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Poles in Ireland: Transnational Communities in the Period of Post-Accession Migration

Are Polish migrants involved in politics? And of which country? How are they engaged in their communities? Do they transmit political norms and customs to Poland? To study the political and public participation of Polish post-EU accession migrants, Prof. Magdalena Lesińska implemented a multi-year research project at CMR – financed by @NCN_PL – focused on Poles in Ireland.

We have published our project findings in [International Migration](#), [Irish Political Studies](#), [East European Politics and Societies](#), and [Central and Eastern European Migration Review](#). Here, we present the English language summary of the new book in Polish [“Polacy w Irlandii: transnarodowe społeczności w dobie migracji poakcesyjnych”](#), which you can download in open access.



Book: *„Poles in Ireland: Transnational Communities in the Period of Post-Accession Migration”* by [Weronika Kloc-Nowak](#), [Magdalena Lesińska](#) and [Dominika Pszczółkowska](#), published by [@WydawnictwaUW](#)



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Poles in Ireland: Transnational Communities in the Period of Post-Accession Migration

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To investigate the transnational dimension of the social and political participation of Polish post-accession migrants, we decided to focus on the Polish community in Ireland. This case proved particularly interesting for several reasons. The Republic of Ireland became the main destination (after the United Kingdom) of migration of Poles in the first years after Poland's accession to the European Union. At the same time, contrary to the United Kingdom, Germany or France, it was a relatively new destination. Before 2004, the number of Poles living in Ireland was insignificant, but after Poland's EU accession, their inflow was so intense that within a short time they became the largest minority. Almost two decades after the enlargement, we can already speak about a stabilisation and the settled character of Polish migration to Ireland. This is demonstrated through the dynamic development of social networks, including associations, and the Poles' well-established socio-economic status. The number of ethnically mixed relationships and Polish children born in Ireland is growing, as well as the number of Polish organisations and schools. At the same time, the migrants keep in close touch with Poland through relations with their families and friends, frequent visits, and following Polish social media. The

Polish community has also started to become politically involved in both countries: Polish candidates take part in Irish local elections, while many Poles are still interested in the political situation in their country of origin, and vote in Polish elections.

For the above reasons, the Polish community in Ireland – as a representative of Polish post-accession migrants – proved ideal for the study of political and public participation through the analysis of forms, patterns and conditions of their participation in the political and public transnational sphere (in the country of residence and country of origin). The research presented in this book concerned the following issues: 1) the forms, spheres and scale of activities of Polish migrants in the country of residence and country of origin; 2) the most important factors influencing their participation or lack thereof; 3) the role of policies and politics of the country of origin and residence in the process of migrant participation.

Given the current dynamics of population movements in Europe and worldwide, the political and public participation of migrants is an important and timely research topic in contemporary scholarship. This is

particularly the case in the European Union countries, where citizens of other member states and foreigners with permanent residence status have a wide range of rights, including the right to vote at the local level. This means that they can be active actors in the public and political sphere simultaneously in their country of residence (as residents) and in their country of origin (as citizens). Understanding the mechanisms that condition the process of migrants' participation (or lack of involvement) is key for explaining the broader processes involving them: integration into the host society, relations with the country of residence and the country of origin.

Our research confirmed that: 1) migrant participation is diverse – it covers many levels: macro (national and transnational), meso (local community) and micro (collective and individual) and takes different forms (spontaneous and organised, formal and informal); 2) one of the most important determinants of the migrants' participation process is the extent of their rights and the practical competences and opportunities to exercise them; 3) an important role is played by the political opportunity structures in the country of residence and origin; 4) the mobilisation of migrants in the political and public sphere is not possible without the presence of leaders and organisational structures existing especially at the local level in the country of residence. The results of the quantitative and qualitative research clearly showed that the political activity of Poles in Ireland is limited by a lack of knowledge and a weak

level of interest in the politics of the country of residence, compared with a greater focus on the political situation in Poland. Poles in Ireland appear to be more involved in the social and cultural sphere than in the political one. Additionally, the social activity of this group is leader-based and prone to fluctuations depending on the leaders' personal involvement. The phase of the life cycle the leaders are in is of great importance; focusing on family and career is not conducive to public activity, but at the same time offers hope for re-activation at a later age. An important factor leading to political and social inactivity is a lack of interest in politics or even an aversion to this sphere of social life.

This monograph consists of eight chapters. **Chapter 1** outlines the dynamics of Polish migration to the Republic of Ireland in relation to the situation of the Irish economy and the changing demand for workers in the Irish labour market. It also presents the characteristics of migrants according to the Irish, Polish and European statistical data and the questionnaire survey conducted within the framework of the project. The main part of the chapter is an analysis of the situation of the Polish population in Ireland based on the 2016 Irish Census, taking into account the main changes in comparison to previous censuses. The statistics show that Polish migrants, who were few in Ireland before 2004, have become the largest group of foreigners, spread across the country, stabilised in numbers and slowly ageing. Compared to other immigrants, Poles have a high proportion of people with tertiary

education, but their employment situation is not entirely in line with their formal qualifications. The chapter also points to signs of Poles taking root in Ireland, such as the proportion of households with children, real estate ownership, an increase in the number of people with dual citizenship or declaring propensity to naturalise.

