



Western Pomeranian Experiences with Migration and Emigration: The Need for Local Solutions

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Abstract

The article describes the socio-demographic situation of Western Pomerania following Poland's accession to the EU in 2004. Western Pomerania faced a number of challenges: a brain drain, a rapidly ageing society and a shortage of workers. The region's demographic situation was particularly serious compared to Poland's other regions. However, Western Pomerania is now profiting from an inflow of migrants, especially from Ukraine, which is boosting the region's economy. The article describes the measures undertaken on the local and regional level to promote the inflow of economic migrants and to integrate them into the local society. The measures described are helping to form a broader regional strategy to tackle the challenges of people leaving the region, the ageing population and a departing workforce. The article argues that if the proper support for newcomers is provided, migration could become a positive factor for the local economy.

Keywords

Poland, Western Pomerania, Migration, Emigration, Integration

Introduction

The Western Pomeranian region of Poland is home to more than 1.7 million people. It is one of the least populated areas of the country, ranking 11 out of 16 in terms of the populations of the Polish regions (Poland, Central Statistical Office 2018). Over the last few years, the population of Western Pomerania has declined. According to demographic forecasts prepared by the Polish Central Statistical Office, by 2030 the voivodeship's¹

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population is expected to have fallen by 80,000 people (Western Pomeranian Voivodeship 2019). Furthermore, by 2030, the percentage of people aged 65 and over in Western Pomerania will be higher than the average nationwide. Western Pomerania is also facing the problem of an outflow of the population caused by economic emigration, which, in the context of decreasing unemployment, is leading to a shortage of workers.

Due to the growing standard of living in Poland, and especially in the region, and the enduring attractiveness of the European social and economic model, for several years we have observed a steady increase in economic migrants to Europe, and to Poland especially, among which Ukrainians constitute the largest group (Gorny et al. 2018).

The story of the Western Pomeranian region is a very European one. This is not only because of its history—through the centuries the wider region has formed part of Poland, Sweden, Denmark and Prussia—but also because of the present-day challenges it faces. The issues of depopulation, brain drain and a simultaneously rising number of migrants are at the top of the agendas of many EU regions. The response to these common challenges, however, cannot take the form of a one-size-fits-all approach. This article argues that regional authorities need to find the right policy tools and utilise the necessary resources to fit the local circumstances. The case of Western Pomerania certainly cannot offer a broadly applicable solution for the whole of Europe. However, it can serve as a good example of the attitude that policymakers should adopt in order to tackle depopulation and a growing hunger for workers while keeping the local population at ease with their new fellow citizens.

The rest of this article is divided into three sections. The first section discusses Western Pomerania's experiences with migration and emigration since Poland joined the EU in 2004, and provides some insights into the strategies that Europe's regions can adopt to deal with the social and economic implications of migration. The second focuses on a new project, the Western Pomeranian Migrant Support System, which was established in 2018. This project is intended to respond to economic policy by attracting foreign workers with the relevant qualifications to meet the needs of the labour market, which is suffering as a result of unfavourable demographic trends. The third and final section summarises the main arguments and presents the view of the European People's Party (EPP) Group in the European Committee of the Regions, with the aim of enabling productive discussions on migration at the subnational level.

Western Pomeranian experiences

The influx of Ukrainian citizens has had a positive impact on the economy of the Western Pomeranian voivodeship. Ukrainians come to the region to fill the staffing gaps in various enterprises, both in industry and in the service sector. The choice of Poland as the destination for economic migrants is dictated by its relatively high wages, as well as its geographical, linguistic and cultural proximity to Ukraine. Most of the Ukrainians who have immigrated to Western Pomerania are between 26 and 40 years old.

Ukrainian citizens belong to the group of foreigners for whom there is a simplified employment procedure (Poland, Official Journal 2015). This procedure allows newcomers to start legal work for a period of six months based on a declaration made by their intended employer. The procedure involves submitting a written statement to the relevant labour office of the employer's intention to employ a foreigner. This is accompanied by a letter justifying the need to contract a foreigner (usually the inability to satisfy the company's personnel needs on the local labour market) and attesting that the work will be performed according to the conditions indicated in the declaration. In 2018 the legislator introduced an additional option—the seasonal work permit. This allows foreigners to be employed for a maximum period of nine months per year.

The Polish labour market has changed dramatically in recent years. At the end of 2004—the year of Poland's accession to the EU—the registered unemployment rate in Poland was 19%, while in Western Pomerania it was 27.5% (Voivodeship Labour Office in Szczecin 2019). Thanks to actions carried out on many levels, including both local and national, and by those receiving EU funding, the situation has improved. According to a study prepared by the Voivodeship Labour Office in Szczecin, in December 2019 the registered unemployment rate in Poland had fallen to 5.2%, and in the voivodeship of Western Pomerania to 6.7% (Poland, Central Statistical Office 2018; Poland, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy 2018). There were 41,800 people registered as unemployed in the region.

