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Heads or hands?

Differences and similarities between Polish students and labour immigrants

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Abstract

Discussing the Polish presence in Leuven, Belgium, this article examines the concept of 'intellectual migration from Eastern Europe after 1989' on at least two levels. On the one hand, it analyzes the numbers of foreign students at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and shows that a Europeanization is taking place, not because of a growth in the number of Central Europeans students, but because of a drop in the number of Chinese students and a rise of students from Belgium's neighbouring countries. On the other hand, it compares this intellectual immigration from Poland with the larger and better known labour immigration. It appears that the categorization between heads and hands is certainly not absolute. Their paths were much more common than scholars and students suppose, with labour immigrants studying, students working, and many Poles from different classes maintaining contact with each other.

Keywords

Labour migration, Student migration, Polish migration, Foreign students, Europeanization, Identities, Ethnicity, Leuven, Belgium, Poland

Paulina is a 26 year old Polish woman. After secondary school she followed a study program focused on dietary health at a technical school in Poland and started working as a dietician. After two years, she followed her boyfriend to Belgium, where both started to work: he as an odd-job worker and she as a cleaning woman. However, Paulina gradually reengaged with her old profession. She published advertisements in the Polish immigration media and found some clients amongst her compatriots for whom she composes diets. Since she would like to expand her customers, she is now following a Dutch course in a language school and aspires to follow a two year program for dieticians at a Belgian institution.

Lidia has lived in Belgium since 2001. Her mother, a nurse from Białystok, had arrived a year earlier and settled in Brussels. She had left her home country because of the low wages and growing tension with her husband. In Belgium, she started working as a cleaning woman. She also found out about the possibilities offered by higher education in Belgium and the following year, she invited her daughter to Belgium. Lidia had not yet even taken her 'matura' (the examination of maturity at the end of secondary education) when she learned that she was allowed to take courses in Belgium. First, she followed a year's course of Dutch language and afterwards she enrolled in the Slavic Studies Program at the University of Leuven, about 20 kilometres from Brussels. She flourished in her first year and in her third year she even went for a year to Cracow to study at the Jagiellonian University as an Erasmus exchange student.

Joanna has a different story. She is a 25 year old Silesian woman, who studied history in Wrocław and came to Leuven in 2004 to complete a second M.A. in European studies. In order to pay for her stay, Joanna had to work. She did different jobs, such as baby-sitting, washing dishes in a restaurant and cleaning private houses. As a result of this combination of working and studying, she had to prolong her study. However, she did not regret this, since she had become acquainted with a Belgian boy very quickly after her arrival. They started a relationship and recently married. Joanna is now looking for a new job that is steadier and corresponds with her education. There is a very high chance that she will settle in Belgium forever.

These three stories concern Polish girls in their twenties who ended up working and studying in the Belgian city Leuven. They are very different. Paulina arrived as a labour immigrant, worked as a cleaning woman and has started new studies in Belgium. Lidia is the daughter of a labour immigrant and has started university study in Belgium. Paulina came as a student, took up a second M.A. programme and combined this with some part time jobs. Yet, in spite of, or perhaps because of, these differences they all illustrate the main argument of this article: the difference between unskilled labour immigration and educated brain immigration is not absolute. Many immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe work and study at the same time, using their heads and their hands simultaneously. Nevertheless, scholars and policy-makers are prone to make an absolute distinction between labour and intellectual migration, mass and elite, unskilled workers and highly qualified students.¹ An absolute distinction between both groups

¹ See, for instance, the study by two important specialists that was ordered by Polish authorities: Paweł Kaczmarczyk & Marek Okólski, *Migracje specjalistów wysokiej klasy w kontekście członkostwa Polski w Unii Europejskiej* (Warszawa: Urząd Komitetu Integracji Europejskiej. Departament Analiz i Strategii, 2005)

is artificial and must rather be seen as an intellectual construction by scholars, partly as a result of what has been called the typical categorization of migration.²

This article is based on about forty in-depth interviews with Poles living in Leuven – both students and labour immigrants, of different ages and social classes. First, it will introduce the reader to the Polish presence in Belgium and Leuven and place the Polish students' community amongst other foreign students in Leuven. Afterwards, it will analyze to what extent and in which fields' domestic workers and students showed differences and similarities. Finally, it will discuss how both groups – in so far as they exist in absolute terms – perceive each other themselves.

