maja 2016 r. o zmianie ustawy o Karcie Polaka oraz niektórych innych ustaw</i>)</p>	<p>Main rights of the holder:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• simplified procedure for obtaining a permanent residence permit in Poland,</li> <li>• the possibility of obtaining Polish citizenship after one year of uninterrupted stay in Poland,</li> <li>• financial assistance: cash benefit for 9 months upon arrival, co-financing of renting an apartment,</li> <li>• access to Polish language courses and vocational courses.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Amendment of 2019</b></p> <p>Act of May 16, 2019 amending the Act on the Pole's Card (<i>Ustawa z dnia 16 maja 2019 r. o zmianie ustawy o Karcie Polaka</i>)</p>	<p>Extension of the group of people entitled to receive the Card:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• people of Polish origin around the world.</li> </ul>

Table 1. Amendments to the provisions of the Act on the Pole's Card in 2007-2019

authorities as an instrument of migration policy. The long-term effects of mass outflows after Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 as well as the anticipated serious demographic decline led the decision-makers to see the Polish minorities in the East as a natural

demographic reservoir, prone to quick integration after settlement in Poland. The dominant motive of Polish diaspora policy – that the state had a moral duty to support and care for Poles in the East – was partially replaced by more pragmatic arguments

suggesting that the settlement of easily integrating people of Polish origin was a necessity for maintaining Poland’s economic development ([Lesińska, Héji 2021](#); [Udrea et al. 2021](#)). Therefore, the changes to the Act on the Pole’s Card led not only to the simplification of stay and naturalization regulations for co-ethnics ([Amendments of 2016](#)) but also to expanding its territorial range to applicants from all around the world ([Amendment of 2019](#)).

It is worth mentioning that these Amendments were also influenced by the fact that a coalition of right-wing parties (led by the Law and Justice party) took power in Poland in 2015. Besides economic and demographic

argumentations, the new government put in the foreground references to the nation as an ethnic and cultural community, as well as the moral obligation to protect Polish minorities abroad as one of the priorities of diaspora policy (cf. [Nowosielski, Nowak 2016](#); [Sendhardt 2017](#); [Pudzianowska 2021](#); [Udrea, Smith 2021](#)).

The migration crisis of 2015 in Europe also had an indirect impact. It was used by right-wing politicians in the narrative about the need to privilege the returns of co-ethnics at the time of “the threat” of an influx of migrants from culturally distant countries (cf. [Adamczyk 2017](#); [Pudzianowska 2021](#)).

	2008*	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	TOTAL
<b>Belarus</b>	4 821	7 601	9021	10198	12491	13463	12835	13079	12707	15713	14624	15261	10908	9139	<b>161 861</b>
<b>Ukraine</b>	8 656	13175	8270	9223	8726	8334	9915	9533	13007	13098	15889	12737	6460	9605	<b>146 628</b>
<b>Lithuania</b>	693	1494	936	1114	786	498	450	277	386	509	529	893	547	551	<b>9 663</b>
<b>Russia</b>	719	626	462	476	516	642	559	548	545	493	923	1069	547	912	<b>9 037</b>
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	214	356	284	288	227	236	283	208	426	385	373	301	188	218	<b>3 987</b>
<b>Latvia</b>	458	470	216	146	118	118	74	50	67	93	188	122	23	33	<b>2 176</b>
<b>Moldova</b>	123	117	98	126	229	175	159	249	191	162	160	117	36	121	<b>2 063</b>
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	39	25	18	0	67	142	109	93	41	36	53	37	21	30	<b>711</b>
<b>Georgia</b>	4	10	6	9	9	17	14	10	27	50	32	31	16	12	<b>247</b>
<b>Azerbaijan</b>	22	13	0	15	16	12	13	9	12	13	29	28	15	31	<b>228</b>
<b>Armenia</b>	15	22	10	5	6	6	4	6	6	9	8	41	5	2	<b>145</b>
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	7	8	13	33	4	0	0	0	0	0	3	4	3	1	<b>76</b>
<b>Estonia</b>	0	0	1	3	0	1	2	0	2	11	1	4	2	1	<b>28</b>
<b>Other states<sup>1</sup></b>	23	38	30	23	25	39	42	43	48	79	60	192	580	556	<b>1 778</b>
<b>Podlaskie Voivodeship</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 513	4647	3137	712	1433	<b>11 442</b>
<b>Lubelskie Voivodeship</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	<b>100</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15 794</b>	<b>23 955</b>	<b>19 365</b>	<b>21 659</b>	<b>23 220</b>	<b>23 683</b>	<b>24 459</b>	<b>24 105</b>	<b>27 465</b>	<b>32 164</b>	<b>37 519</b>	<b>33 974</b>	<b>20 063</b>	<b>22 745</b>	<b>350 170</b>

