

## **Prejudice against Polish immigrants in Great Britain**

by Zuzanna Strzyżewska  
Association SWRK Pontes  
for the project *Being and Belonging*  
Warsaw, 2021

### **Emigration**

- After Poland joined the European Union in 2004, there was a significant increase in the migration of Poles to Great Britain. They were not only young men, but also women, and even entire families. Until 2008, Polish children were the largest non-English speaking group in schools.
- In 2014, in order to minimize migration to the UK, Prime Minister David Cameron announced plans to limit EU immigrants from state benefits, such as social housing and tax credits, for at least 4 years.
- In 2016, a referendum was held on the withdrawal of Great Britain from the European Union.
- In 2019, Poles were the largest group of immigrants in Great Britain (15% of all emigrants). Most came to work or study.

### **Stereotypes and prejudices**

The influx of migrants from Syria in 2015 had a great influence on attitudes towards immigrants. Right-wing, more conservative parties have started to gain support in many European countries. Immigration was also one of the main themes in the British election campaign. The Conservative Party has promised to hold a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union by the end of 2017, while the United Kingdom's Independence Party (UKIP) has waged a strong anti-immigration campaign. The election posters alluded to migrants taking up jobs in Britain, and the British were called upon to "regain control of the country." However, the topic of migration appeared in the debates and aroused much controversy, even before 2015.

### • Children and youth

In the years 2012-2014, the Show Racism The Red Card Foundation conducted a survey in over 60 schools, in which almost 6,000 children from Great Britain took part. The survey concerned the children's attitudes towards immigrants and their attitudes towards the Muslim religion and its followers. The answers showed that 60% of the respondents believed that "Asylum seekers and immigrants are stealing our jobs". At the same time, 72% of the children answered that stereotypes were harmful. This may suggest that since children understand the dangers of the stereotype, their perception of migrants is genuine. 28% of children feared that the immigrants might endanger their own careers in the future. In addition, 49% of those polled expressed concern about migrations in the UK and felt that they were out of control.

In 2015-2016, Sara Young conducted a qualitative study in which she conducted interviews with Polish children living in the UK. The aim of the study was to find out what words children use to represent themselves in the stories they tell. The basis of the study was Davies and Harre positioning theory, which characterizes interactions between individuals through the way we use words to locate ourselves and others. In her research, Young also wanted to find out what the children's approach to the referendum on leaving the European Union is.

The research showed that most of the respondents encountered anti-Polish hate speech, referring, for example, to „stealing our jobs ". Some of them have experienced bullying by their peers due to their origins, which resulted in a change of school. Teenagers also expressed concern about the referendum at the time, fearing that some expats would have to leave the UK. Their narrative, however, did not position them as victims. Rather, it emphasized their sense of being Poles, but having the right to live in the UK.

Undoubtedly, however, the study conducted on 11 people is not entirely reliable. It should be borne in mind that these units could have had strong support from parents and teaching staff (the study was carried out in one school), therefore their positioning did not make them victims.

Many younger or mentally weak children encountering anti-Polish hate speech may lose their self-esteem, feel the need to return to their country or even suffer mental health deterioration.

Both the questionnaire and the survey show that many British children have negative beliefs about immigrants. Undoubtedly, such a worldview is largely acquired in the family home.

The topic of Brexit and the unfavorable image of immigrants drawn in the media additionally intensifies fears and, as a consequence, repeats the stereotype.

#### • **Adults**

The topic of immigrants raises many fears and doubts, and one of the regularly appearing accusations against this social group is their inactivity, or on the contrary, the sense of danger related to migrants taking their work away from their compatriots.

In a study by Chris McVittie and Andy McKinlay, 15 men and 16 women were invited to take part in semi-structured discussions about Polish immigrants. Their statements were then analyzed to understand how the British create their attitudes towards immigrants. The analyzes of the statements showed that:

- Poles "at least" work hard for their livelihood, making an economic contribution to British society. There is also a favorable comparison for Poles to immigrants from Pakistan who are accused of relying solely on benefits.
- Poles do difficult, poorly paid jobs, but it makes lower-status Britons lazy to do such jobs. So there is again the accusation of „stealing jobs”. The economic activity of Poles has been repeatedly criticized for performing hard work for less money, which results in the employment of Poles instead of the British. One of the survey participants also refers to a TV program about Poles, in which this topic was discussed, which proves the criticism and builds a negative image of immigrants in the media.
- Hard work and commitment of Poles are appreciated, but it is also seen as a threat to UK citizens, who may run out of work.

- 16-year-olds can work in stores in the UK, under the supervision of adults, which is why employers prefer to hire adult Poles because they can pay them less and they do not require supervision. So there is an accusation of depriving young Britons of job opportunities.

The survey shows that the frequent accusations faced by Polish immigrants are taking jobs from the British. These moods are supported by anti-immigrant media, such as the press and television, which build the image of a hard-working Pole, waiting for the work of UK citizens. One of the reasons why Poles choose this type of job is their poor knowledge of English, which is why supporting these immigrants should undoubtedly be associated with the development of language skills.

#### • Poles in the media

In 2008, a report on the perception of Polish economic immigrants was published, entitled *Next stopski London*. The report describes the migration of Poles to Great Britain, as well as research on the presentation of Poles in the British press. According to the report, Poles are perceived like any other ethnic group in a multicultural society. There are negative metaphors about Poles, but they are used in neutral or even positive contexts. In the general summary of the report, we can find a statement that the messages addressed to the reader are mixed up: Polish immigrants are valued for their hard work, but, like any migrant group, they pose a threat to certain aspects of life in Great Britain.

However, in the press you can also find articles dehumanizing Poles, arousing dislike for this nation. The Daily Mail specialized in portraying Eastern European citizens as uncivilized or crude. One of the articles blamed Poles and Lithuanians for the disappearance of swans from the Grand Union Canal, suggesting that migrants hunt and eat them. Such alleged behavior can arouse fear and anxiety in the community, and consequently resentment and even hatred.

### **What can be done to solve these problems?**

One of the most effective ways to reduce prejudices is to **contact representatives of the out-group**.

This was confirmed by the meta-analysis of research conducted by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006). According to this theory, in order to facilitate the process of acculturation for migrants, the culture of the host community should be combined with the ascending community.

### **Bibliography**

- Fomina, J., & Frelak, J. (2008). Next stopski London: Public perceptions of labour migration within the EU. The case of Polish labour migrants in the British press.
- McVittie, C., & McKinlay, A. (2019). 'Would it not be better to get someone out workin?': 'Safe prejudice' against Polish workers. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 49(1), 19-30.
- Moskal, M. (2014). Polish migrant youth in Scottish schools: conflicted identity and family capital. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(2), 279-291.
- Siewierska-Chmaj, A. (2017). BREXIT z Polonią w tle. Antypolskie nastroje w Wielkiej Brytanii w świetle psychologicznych teorii relacji międzygrupowych. *Studia Politologiczne*, 45, 314-326.