Decreasing unemployment also reduces the pool of people who are actively looking for work in the jobs market, which makes it more difficult for employers to recruit new staff to meet their employment needs. By analysing the data collected in the Occupations Barometer survey, which has been conducted since 2015 in all voivodeships for the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, one can see a clear trend of an increasing deficit and decreasing surplus in the surveyed occupations. In the Occupations Barometer 2020 survey for the Western Pomeranian region, there were 39 occupations in which there was a deficit and only 2 which had a surplus (Personnel Service 2019).

The shortage of employees is alleviated by the increasing influx of foreigners who start working in industries where there is a scarcity of workers. The number of foreigners who have a valid long-term residence permit in Poland has increased by 400,000 since 2010 (Poland, Social Insurance Institute, Department of Statistics and Actuarial Forecasts 2019). According to data provided by the Polish Social Insurance Institute, this increase can also be observed in the growing number of applications by foreigners for social insurance (Poland, Social Insurance Institute, Department of Statistics and Actuarial Forecasts 2019). Businesses within Western Pomerania applied for social insurance for 29,597 people whose nationality was not Polish. Of these people, 23,317 indicated that Western Pomerania was their place of residence (data as of 31 December 2019). The demand for non-Polish employees can also be observed in the statistics of the county labour offices of the Western Pomeranian region, which in 2018 registered 59,142 declarations of employment of a foreigner. According to the data for the first half of 2019, there had already been 35,937 such declarations.

Among the main problems foreigners encounter is the fulfilment of the formal procedures required to legalise their stay and take up legal employment in Western Pomerania. As a result of their lack of knowledge of public institutions' scope of activity, some migrants have concerns about contacting them. This means that they are unable to utilise their services. Poor Polish language capabilities are also an obstacle to accessing help (Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights 2012).

Another issue for foreigners is a lack of knowledge of legal regulations in the fields of, among others, labour law, social assistance, housing, social security, education and health care. This makes it more difficult for them to access the services provided by public institutions. Some Ukrainian workers have been exposed to unequal treatment in the workplace—foreign workers often receive lower remuneration for the same work than Poles (the phenomenon of 'wage dumping'). Moreover, employers are more likely not to comply with laws on working conditions.

A majority of immigrants accept jobs that are incompatible with or beneath their qualifications, which is often due to insufficient language skills and problems with the recognition of qualifications or education from their country of origin. Foreigners often work in basic jobs and their competence varies.

The influx of foreigners has created several difficulties and challenges that the Polish administration will have to face. Lacking sufficient staffing, institutions are unprepared to handle the increasing numbers of foreigners. The lack of a comprehensive and coherent legal regulation concerning the employment of foreigners in Poland additionally hinders procedures. Furthermore, there is a lack of foreign-language skills among officials, and public administration employees have insufficient knowledge of interculturalism, with what knowledge they do have often being based on stereotypes.

Another problem is the inadequate adaptation of public spaces (for public offices, health clinics etc.); a lack of information in foreign languages; and a lack of publicly available, transparent and constantly updated information on the services provided by public institutions in foreign languages. This includes both basic information as well as more detailed information on the possibility of assistance and help with formal procedures. Currently, there are not enough information points, websites dedicated to foreign workers or telephone hotlines in the Western Pomeranian region from which immigrants can receive all the information and help they need without having to speak Polish.

In Western Pomerania there is a lack of integrated projects focused on immigrants and little coherent policy in the areas of professional activation, education, health and social assistance. The flow of information between institutions that do implement activities for immigrants is insufficient.

Taking into consideration the above, it is important to note that Western Pomerania does dispel some of the commonly accepted beliefs about migration in Europe while providing some useful insights into the economic implications for Europe's regions.

First, while it is believed that economic migrants choose primarily, and even exclusively, countries and regions with the most generous social assistance and wage conditions, the case here seems to disprove that. Factors such as cultural, geographic and linguistic proximity, as well as family and friendship ties, play a major or at least equally important role in migrants' choice of a new home.

Second, seasonal work and legal stay arrangements are strong enabling factors which facilitate national and regional institutions to meet labour demands, but which in themselves are not enough for the smooth integration of migrants. Such measures do not automatically calm social anxiety and cannot ensure that European procedures and values are respected. Additional efforts to achieve these goals are in high demand. It is through these aspects that the (highly debated) concept of a 'European way of life' is showcased. Ensuring clear and transparent procedures, equal treatment, fair working conditions, proper social protection, access to information, and access to language classes and education, and making sure that misinformation in local news is countered are some of the true attributes of the 'European way of life'. To it also belongs the willingness of newcomers to contribute to economic and cultural life, to learn the language, and to play by the written and unwritten rules of the community.