In **Chapter 2**, attention focuses on Ireland as the receiving country, since according to one of our hypotheses, the legal and political solutions in the country of residence are key factors encouraging or discouraging the involvement of migrants in various spheres of social life. Ireland is among the top ten countries with the best legal and practical integration measures (according to the MIPEX index). The authors of this index positively judged Irish rules regarding naturalisation, the broad range of legal rights and antidiscrimination practices, and support for migrant organisations. A characteristic feature of Irish policy is mainstreaming, in line with which integration practices are not directed only at migrants but are part of the general practices directed at all inhabitants of the country. The chapter presents the activities of the Irish state to integrate migrant communities within the political and public sphere since the 1990s, when Ireland started experiencing inflows. The analysis focuses particularly on the last two decades, when these processes accelerated rapidly due to the inflow of citizens of the new EU member states, including Poles. Issues pondered concern the spectrum of political rights accorded to migrants, the conditions of

acquiring Irish citizenship, the possibilities of participating in political life, and anti-discrimination laws and practices in Ireland.

Chapter 3 concerns the self-organisation of the Polish community in Ireland. It presents the main Polish organisations in the country, their spheres of activity, and how they have changed since 2004. We distinguish three periods of their activity: the boom period (2005–2008), when due to the arrival of numerous Poles, many organisations, media and other commercial and non-commercial enterprises directing their services to Poles were created. For some newcomers not yet familiar with Irish reality, these were necessary for basic purposes: looking for a job or dealing with administrative matters. This period ended with the onset of the economic crisis, which made some Poles leave. A symbolic closure of the period was also related to a certain degree of consolidation of the Polish organisations – the creation of the umbrella Forum Polonia. During the second period (2009–2015), Polish organisations began to specialise in response to the particular needs of some migrants, for example, regarding mental health. The beginning of the third period (from 2015) was marked by the change of the governing party in Poland, which brought on new rules regarding financing Polish organisations abroad. For financial and other reasons, Polish organisations started to direct their offer more often to the Irish and other national groups in the country.

Chapter 4 deals with Polish education in Ireland. Compared to the relatively slow development of political activism, education is a field of activity that is growing dynamically with the participation of dozens of teachers, several thousand Polish children, and the indirect involvement of many of their relatives. The number of Polish schools, which have been built from scratch since 2005, reached 53 in the peak year of 2017. Schools run by the Irish Polish community vary in their legal and organisational form, which affects their educational offer and accessibility to families. The chapter outlines the pathways for the establishment of the different types of schools and their links with other state and non-governmental institutions in Poland, diaspora organisations at national and supranational levels and Irish institutions. Polish teachers and methodologists have also been involved in the formulation of the language strategy of the Irish education system, developing a strong position for Polish as an available language in Irish public schools and in school-leaving examinations. This shows how, in a relatively narrow field, the synergy of the interests of host society institutions and immigrants can lead to effective cooperation.

Chapter 5 focuses on Poles in Ireland as voters. It analyses the participation of migrants in Polish parliamentary and presidential elections, as well as elections to the European Parliament. Based on data from the National Electoral Commission of Poland regarding votes cast in electoral

districts abroad, the participation trends were analysed over three decades (1990–2020). The analysis concerned the numbers of registered voters, numbers of votes cast and support for candidates and political parties, compared to votes cast in other countries and the general voting results in Poland. An important question that we address in this chapter is whether a change of country of residence influences political and electoral behaviours. Do Polish migrants follow the political situation in Poland and in their country of residence? Are they likely to vote when abroad? Are they active in other spheres, for example, organisations and associations, instead of participating in politics? The research demonstrates that although legal and institutional factors (for example, the necessity of registering to vote or the available methods of voting in electoral districts abroad) are an important determinant of electoral participation, the most important factor limiting participation is a lack of interest in politics. This is the most frequent reason for the political passivity of Poles in Ireland.

Chapter 6 focuses on the political participation of Poles, but this time as candidates and voters in Irish local elections (in which all inhabitants, irrespective of citizenship, can participate). The level of participation suggests that politics may prove to be the last and most difficult sphere of integration of Poles in the Republic of Ireland. Since Poland joined the EU and significant numbers of migrants arrived there, three local elections took place – in 2009, 2014 and 2019. Polish citizens ran a

total of 21 times (some people twice) but to date, none have won seats. Moreover, their participation as candidates and chances of being elected even seem to be diminishing. In 2009, there were nine Poles running, most as party candidates, which facilitated the task. Five years later, their number was the same but all ran as independents. In 2019, there were only three. The chapter analyses factors on the Irish and Polish community sides that determined the lack of success of Polish candidates. The influence of the country of origin also proved significant – both its diaspora policies and political divisions, which echoed among Poles in Ireland and made it difficult for potential candidates to run as representatives of the whole Polish diaspora.

