

How Polish Migrants in Norway Consider Return Migration

Insights from the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration'

After Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 and the substantial emigration that followed, return migration was an expectation widely shared by observers in Poland and abroad. Return migration has been modest, however, even in the wake of the 2008-2009 financial crisis. Due to the post-accession migration wave, Poles comprise the largest immigrant group in Norway. Although Polish migrants in Norway were also expected to stay for short periods of time, they are for the most part not returning to Poland. This Policy Brief explores why, presenting five common perspectives on return migration among Poles in Norway.

Brief Points

- A majority of recent Polish migrants is not returning to Poland any time soon.
- A segment of Polish migrants sustains mobility over time, working in Norway but living in Poland.
- As of 2015, males make up two thirds of Polish migrants in Norway despite the increasing settlement of families.
- Return considerations have changed rapidly, with many migrants postponing return indefinitely and focusing on settlement.
- Not all Polish migrants want to settle permanently; return migration and onward mobility remain as alternatives.

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Recent Polish migration to Norway

As of 2015, the number of Polish migrants living in Norway reached 99,000. The majority arrived in the years following Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 and the subsequent opening up of free mobility with Norway in 2007. Substantial immigration from Poland has since continued and contributed to a rapidly growing immigrant population. About two thirds of Polish immigrants in Norway are men.

Polish post-accession migration was often borne from social networks, which provide would-be migrants with migration-enabling resources to draw on or foreign work offers circulated via the network. In many cases, migration has been less a response to unemployment, but rather to low salaries, poor working conditions and bleak career pro-

spects. Whilst the expectation following the substantial post-accession emigration was that many migrants would return to Poland, no mass movement has materialized. Today it is commonly acknowledged that the majority of Polish migrants is not going back any time soon. About 70 per cent% of those who arrived in Norway a decade ago remain.¹ ²However, a not insignificant proportion of Polish migrants in Norway and elsewhere in Europe engage in *transnational commuting*.³ While that practice often eventually leads to settlement in a destination country, it sometimes results in return migration, onward migration or sustained transnational living.

This policy brief draws on analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with Polish migrants living in Norway. Interviewees comprised men and women, both with and without partners and children. To explore a variety of perspectives on return migration, people with diverse experiences were included: men working in the construction sector; women performing domestic work, usually cleaning; women and men working within their professions, having highly educated backgrounds and vocational training; and women and men with experiences of 'deskilling'. What follows are five perspectives on return migration that emerged from the analysis of migrants' considerations about the possibility of going back to Poland.

Return perspective I: Liquid migration

All free mobility within the EU (and the European Economic Area) enables migrants to move in order to pursue work, with few restrictions on settling in another country. The free nature of intra-European mobility has led to these migration flows being described as 'liquid', following sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's descriptions of the present era as 'liquid modernity'.⁴ While the metaphor has its merits, migrants' narratives reveal nuances in how unplanned migration and uncertainty affects individuals and families.

Among male migrants who work on short-term contracts in the construction sector, for example, there is the widely acknowledged concept of working abroad but still living at home in Poland. Comparing their circumstances to those of sailors, some migrants feel at ease with the idea of being away a lot. They

may celebrate their time at home with family while equally appreciating their working life in a male-dominated environment abroad. However, others were more ambiguous about the nature of their migration experiences.

For those migrants whose families did not unite with them in Norway, even after six to eight years of temporary work abroad, return perspectives often remained the same. Marek⁵ described the plan for his stay in Norway as follows: 'Till the summer, till the end of the year, then I'll go back.' Overall, return migration was the only future plan, although it was not realizable at that point in time either because the migrant did not want to relocate the family or, often, because his wife rejected the idea. Some described their family economy as depending on a Norwegian income to uphold newly assumed living standards in Poland.

Some migrants whose families had not settled in Norway described their experience of open-ended, or liquid migration, as a resource. Many others, though, felt trapped in migration, with no option other than to continue living transnationally.

Return perspective II: A settlement decision

Many Polish migrants in Norway have decided to settle there. For some, most often in the case of families reuniting in Norway, this was a decision taken before emigration. The migration pattern frequently begins with a male, later followed by his partner and children relocating to Norway. Ania's case was typical. When asked to be interviewed, she said: 'You can interview me, if you like, but we're not going back.' From day one, her energies were invested in learning the local language and getting a job, and she described how her three children all started school immediately after arrival.