Last but not least, the investments which regions make to facilitate procedures and integration, including all of the above points, have clear economic benefits. Faster administrative procedures and better integration lead to quicker wins for the local economy.

The Western Pomeranian Migrant Support System

The regional government of the Western Pomeranian region is responding to the needs of the regional labour market through the implementation of its statutory tasks. As the analysis above shows, the economic and demographic situation in the province requires that an increasing number of employees be drawn from outside the country. It has become necessary to take systemic actions to effectively and uniformly manage migration processes.

Therefore, the Voivodeship Labour Office in Szczecin, acting on behalf of the regional government, has started to create institutional procedures for the integration of foreigners and to build a network of cooperative organisations that arrange activities for them in Western Pomerania. During several meetings and consultations with representatives of the administration, the scientific community and institutions which are currently implementing projects for foreigners, a coherent concept and framework for the project, titled the 'Western Pomeranian Migrant Support System', was discussed and created.

This project is intended to respond to the requirements of the economy by attracting foreign workers with the relevant qualifications to meet the needs of the labour market, which is suffering from unfavourable demographic trends. The aim of the project is to improve integration in the labour market and the professional mobility of migrants (and

their families) residing in Western Pomerania by building and improving a multidimensional system of support for migrants in various areas of social life. This will be implemented primarily through the operation of Local Integration Points for Foreigners in the region, whose creation will be delegated to local governments. There will also be support for administrative employees, intended to raise the level of knowledge and skills in the fields of, among others, interculturalism, security and anti-discrimination. The next important task will be to conduct a social campaign that aims to shape attitudes of openness and tolerance.

All planned activities in this project will be supported by an advisory and opinion-forming body. As part of the project, multilevel cooperation will be established with various entities, including public institutions, which will ensure the reliable implementation of the solutions developed throughout the project. The project is scheduled to cover the period June 2020–June 2023.

It is planned to establish six Local Integration Points for Foreigners, which will provide support in the fields of, *inter alia*, career counselling, legal assistance, psychological assistance and translation services. Furthermore, the project also involves the purchase of a platform for learning Polish as an additional language, as well as reimbursement for the costs of language study, including exams in Polish and courses offering qualifications for foreigners. The next step planned will be the creation of a Welcome Guide web application for immigrants in four languages.

It is also planned to develop an integration policy for migrants in Western Pomerania. The project will include a social campaign that covers immigration, integration, multiculturalism and anti-discrimination. An important part of the project will be the organisation of training courses and workshops for employers in the legal stay field and those who employ foreigners, as well as administration employees. These programmes will cover intercultural competences, ensuring security, and countering discrimination and violence motivated by prejudice against immigrants. Increasing the language competences of the administrative staff is another important step. Postgraduate studies for teachers are planned, including methodologies for teaching Polish as a foreign language.

The project aims to help immigrants and their families, including people of Polish origin, people returning to the country after economic migration, repatriates, and those living abroad who intend to start work or business activity in Poland. The support will also cover employers who employ, or plan to employ, immigrants and their employees; public servants; teachers, including university teaching staff; foreign students; Ph.D. students; scientists; and non-governmental organisations.

Conclusion

In view of the current migration, civilisation and globalisation processes, as well as cultural changes, the social resources of Western Pomerania and many other European

regions require special attention and strengthening. Every person and every family who wants to live in Europe's regions and cities and who wishes to create added value in economic, social and cultural dimensions should be seen as a valuable asset to that region. In Western Pomerania we are building a dynamic and open community, which should be the foundation of stable regional development in all aspects.

By applying some of the measures outlined above, the EU's regions can lead by example in the very contested and challenging field of migration.

The EPP Group in the Committee of the Regions considers that the challenges of migration should be addressed at the EU, national, regional and local levels. For the successful integration of migrants, and to ensure economic viability in the context of migration flows, regional and local authorities need to have a real say in both the design and implementation of policies. For that to happen they need to be vested with the necessary decision-making powers and resources to develop projects which correspond to local conditions and demands in the local labour market. Successful policies at the local level should recognise migrants' rights and human dignity, as well as guarantee reciprocal respect for the rules and culture of the local community. This model, based on tolerance, liberal democratic values and subsidiarity in decision-making, is a central component of the European way of life and should be the guiding principle for our common approach to migration.

Note

1. A 'voivodeship' is Poland's highest subnational administrative subdivision, corresponding roughly to a province in many other countries.

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Author biography



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