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(In)formal social participation of immigrants

Are #migrants socially active in their countries of residence? A number of studies, including on Polish migrants, suggest that very few are. However, we might be measuring the wrong things. As the research presented in this issue of CMR Spotlight suggests, focusing on formal engagement in NGOs or immigrant organizations might be the wrong strategy. #MichałNowosielski and #WitoldNowak have found that #Poles in nine countries of Europe prefer other ways of being involved.



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(In)formal social participation of immigrants – are migrants from Poland socially active?

Michał Nowosielski, Witold Nowak

Introduction

Although migration studies put a great emphasis on issues of immigrants' participation, the attention of most researchers only focuses on a few aspects of this broad subject. Among the primary forms of immigrant participation mentioned are, for example, involvement in the political system of the country of origin, membership in special organisations created for immigrants, cooperation with institutions in the host country – such as political parties and trade unions (*"Introduction"* 1985; [Valentova & Alieva, 2018](#), [Lesińska & Pszczółkowska 2018](#), [Lesińska, Kloc-Nowak & Pszczółkowska 2019](#)). The most commonly discussed issues are those related to the political engagement of immigrants. But the involvement of migrants is broader than just political. A significant problem that also attracts the attention of migration researchers is social participation, including the self-organisation of immigrants and involvement in the activities of host-country institutions ([Cyrus, 2005](#); [Fiń et al., 2019](#); [Gabielli et al., 2017](#)).

However, focusing on formal involvement – especially membership and volunteering in different forms of non-governmental organisations, and comparing participation of immigrant with non-immigrant populations,

causes immigrants to be perceived as less active ([Turcotte, 2012](#); [Bada et al. 2010](#), [Cyrus, 2005](#)). We have to bear in mind that immigrants' social participation is not limited to the formal dimension and may occur in various informal modes. It helps to overcome simplistic judgements about the weaker social involvement of immigrants and may give an insight into its specific nature. Migrants, who are a minority group with diverse backgrounds and experiences in formal participation in their home countries ([Nowak & Nowosielski, 2016](#)), may simply be less attached to traditional formal ways of engagement, like membership and volunteering. Therefore, the thesis regarding their small social participation may be false. They seem to prefer other forms of involvement ([Couton & Gaudet, 2008](#); [Cyrus, 2005](#)).

The proposed paper aims to present and discuss the results of research on the social participation of Polish immigrants in selected European countries. A particular focus is put on the formal vs informal modes of participation. The rationale for taking up such a subject is an observation that the formal engagement of immigrants from Poland, defined as their participation in traditional immigrant organisations, seems to be declining. At the same time, one can suspect

that in many cases, the formal engagement has been substituted with informal forms of participation.

Data

The research results presented here are quantitative; the study used the survey method, employing the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviews) research technique engaging a sample of 5000 Polish immigrants in 9 selected European countries (Ireland, Great Britain, Norway, Holland, Spain, Sweden, Italy, France and Germany). The study was conducted in May and June 2018. Due to the nature of the research methods used and the sampling scheme (quota sampling controlling country of residence and level of education), the results of the study are not representative in the strict sense. That means that they cannot be generalised with reference to the whole population of Polish immigrants; they only concern the group reached with the applied recruitment procedure – persons who use selected Polish websites and websites dedicated to Polish immigrants in the countries mentioned above while living abroad. However, that was the only cost-efficient method of reaching a significant number of respondents (Polish immigrants) in a relatively short time. The questionnaire was available in Polish, the minimum age of participants was 15 years old, and the minimum length of stay abroad was three months.

Formal participation

The analysis of the survey results regarding formal social participation starts with the issue

of the involvement in the third sector that was divided into two main fields of engagement: in non-immigrant NGOs of the country of residence and immigrant civil society, namely in Polish immigrant organisations (PIOs) operating in the respondent’s state of residence. The second aspect is specific for the migratory situation and was incorporated into the study as immigrant organisations (IOs) – understood here as associations established by and for immigrants to provide social, economic and cultural services, or those which represent and seek to advance immigrant communities.

