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Title: An unresolved problem or an expected remedy? Debates on repatriation and ethnic migration in Poland

Abstract

As estimated, there are roughly 15 million people of Polish origin living outside Poland, making that diaspora one of the largest in the world (Chodubski 2003). In case of people of Polish descent living in Western Europe or Americas they are mainly labour migrants (or their children), whereas those in the post-Soviet republics are the next generation of Poles who remained outside their native land involuntarily. During the WWII the USSR annexed Poland’s Eastern territories and resettled large groups of its citizens to Siberia, Kazakhstan and other parts of Stalin’s empire. A number of Polish nationals also remained in what are now Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. Although 1.75 million Poles returned then within post-war repatriation, Polish minority in the post-Soviet area still accounts for about 1.3 million (de Tinguy 2003).

The latter have a particular role in the Polish politics of memory, which reflects in the authorities’ moral obligations towards the “brothers from the East” enduring discrimination based on descent in exile. The will to compensate the “errors of history” for the co-ethnics who had not been able in the past to benefit from repatriation programmes results in preferential, in contrast to non-Poles, reception and integration procedures (Stefarska 2010). The Constitution of 1997 and the Repatriation Act of 2000 impose upon the Polish state a duty to provide assistance to the “blood brothers” in maintaining linkages with the national culture as well as possibility of repatriation. Moreover, the Law on the Charter of the Poles of 2007 guarantees ethnic Poles in neighbouring Eastern states legal recognition of belonging to the Polish nation and a range of rights in Poland (Górny et al. 2007).

On the other hand, despite the offered amenities the Polish repatriation system remains inefficient. In practice prospective returnees must overcome complicated administrative procedures. Since it takes 7–10 years on average to be granted a repatriate’s status, Polish minority members in the East who come from multinational families tend to make use of other departure possibilities and apply for, most likely, Russian or German citizenship. Moreover, local governing bodies in Poland are obliged to cover reception costs of a returnee and his/her family, but in fact they are hesitant to fulfil these duties. Consequently, between 1997 and 2008 merely 6,732 people have benefited from the repatriation programme (Wyszyński 2011).

The proposed paper will be an attempt, firstly, to critically reflect on existing Poland’s repatriation policies. As estimated in the next decades Poland will need to open more widely its borders to immigrants. What is then the potential repatriates’ role in the slowly developing Polish immigration policy? What are the main challenges in enhancing repatriates’ arrivals? Secondly, the paper will investigate public and political debates on repatriation. How one can evaluate repatriates’ presence in the politics of memory? What is their position in the increasing public interest in immigration? Furthermore, the paper will also discuss other means of return to the ancestral homeland (ethnic migration) (Hut 2011, King 2011), in particular in educational context. A special attention will be given to the arrivals of foreign students of Polish origins (Zołędowski 2010). Since other return possibilities are limited, educational migration is often the only possibility for young Poles to move westwards and thus it covers larger volume of migrants than regular repatriation operations.