Poles in Belgium and Leuven

Poles are one of the largest ethnic groups involved in the migration waves after 1989.

According to an estimation based on the Polish Census of 2002, ca. 800,000 Poles had left their country between 1990 and 2001 and were still residing abroad in 2002. Most of them lived in Germany (57%), the U.S. (22%), Canada (4%), and Italy (4%), but Belgium was an important host country as well, taking seventh place (in absolute terms and still being preceded by France and Great Britain.³ At the end of the 1990s, the number of undocumented Polish workers in Belgium was estimated to be between 30,000 and 50,000. About half of them were considered to live and work in Brussels.⁴

Most of them came from the rural areas of Eastern Poland and have continued to maintain contact with their homeland, regularly spending some time in Poland again. In the 1990s, they worked on the black market. Most women earned money as domestic workers (cleaning, baby-sitting) and most men in the construction, gardening, painting, and decorating sectors.⁵ After 2004, Belgium did not immediately open its labour market to the new EU member states, but from 1 June 2006 onwards, it has allowed Central European workers to follow 112 so-called bottleneck professions. In the first year, 14,209 vacancies were filled in Flanders alone, of

² Lucassen, Jan, & Lucassen, Leo, "Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives", in: Lucassen, Jan, & Lucassen, Leo, *Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, Bern e.a., 1999², 9-38.

³ Kaczmarczyk & Okólski, *Migracje specjalistów wysokiej klasy*, p. 13-14.

⁴ A. Grzymała-Kazłowska, "From Ethnic Cooperation to In-Group Competition: Undocumented Polish Workers in Brussels", in: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31 (2005), 676.

⁵ Aleksandra Grzymała-Kazłowska, "Dynamika sieci migranckich: Polacy w Brukseli", in: Ewa Jaźwińska & Marek Okólski (ed.), *Ludzie na huśtawce. Migracje między peryferiami Polski i Zachodu* (Warszawa: Scholar, 2001), 272-302; Aleksandra Grzymała-Kazłowska, "Sieci społeczne i kapitał migrancki wśród Polaków w Belgii", in: Bolesław Klimaszewski (ed.), *Emigracja z Polski po 1989 roku* (Kraków: Grell, 2002), 336-361; A. Grzymała-Kazłowska, "From Ethnic Cooperation to In-Group Competition: Undocumented Polish Workers in Brussels", in: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31 (2005), 675-697; Elżbieta Kuźma, "Migracje do Belgii : o możliwościach i barierach wychodzenia z nielegalności", in: Wojciech Łukowski & Paweł Kaczmarczyk (ed.), *Polscy pracownicy na rynku pracy Unii Europejskiej* (Warszawa: Scholar, 2004); Elżbieta Kuźma, "Kobiety - nielegalne imigrantki z Polski w Brukseli. Zjawisko i problemy", in: *Migracje i społeczeństwo*, 10 (2005); Mila Paspalanova, *Undocumented and legal Eastern European immigrants in Brussels* (Doctoral dissertation K.U.Leuven Social Sciences, 2006).

which 88% were filled by Polish workers. Especially the seasonal work of fruit picking is very popular in this system.⁶ Others, however, continue to work illegally.

In Leuven, there are fewer Poles than in Brussels or Antwerp. As of January 1, 2007, the city had 383 registered Polish inhabitants. This seems to be a small group: Leuven counted 10, 000 official foreigners (about 11% of the total population). The Poles are only the fifth group, after the Dutch (1383), the Chinese (1026), the Spanish (440), and the Moroccans (437). However, the official data obviously do not include all people of foreign origin: many of them do not register or have been naturalized.⁷ Most interviewed Poles assess their total number in the city at five hundred to one thousand. This group is much more heterogeneous than in other Belgian cities. It does not only include labour migrants and partners of mixed marriages, but also intellectuals. The university indeed attracts Polish exchange students (both for Bachelor and for Master programs), assistants working on PhD's, and postdoctoral researchers conducting research projects.