Table 2. Submitted applications for the Pole’s Card between April 2008 and December 2021

Source: Data from the Central Register of Issued and Invalidated Pole’s Cards at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2022)

\*Period of April-December 2008

<sup>11</sup> Other countries where the Pole's Card was applied for, mostly the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and South America. During this period, most applications were submitted in Czechia (786).

### The Pole's Card: the data

Since the introduction of the Pole's Card in 2007, there is a visible trend of growing interest in applying for this document (see Table 2). In 2008, almost 16,000 applications for the Card were registered in Polish consulates, while a decade later the number peaked at 37,500 (the number of applications decreased slightly only during the Covid-19 pandemic). In total, over 350,000 people applied for the Pole's Card in 2008-2021, most in Belarus (162,000) and Ukraine (147,000). Around 87% of all applications were submitted in these two countries.

The number of submitted applications peaked in the years 2016-2018 – evidently, the Amendment to the Act on the Pole's Card of 2016 had a positive impact here. A significant number (about 11,500) of applications were also submitted in Poland (not only in consulates abroad). It was possible due to the establishment of special units within the voivodeship (regional) offices in the eastern part of Poland (first in Podlasie in 2017 and then in Lubelskie region in 2021) to enable foreigners of Polish descent who already reside in Poland to apply for the Pole's Card to encourage them to settle permanently in Poland. They were opened particularly for Belarusian citizens who might have had problems applying for the Card in Belarus at a

time of growing political tensions between the Lukashenka regime and Poland. Interestingly, despite broadening the geographical scope of the Act to the whole world since 2019, the Pole's Card remains popular mostly among Polish minorities in the post-Soviet countries.

Analysing the data presented above, it must be underlined that the number of applicants also includes people who have applied for the Card more than once, e.g. as a result of its expiry (after 10 years), loss, change of personal data or reaching adult age. In 2008-2021, over 130,000 Cards were re-issued because of such reasons. Despite the number of rejected applications being small (about 1,500), some Cards are also automatically cancelled once the holder obtains Polish citizenship or a permanent residence permit in Poland (about 15,000 people). All in all, the data indicate that a total of 200,000 people held a Pole's Card at the end of 2021. Taking into account that at that time up to 2 million foreigners (mostly Ukrainian nationals) lived in Poland, even 1 out of 10 of them could have received that document. The numbers show clearly that the Pole's Card has evolved from a tool addressed to Poles abroad to maintain ties with the country of origin to an effective instrument that significantly influences immigration to Poland.



#### Marcin Gońda

PhD, Assistant Professor at the Institute of Sociology, University of Lodz. He is the head of the Centre of Migration Studies, University of Lodz. He also cooperates with the Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw. He was a leader and contributor to numerous research and educational projects on migrants' integration. His research interests cover return migration and diaspora policies, educational migration, internationalisation of higher education, migration in Central and Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet area, transformation of migration policies of EU member states and implementation of qualitative research methods (including the biographical approach) in migration studies.



#### Magdalena Lesińska

PhD, political scientist, Assistant Professor and Deputy Director of the Centre of Migration Research at the University of Warsaw (CMR UW), Head of Postgraduate Studies "Contemporary International Migration Processes". Her areas of expertise are diaspora and migration policy in Poland and CEE countries, political and public participation of diaspora members in transnational space, including external voting. Currently she is the Principal Investigator in the project "Diaspora policy in the context of post-accession emigration. Comparative perspective of Poland, Hungary and Lithuania", funded by the National Science Centre in Poland.

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#### Keywords:

Poland, diaspora policy, Pole's Card, Karta Polaka

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