Table 1. Participation in non-immigrant NGOs and Polish immigrant organisations in the country of residence

Categories	Have you been engaged in activities of:			
	NGOs in your country of residence?		PIOs in your country of residence?	
	N	%	N	%
Yes, I have used an offer	368	7,4	660	13,2
Yes, I have volunteered	282	5,6	166	3,3
Yes, I have supported financially	253	5,1	154	3,1
Yes, I have been a member	204	4,1	196	3,9
Yes, another form	7	0,1	44	0,9
No	4198	84,0	4053 ¹	80,3

Source: Survey in the project ‘Polish immigrant organisations in Europe’ (2018)

It turns out that 16% of the survey participants had somehow been engaged in non-immigrant NGOs in their country of residence. In comparison, nearly 20% of the surveyed had been involved in the associations created by and for their ethnic group. At first sight, these

¹ The „No” category for the engagement in PIOs involves also

respondents who did not know any such associations in their country of residence (55,2% of the surveyed, N=2758)

results seem to prove quite substantial formal participation. Still, one has to keep in mind that the goal of the survey was to grasp a comprehensive picture of their engagement, including several active and passive ways. The closer analysis of the respondents' answers shows that specific characteristics of the engagement not only strongly differed between general and ethnic formal social participation but also show relatively weak active engagement in formal modes of participation. First of all, the respondents had been more inclined to use an offer of PIOs (13,2%) than an offer of non-immigrant NGOs (7,4%). Second, in most of the cases their engagement was passive, oriented on the reception of services rather than on active participation in the organisations' activities. The analysis of more active modes on involvement in formal organisations shows not only lower rates but also differences between participation in immigrant and non-immigrant civil society. The respondents had been more eager to engage in non-immigrant NGOs actively – 5,6% had volunteered, and 5,1% had supported such associations financially. For the PIO's those indexes were noticeably lower – 3,3% of the survey participants had volunteered in ethnic organisations, while 3,1% had supported them financially. The formal membership was observed on a similar level in both types of associations (around 4%).

Informal participation

The survey participants were asked to declare if they had been engaged in specific informal activities both related to host society and undertaken within the Polish ethnic community. The results show not only that in general those informal modes of engagement

are attracting more attention of the researched immigrants but also differences in respondents' engagement in those two contexts – the society of the country of residence and immigrant civil society.

Table 2. Participation in informal social activities

Categories	Have you been engaged in the following activities:					
	of the host society?			related to the Polish community?		
	Rank	N	%	Rank	N	%
Selfless help for neighbors and other people in close social environment	1	2693	53,9	2	1850	37,0
Collecting for those in need	2	1934	38,7	3	1151	23,0
Internet activity (e.g. blog, social media group, email list, forum)	3	1253	25,1	1	1994	39,9
Actions for the local community	4	955	19,1	7	256	5,1
Informal hobby group	5	732	14,6	5	381	7,6
Organizing events (one-off or repetitive)	6	729	14,6	4	595	11,9
Public gatherings (not in the workplace)	7	561	11,2	8	213	4,3
Social protests	8	387	7,7	9	212	4,2
Informal self-help group	9	331	6,6	6	352	7,0
Political activity	10	251	5,0	10	206	4,1
Not engaged in any of the above-mentioned activities	-	1433	28,7	-	1724	34,5

Source: Survey in the project 'Polish immigrant organisations in Europe' (2018)

The most common forms of activity falling within informal social participation in the host society were: selfless help for people in the close social environment (53,9%) and collecting for those in need (38,7%). Visibly more rarely respondents declared being active on internet (running a blog, being a part of a social media group or email list, or actively participating in a forum) (25,1%) and participating in actions for the local community (19,1%). Further activities in the rank of popularity among respondents were participation in informal hobby groups (14,6%) and organising of various one-off and repetitive events (14,6%). One out of nine of the surveyed Polish immigrants (11,2%) had participated in public gatherings other than organised in a workplace.

For the participation related to the Polish community in the country of residence, the rank and the frequency distribution were much different. First of all, the most commonly declared activities in the ethnic context were placed on the internet (39,9%). Selfless help for people in the close surrounding was also popular (37,0%), but relatively less frequent than in the host society's context. A similar phenomenon was observed in the case of collecting for those in need – it was also relatively high in the popularity rank but visibly less frequent (23,0%) than the same activity in the host society. Further activities in the rank of popularity among respondents were: organising various events (11,9%) and participating in informal hobby groups (7,6%). Actions for the local community and

participation in public gatherings that were relatively popular among respondents in the host society's space turned out to attract much less of the surveyed immigrants in the ethnic context (5,1% and 4,3%).

Conclusions

The analysis of the patterns of formal and informal participation of Polish migrants in nine selected countries shows the prevalence of informal modes of engagement over the formal ones. This is especially visible while analysing formal membership and volunteering in NGOs, which are typically used as indicators of a formal engagement. In both cases – non-immigrant NGOs and PIOs – their values are relatively low, and in each case do not exceed 6% of the researched population. On the other hand, the indicators of informal engagement are significantly higher. This applies especially to some of the dimensions of informal social activities like selfless help for neighbours and other people in close social environment, collecting for those in need and different forms of internet activity.

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