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MCA Newsletter No. 4: Polish Migration to Ireland: New Mobilities in an Enlarged EU

In the last Newsletter of the Migrant Careers and Aspirations project we ask what is new about contemporary East-West migration. By drawing on interview data from a two-year Qualitative Panel Study with a group of Polish migrants, we argue that its novelty lies above all in new patterns of mobility. Polish and other migrants from the new EU member states (NMS) are not only more mobile *across* national borders in an enlarged EU, but they are also more mobile *within* national labour markets, as they can frequently change employer without fear of loss of a work permit. Hence return migration, circular migration and multiple, cross-national employment biographies have become a possibility for all in the new Europe.

Looking back: migration, the work experience and lifestyle choices

Almost all of our research participants arrived in Ireland in the aftermath of EU enlargement in 2004. Then, in times of a buoyant labour market, all found employment with relative ease. For those who secured employment in higher-skilled professions in architecture and civil engineering, the move to Ireland was part of a wider career move. Others found employment in middle-level positions in financial services and software.

Contrary to some assumptions, these jobs are not necessarily of a highly skilled nature as particularly in financial services many NMS migrants, often women, work in lesser-skilled clerical positions, in spite of relatively high

educational qualifications.¹ Further, pay in these positions was sometimes surprisingly low, suggesting that some migrants may experience a 'wage penalty' in that their qualifications and experience are not sufficiently taken into account. Nevertheless, in spite of occasionally relatively low pay and some rather repetitive job tasks, most of our participants who work in skilled job positions think of their employment as part of a broader career that may well transcend national boundaries:

I worked for the Polish branch of xxx [multinational software company], somewhere very low, doing tedious jobs...I came here and started to work for xxx [another multinational IT company], much bigger responsibility, better position...Then here in xxx again [multinational software company he had worked before in Poland], so yeah, the CV looks great and I probably wouldn't have got that experience in Poland (male, 30 (21/07/08)).

In turn, migrants in less-skilled jobs in hospitality and construction were more inclined to think of their job primarily as a money-earning purpose. Because they viewed their job as only temporary, they were sometimes prepared to 'trade off'² relatively

¹ Salamońska, J., Moriarty, E., Wickham, J. and Bobek, A. (2008) *Migrant Workers and the Financial Services Sector in Ireland*. Dublin: Trinity Immigration Initiative.

² Anderson, B., Ruhs, M., Spencer, S. and Rogaly, B. (2006) *Fair Enough? Central and East European*

poor working conditions for short-term economic gains. An important question is whether the initial job represents a stepping stone in the career or whether migrants remain trapped at the bottom of the occupational ladder. On the basis of our Qualitative Panel Study, the evidence is mixed. Some migrants initially accessed the Irish labour market in lesser-skilled positions but eventually managed to find employment in an occupation for which they hold relevant qualifications. Others, however, did not manage to advance in the labour market.

Nevertheless, even in the case of the latter the migration experience is not necessarily a case of labour market entrapment as migrants acquire certain skills such as social and language competencies that may be of use in a later stage of their career.³ For this participant who worked as a painter in Ireland, his English language skills have proven valuable after he returned to Poland to work in the family business: 'I now use (English) almost every day, mainly through contacts with Germans and French (clients)...We don't have to bring in a translator, I do it all myself' (male, 25 (13/01/10).

Similarly, although this interviewee who worked as a waitress regretted not having pursued some further education during her time in Ireland, she was nevertheless positive about the migration experience: 'I'm very happy I went there, I learnt a lot, I became self reliant, I earned some money...I learnt English' (female, 22 (16/09/09). This has assisted her when securing employment in Canada where she currently lives.

Arguably, migration can represent a 'project of self-realisation'⁴ for young Europeans at different skill levels in that it offers opportunities for self-development and lifestyle choices that simply may not be available at home. It is true that initially the search for a job and a higher income featured quite prominently in the migration-decision of our respondents. However, our research also found that the longer migrants stay in Ireland, the more issues like 'quality of life' become important. Living in a cosmopolitan city like Dublin appeals to young migrants as also found in other research:⁵ 'the fact that you meet so many different people in here, different nationalities, different cultures, and that's what keeps me with in this city as well' (female, 26 (17/08/08). Thus, contemporary East-West migration is more than just 'labour migration'. In fact it might be better conceptualised as the pursuit of flexible worklife pathways in a unified Europe and a globalised world.

Mobility and flexible worklife pathways in Europe and beyond

Contemporary East-West migration has become more transient than previous European immigration. This is facilitated by a free movement regime that entails the possibility to frequently cross borders and new and cheap travel opportunities, in particular air travel. The more temporary and circular character of this migration becomes visible when comparing *migrant inflows* with *migrant stocks* from the NMS. Whereas around 500,000 NMS migrants have arrived in Ireland since EU enlargement in 2004, the number of NMS

Migrants in Low Wage Employment in the UK. Oxford: Centre on Migration, Policy and Society.

³ Williams, A.M. (2009) 'Employability and international migration: theoretical perspectives', in McKay, S. (ed.) *Refugees, Recent Migrants and Employment: Challenging Barriers and Exploring Pathways*. New York: Routledge.