The settlement decision for many families followed a stepwise trajectory, beginning with temporary migration and arriving at family reunification. A more reluctant settlement decision was also acknowledged by some who had not yet invested in learning the language. These migrants were slowly realizing that life had shifted to Norway; key events, such as children entering school, had taken place and years passed since their emigration. Some

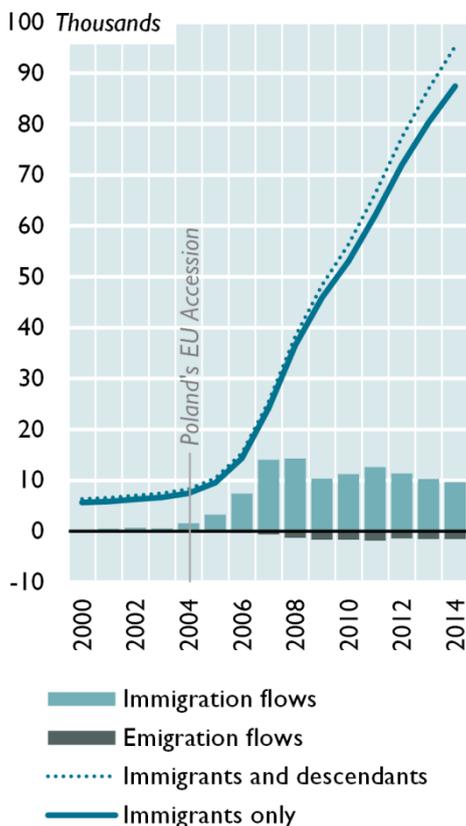


Figure 1. Polish migration to Norway.

Migration flow data refers to registered migration between Norway and Poland regardless of citizenship. Descendants are Norwegian-born children of immigrant parents. (Source: Statistics Norway.)



Metro in Warsaw (Giuseppe Milo, Flickr).

were challenged to find time and resources to learn the language, to seek more relevant employment and to adapt to a longer-term perspective on life in Norway.

There were others who decided to move together with their families. For them, the settlement decision was more gradual as they gained everyday life experiences in Norway.

In both scenarios, however, the priorities were learning the language and consciously investing in Norway in terms of securing housing and employment commensurate to one's training.

Return perspective III: Trying out return or an adventure?

Planning for, or considering the possibility of, return migration was something many migrants discussed with enthusiasm. But how realistic these plans were, as well as the temporal perspective on when return might happen, varied. Given the context of free mobility, the option of 'trying out' return migration for a while was also present. Migrants who had returned to Poland for a period rarely described these experiences as 'failed return', but they would emphasize, as an interviewee

named Adam put it, how 'it was a great experience...'

Adam and his family returned to Poland for nine months during his parental leave. Their narrative made it evident that they had been testing the waters for a permanent move, though they decided to go back to their jobs and lives in Norway. In retrospect, they cherished the time in Poland, emphasizing the stay's impact on their older children's linguistic and cultural connection to their country of origin. Whilst Adam and his family settled back in Norway and saw their time in Poland as an adventure, other families might have reached a different conclusion that would compel a decision to relocate permanently to Poland.

Return perspective IV: The myth of return

Within a very short time frame, many Polish migrants in Norway have changed their perspectives on return migration from being something imminent to long-term. The 'myth of return' – not letting go of the idea of one day going back – is common among migrants globally. Sustaining linguistic and cultural

identities is often closely tied to an ethnic or national affinity, as well as with more personal memories of the past. Together, they translate into dreams of return at some future time.

When asked about her changing perspectives on return, Magda said: '[We're in Norway] till we retire, then we'll go back...' She admitted that she had not expected to be saying this, having lived in Norway for just five years. But with children doing well in their schooling – one starting higher education and the other in vocational training – and her husband running a successful construction company, the family's life was anchored in Norway. Magda was working as a maid in a hotel, enthusiastic about her opportunities for encounters with people who were different from herself and happy she could learn Norwegian on the job.

Nevertheless, Magda, like so many others, was not letting go of the idea of returning to Poland. The time frame had changed quite dramatically, but the notion of not returning was not one she wanted to contemplate. However, she did reflect on the prospect that her life might become rooted in Norway for good should any grandchildren be born there. Then she would travel back and forth, splitting her life between Poland and Norway, she said. Magda's return considerations – notably emphasizing return and, in so doing, upholding the myth – echo those of many Polish migrants in Norway and globally.