Chapter 7 concerns political remittances from Ireland to Poland, transmitted by return migrants and by those who have not returned but remain in regular contact with Poland in the transnational sphere. It describes examples of people who use the experiences gained in Ireland to change the realities of Poland in various spheres of social and political life. Political remittances concern, especially, three areas: (1) the perception of minorities (ethnic, national, sexual); (2) the transparency of government and closeness of representatives to citizens; and (3) the cooperation between the authorities and other actors to achieve local economic development. The research demonstrates that political remitting does not only take place from developed to developing countries, as most of the

academic literature suggests, but also within the European Union.

Chapter 8 sums up the findings of previous chapters and attempts to look ahead at the possible scenarios for the Polish community in Ireland, in the very near and more distant future. Will they be represented in the Irish Parliament? Should we expect large numbers of returns? Although the future of the Polish diaspora in Ireland remains unknown, certain predictions can be made based on theories and other studies of migrations and the integration of migrant communities.

We believe that the most predictable scenario for Poles in Ireland is a progressively deeper integration into Irish society over time. This is evidenced by the data on Polish families with Irish-born children, investment in real estate and an increase in the number of applicants for Irish citizenship. The longer they stay in Ireland, the more anchors emerge that keep migrants in Ireland and the more they invest in a better quality of life in their area of residence. Processes are emerging that reinforce integration in a number of dimensions, including spatial dispersal, deepening contact with the host community, and stepping out of one's own ethnic environment into the wider society. These processes are supported by integration policies pursued by Ireland. One indicator of integration is the interest in politics and participation in elections in the country of residence. The results of our research clearly showed that a vast majority

of Polish migrants are interested in political events in Poland and not in Ireland. Similarly – if they participated in elections at all, it was a vote concerning Poland. It should be emphasised that these are not surprising results for migrants who are in the early stages of the process of settling in a new country. They primarily undertake integration efforts in the economic (labour market) and socio-cultural dimensions, while investing in a new field of knowledge, such as the political and electoral system and the current political situation in the country of residence, is not considered a priority at this stage. The failures of Polish candidates in the Irish local elections were mainly due to the specificity of the electoral and party system in Ireland and the style of campaigning, which differ from the Polish electoral rules, but also to the lack of knowledge and willingness to get involved on the side of Polish voters.

Research indicates that political integration comes with time, when the focus of life in the transnational space shifts from the country of origin towards the country of settlement. And even if this does not fully happen in the first generation of migrants (those who left for the new country as adults) it should certainly happen among the younger generations – those who came to Ireland as children (the so-called 1.5 generation) and those already born in Ireland. Representatives of these

generations will have better chances (and hopefully aspirations) for political careers and winning seats in the representative bodies at the local and national levels and will represent the interests of the Polish community.

The future of Poles in the Republic of Ireland remains open, but much data and numerous examples indicate that they will evolve from the current transnational community with strong links to both countries into a settled community, with Ireland as the centre of their lives. The changing nature of the Polish community on the Emerald Isle, and post-accession migrants more broadly, towards greater embedding in their countries of residence will require an adaptation of the scope of the Polish state's activities towards Poles settled abroad. Priority should be given not only to legal and consular services but also to providing them with the widest possible access to the Polish language and culture in a version attractive to younger generations already educated outside of the Polish education system. This will impact whether they will identify with Poland and mobilise to act in the interests of their community and Polish-Irish relations. Given all of the above, the social processes experienced by successive generations of Poles in Ireland need to be observed in a transnational context, co-shaped by both the country of origin and the host country.

Recommended further readings:

Fanning B., Kloc-Nowak W., Lesińska M. (2021). Polish Migrant Settlement without Political Integration in the United Kingdom and Ireland: A Comparative Analysis in the Context of Brexit and Thin European Citizenship. *International Migration* 59(1), 263–280. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12758>

Pszczółkowska D. (2023). Are They Building a “Second Ireland” in Poland? Political Remitting by Polish Migrants and Return Migrants from Ireland. *East European Politics and Societies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254221144712>

Pszczółkowska D., Lesińska M. (2022). One Step Forward, Two Steps Back in Political Integration: Why are Polish Candidates Not Making Progress in Irish Local Elections. *Irish Political Studies* 37(1), 125–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2021.1929186>

Salamońska J., Lesińska M., Kloc-Nowak W. (2021). Polish Migrants in Ireland and Their Political (Dis)engagement in Transnational Space. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 10(2), 49–69. <https://doi.org/10.17467/ceemr.2021.12>

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PhD, political scientist, Professor and Deputy Director of the Centre of Migration Research at the University of Warsaw (CMR UW). 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. She was 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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