⁴ Kennedy, P. (2010) 'Mobility, flexible lifestyles and cosmopolitanism: EU postgraduates in Manchester', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36(3): 465-482.

⁵ Boyle, N. (2006) 'Culture in the rise of tiger economies: Scottish expatriates in Dublin and the "creative class" thesis', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30(2): 403-426.

migrants actually living in Ireland is closer to 200,000.⁶ In other words, a large number of migrants only stayed in Ireland for a certain period of time until returning home or moving on elsewhere.

The free movement rights that Polish migrants enjoy in Ireland, and by now in most other EU member states, emerged as a major theme in our interviews. In fact for many of our participants the opportunity to freely move across Europe represents the very essence of what it means to be European:

I can easily move around Europe... I can find a job wherever I want...In the European Union I have equal rights everywhere. In fact I came here because I wouldn't have gone anywhere where I would have been illegal (female, 38 (04/02/10).

This notion of 'equal rights' is illuminating as the idea of European citizenship enables EU migrants not only to move *between* national labour markets but also *within* these labour markets. Contrary to previous generations of European immigrants, they are not bound by a work permit and can frequently change employer. This inserts a new form of migrant agency: 'Now I'm working in a hotel...but I'm going to quit the job next week, because I found a new one (as a waitress) with better opportunities' (female, 22 (11/11/07).

While our respondents did not explicitly mention the concept of European citizenship, they were quite aware of its rights-based content. Indeed, the fact that Polish migrants as EU citizens have the same residence, labour and social rights as Irish nationals is likely to be the main reason why hardly anyone of our respondents seriously considered applying for Irish citizenship. Whereas for non-EU

immigrants application for citizenship remains the main route towards a secure residence, EU migrants already are quasi-citizens in Ireland.

To what extent does the migration experience impact upon notions of (trans)national identity? Only a minority of our respondents see themselves as primarily European. However, many see their Polish identity increasingly complemented by *some* form of European identity which seems to be indicative of a broader trend across Europe.⁷ Thus, the experience abroad has led to the emergence of multiple and fluid identities and a greater openness towards other cultures. Indeed, some of our participants exhibit a certain cosmopolitan attitude that looks beyond Europe and that has also been found in other research on the attitudes of European migrants.⁸

I feel European, basically a citizen of the world. It's not that I don't have my national identity...but I'm not that much attached (to it) as the generation of my grandparents. And maybe it's that I am not only European but a citizen of the world...in here I have contact with the wider world, not only Europe...and we're all in here together (female, 26 (13/01/10).

Interestingly, although Polish migrants now have free movement rights in almost all EU member states, the traditional English-speaking immigration countries such as Australia, Canada, and the USA feature at least as prominently as possible future migration destination as other EU member states among our respondents. This suggests that the new

⁶ Inflows as calculated by Personal Public Service numbers (2004-2009), stocks as estimated by the Quarterly National Household Survey (2009, q4).

⁷ Fligstein, N. (2008) *Euroclash: The EU, European Identity and the Future of Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Kennedy, P. (2010) 'Mobility, flexible lifestyles and cosmopolitanism: EU postgraduates in Manchester', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36(3): 465-482.

patterns of mobility which are characteristic of contemporary East-West migration are not confined to Europe in the contemporary 'global age'.

Looking ahead: the future of Polish migration to Ireland

In this Newsletter we have argued that contemporary East-West migration is characterised by new patterns of mobility. NMS migrants are more mobile than previous generations of European immigrants in at least a double sense. Not only are they more mobile *across* national borders in an enlarged EU, but they are also more mobile *within* national labour markets in that they are no longer tied to an individual employer through a work permit. This affords NMS migrants new opportunities and lifestyle choices that go beyond the employment experience.

It should be stressed, however, that just because Polish migrants have free movement rights in almost all EU member states, it does not mean that they necessarily move from one member state to the other. There continues to be a lot of two way traffic between Ireland and Poland, with some migrants already having returned to their home country. While some consider moving to another member state, others see their future in traditional English-

speaking immigration countries such as Australia, Canada and the USA. Others again see their long-term future in Ireland where a change in family arrangements, in particular the birth of a child can slow down the mobile lifestyle. Regardless of different experiences and aspirations for the future, there is little doubt that Polish and other EU migrants have more opportunities to construct their own flexible worklife pathways than previous generations.

The most important lesson for policy-makers is to match these new patterns of mobility with an appropriate institutional framework at the level of the EU in relation to issues such as health, education and social security schemes. For policy-makers in Ireland, the most important lesson is that Polish and other migrants will remain a significant part of Ireland's population and labour force for the foreseeable future, in spite of, or perhaps because of, new patterns of transnational mobility in an enlarged EU.

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Publications

'Labour Migration and the Irish Construction Sector' in *CLR News*, 2009 (4)

'Migration and Recession: Polish Migrants in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland', in *Sociological Research Online*, 2009, Vol. 14(2/3)

Further Newsletters and Sector reports at <http://www.tcd.ie/immigration/careers/publications.php>

Announcements

New MSc in European Employment Studies
Further information at <http://www.tcd.ie/ERC/MSc/index.php>

International Migration Conference
Trinity College Dublin (30 June-2 July 2010)
New Migrations, New Challenges
Further information at <http://www.tcd.ie/immigration/conference2010/index.php>