

Kamila Fiałkowska,
Centre of Migration Research,
University of Warsaw

20 years later: On the persistence of seasonal migration from Poland to Germany

Introduction

Migration in order to take up short-term work in German agriculture and thus circulating between two countries has a long tradition in Poland. At least since mid-nineteenth century people inhabiting Polish territories which back then were under Prussian, Russian and Austrian partition were seasonally going abroad, to East Prussia and Saxony, only later to reach industrial centres in Ruhr region (Wieruszewska 2007). From those expeditions in the Polish language until now functions a phrase “saksy” which is as a synonym of temporary work in Germany. The II World War and its aftermath put an end to this activity for the next few decades. Nevertheless, with the decreased control of the socialist state over its borders and increasing economic crisis in the late 1970s and 1980s in Poland, the government relaxed the visa regime, allowing its population for freer crossings of the western borders (Stola, 2012). Since the late 1980s seasonal migration again became one of the numerically most important labour migration flows from Poland. Ever since then, the phenomenon of seasonal migration from Poland to Germany has undergone significant changes – of which the most decisive was on the 8th December 1990 when a bilateral agreement between Poland and Germany that regulated this type of employment was signed.

According to available statistical data seasonal workers from Poland in Germany consists of few hundred thousand people every year. The number was growing steadily since the early 1990s. It is remarkable, that at the time of Poland's accession to the European Union (2004) nearly 300 thousand people went to work in the agriculture, what exceeded the massive out migration to United Kingdom at the time. In the course of Poland's accession to the EU, actors from different sides (i.e. farmers) started wondering about the future of seasonal migration to Germany. The main fears were that workers will move to another, perhaps more attractive destination like the United Kingdom or Sweden, where they did not face any obstacles regarding their employment, whereas Germany controlled access to their labour market until 2011 with agriculture being the only exception. Nevertheless, following years proved those fears to be unfounded – the popularity of seasonal migration from Poland to Germany decreased only slightly. Against this backdrop the question arises as to why seasonal migration is still popular migration strategy?

Research objectives

In the course of more than two decades after the agreement of 1990 significant changes in legal regulations, such as the EU enlargement happened. Also, socioeconomic conditions in both Germany and Poland changed. Those changes brought new opportunities for migration within the European Union and it was to be expected that seasonal migration will lose attractiveness. However, according to data provided by state's employment office, the seasonal migration from Poland to Germany after the accession to the EU decreased only slightly, and remained popular labour market strategy and still a far-reaching phenomenon. Against the backdrop of the assumed ‘unattractiveness’ of this type of labour market strategy in terms of income, security and ‘opportunity costs’ compared to other possible economic activities, it is necessary to investigate the stability of the phenomenon. Beyond macroeconomic indicators on the aggregate country level, which are often taken to foresee and explain migration trends, I argue that for a better understanding of seasonal migration as one type of migration, the embeddedness of individual's action in broader structures should be taken into account. Therefore I assess my analyses at the ‘intersection of micro and macro’, i.e. the meso level and analyse

the formation, persistence and access to migrant networks and not leaving aside their personal background and emigration context. Also, in relation to migration networks and migrants' embeddedness in the local community one may consider different forms of social protection in the migratory processes (Amelina, Bilecen, Bargłowski, Faist 2012). According to the 'new economics of labour' approach (Stark 1985) I argue that in order to achieve an appropriate understanding of migration phenomena the interrelation between migrants, their local communities and their families has to be conceptualized as a 'migration decision unit' (ibid.). Local communities and their socio-economic conditions seem to be an important frame of reference, especially when considering the nature of seasonal migration which is mainly shaped by informal networks. Networks as a social capital of migrants (Bourdieu 1986) and the unequal access to those networks for a long time determined who and who will not get a placement for this or another employer. Also it is important to note that migration may be one form of establishing social protection. According to previous research it is understood in four dimensions: different aspects of care, financial help, access to and provision of information and lastly the social activities (Amelina, Bilecen, Bargłowski, Faist, 2012) and their relation to an individual at different stages of migration. In the case of circular migration it becomes obvious that placements and thus access to mobility and labor market performance is dependent on information flows within networks.

The goal of my thesis is therefore an analysis of the reasons for the consistency of respective migration patterns. I argue that this can be achieved by investigating the interrelation between social capital, migration networks and emergence of respective migration patterns. For this, I empirically analyse the pattern of 'seasonal migration' from Poland to Germany, as it proved to be remarkably stable despite discrepant prognoses and 'objectively' available more profitable opportunities. To answer how the singular episode of seasonal work abroad turn into routinized, yearly activities one has to look closer at migrants positioning in the social structure of the emigration 'community' to investigate the mechanisms that condition this type of mobility. Therefore theoretical approaches that link agency with the structure will be particularly useful in this research. In attempt to connect the individual and her/his actions to the structure - local community in which the migrant lives both in Poland and abroad, networks, but also legal framework of migration - perspective proposed by Pierre Bourdieu will be engaged, especially his theory of social capital, habitus, and social fields. These concepts will allow drawing conclusions with regard to the choice of migration strategy, the reasoning and the impact of migration on the lives of the actors and their families.

The qualitative research design consisted of long lasting field research and multi-local data collection including different methods, like semi structured interviews, participant observations in the sending community, undercover participant observation in the German agriculture farm, field notes, photoethnography and focus groups.

Closing remarks

Despite the fact that all European labour markets are now open for Polish nationals, the popularity of seasonal migration to Germany is still high (Kępińska 2008). It is so especially in the rural and provincial areas, where work opportunities are scarce, as they were in the beginning of the 1990s when the transition caused massive unemployment. Seasonal migration, accompanied also by temporary work in services, such as care or cleaning industries seems to be still an appealing option for several thousands of Poles. In the course of more than two decades the gap between earnings in Poland and Germany narrowed down, and costs of living has risen therefore the economic rationale are not as attractive as they were previously. Therefore I argue that the reasons for the perpetuation of seasonal migration only partly lie in their in their economic benefits for otherwise jobless or poorly paid beneficiaries. Instead the reasons lie more in the migrants' family relations, their social capital, migration networks (i.e. integration into migration network, their creation, dynamic of changes, power

relation, unequal access to the network) and local socio-economic conditions. All these factors offer more of a complete picture as to why and in what circumstances people continue to engage in the seasonal migration.

Routinisation of this migration strategy over decades have had a tremendous impact on family and local life of those involved in this mobility, what still calls for more attention, especially in the light of recent developments on the migration scene in this part of Europe. Analysis of these processes by applying agency and structure perspective and through the lenses of Bourdieu's theory offer a plausible explanation of a phenomenon, that has a long history and when reach ethnographic data are collected.