Return perspective V: Actually going back

Data quality on both emigration and return migration is severely destabilized by the free intra-European mobility regime and the circular and temporary nature of segments of Polish migration.⁶ Considering the volumes of emigration from Poland, return migration is nevertheless acknowledged as an existent albeit small-scale phenomenon. The Polish government seeks to engage with migrants abroad. In recent years, its policies have evolved from focusing primarily on return migration towards a more comprehensive agenda that acknowledges the longer-term nature of post-accession emigration.

Among Polish migrants who have settled in Norway with a longer-term perspective in mind, relatively few return. Among research participants in Norway and their networks,

commonly cited reasons for moving back were connected with particular professional opportunities that presented themselves or with personal circumstances, including changing relationship statuses and having children. There were also examples of individuals who moved back due to various crises, including health problems, alcohol dependency and a serious illness or the death of a close family member.

The return migratory movements of settled migrants often contrast to those engaged in sustained transnational commuting. There are also significant differences in socioeconomic positions at the upper and the lower ends of the spectrums within both categories. For some, exploitative practices in the Norwegian labour market could also contribute to decisions against reuniting and settling with their families in Norway, thus either leading to return or continued transnational mobility.

Intra-European mobility and return considerations

Few Polish migrants have returned from Norway, and migrants' perspectives on return are changing rapidly. Yet a substantial proportion of male migrants continues to work in Norway, whilst their families remain in Poland. This contributes to dually developing return and settlement considerations. One consists of families settling in Norway, children going to school there and return migration fading to become a distant plan. The other consists of migrants continuing to work in Norway, where their family and, for all intents and purposes, their 'real' life remain in Poland. Among the latter are those who have a preference for transnational commuting and others who feel that circumstances have forced them into this situation.

The five perspectives on return migration present the multiplicity of circumstances facing Polish migrants in Norway in regards to their migration projects. Across the board, however, migrants often retain transnational ties with Poland, notably through return visits, and stress both familial ties and a strong sense of national identity. Nevertheless, after periods of settlement, often of less than a decade, many Polish migrants manage to speak Norwegian, work in jobs relevant to their training and own housing. However, for others, a rapid shift in return considerations, or continued uncertainty about settlement in Norway or return to Poland, poses challenges at a personal level, in their relationships and family lives, as well as for their professional careers.

Migrants' return considerations relating to contextual factors in both Poland and Norway also highlight some structural challenges. In Norway, the massive labour immigration of recent years, with many migrants settling more permanently, is perhaps as much a surprise for the receiving society as it is for migrants themselves. Whilst concerns over exploitation of labour migrants have been high on public agendas for good reason, interest in the broader integration processes of Polish migrants has been slow to emerge. Currently, migrants themselves must bear the brunt of learning the language and figuring out how institutions function, including how to get their foreign qualifications recognized. Arguably, an acknowledgment that most Polish migrants are not returning any time soon should also lead to the realization that Norway needs measures for basic language training and knowledge about society. Facilitating language learning and skills acquisition are sound public investments for the benefit of migrants and the rest of Norwegian society.

For further reading

- Engbersen, G., Leerkes, A., Grabowska-Lusinska, I., Snel, E., and Burgers, J. (2013) On the differential attachments of migrants from Central and Eastern Europe: A typology of labour migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39(6): 959-81.
- Erdal, M. B. (2014a) Praca i rodzina: Rozważania o powrocie wśród Polaków mieszkających w Norwegii. [Work and family: Return migration considerations among Poles living in Norway] *Studia Migracyjne—Przegląd Polonijny*, 40(2): 41-64.
- Erdal, M. B. (2014b) 'This is my home': Polish and Pakistani migrants' return considerations as articulations about home. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 2(3): 361-84.
- Friberg, J. H. (2012a) The stages of migration: From going abroad to settling down: post-accession Polish migrant workers in Norway. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38(10): 1589-1605.
- Friberg, J. H. (2012b) Culture at work: Polish migrants in the ethnic division of labour on Norwegian construction sites. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35(11): 1914-33.

Notes

1 Frischsenteret & Fafo (2015) *Kunnskapsutvikling om arbeidsinnvandring* [Developing knowledge about labour immigration]. 2 About 10% of these migrants did return to Poland but then re-migrated to Norway. 3 Friberg 2012a. 4 Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge: Polity. 5 Names used are pseudonyms. 6 Recent trends in International Migration in Poland: The 2012 SOPEMI report (ed.) Paweł Kaczmarczyk, Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw.

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THE PROJECT

This Policy Brief is part of the project 'Possibilities and Realities of Return Migration' (PREMIG), a large-scale research project that explores return migration from Norway and the United Kingdom. The project is led by Research Professor Jørgen Carling. For more information, see www.prio.org/premig.

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