Foreign students in Leuven

In the academic year 2007-08, the K.U. Leuven (campus Leuven) had 32,779 students. One on eight of them was foreign. The most important countries supplying students are the Netherlands (817), China (317), India (214), Spain (189) and the U.S. (188 students). The 131 Polish students take only eighth place, but they are by far the biggest Central European group before Romanians (67), Bulgarians (48), Hungarians (47), Czechs (28), Lithuanians (21) and Slovaks (20).

| | 2003-04 | 2004-05 | 2005-06 | 2006-07 | 2007-08 |
|------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Dutch | 471 | 535 | 634 | 760 | 817 |
| Chinese | 512 | 537 | 401 | 371 | 317 |
| Indian | 120 | 124 | 131 | 180 | 214 |
| Spanish | 174 | 173 | 196 | 194 | 189 |
| American | 157 | 166 | 169 | 174 | 188 |
| German | 110 | 116 | 157 | 160 | 179 |
| Italian | 107 | 123 | 132 | 138 | 157 |
| Polish | 107 | 120 | 133 | 130 | 131 |
| French | 74 | 83 | 88 | 110 | 97 |
| British | 70 | 61 | 62 | 55 | 71 |
| Greek | 61 | 66 | 70 | 53 | 69 |
| Turkic | 56 | 74 | 84 | 65 | 69 |
| Romanian | 74 | 76 | 71 | 62 | 67 |
| Nigerian | 91 | 84 | 85 | 79 | 66 |
| Vietnamese | 70 | 80 | 73 | 63 | 64 |
| Russian | 49 | 52 | 53 | 61 | 62 |
| Iranian | 39 | 48 | 41 | 53 | 61 |
| Portuguese | 36 | 35 | 39 | 39 | 53 |
| Canadian | 50 | 50 | 52 | 41 | 50 |
| Bulgarian | 54 | 52 | 51 | 46 | 48 |

Figure 1: Foreign students at the K.U.Leuven, 2003-08⁸

Figure 1 shows how the twenty most important nationalities of the academic year 2007-08 have been represented among the student population of K.U.Leuven over the last five years. It illustrates four important statements. First, it reveals that the number of Polish students has been

⁶ „1000 ‘witte’ Polen per maand naar Vlaanderen”, in: *De Standaard*, 30-05-2007.

⁷ “Eén op negen Leuvenaars heeft buitenlandse nationaliteit”, in: *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 4-7-2007. A year before, only 273 Poles had registered (*Het Nieuwsblad*, 23-05-2007) – this shows that more Poles find their way to the Leuven city hall.

⁸ See the K.U.Leuven archive on: <http://www.kuleuven.be/studentenaantallen/>. These numbers include all foreign students with a main enrolment at Leuven University, so also, for instance, exchange students and doctoral students.

stable. They have been 130 over the last three years and Poles have occupied sixth to eighth place over the last five years.⁹ This somehow contradicts the public opinion about the numerous Polish presence in Leuven (for instance, a newspaper article in 2005 wrote “especially Chinese students, but also Dutchmen, Americans, and Poles have discovered Leuven”)¹⁰. Secondly, there have been no significant changes either in the numbers of other Central European groups. The Erasmus and Socrates collaboration clearly anticipated the Romanian and Bulgarian entry to the European Union on January 1, 2007. Thirdly, the presence of Central European students has not followed the development of Western European ones: the amount of Dutch and German students, but also Portuguese and Italian ones, has increased spectacularly (1.5 to 1.7 times more) over the last five years, with only Spanish and British students not arriving in much larger numbers. The ‘mass’ influx of Central European students in the 1990s seems to have halted and neighbouring countries seem to have rediscovered the Belgian university again. Fourthly, there have been some fluctuations amongst non-European students as well. The most important are the drop in the number of Chinese (a 60% fall in four years) and Nigerian students, and the rise of Iranian and particularly Indian students.

The consequence of these developments has been a remarkable change in the ratio of European to non-European foreign students. In 2003-04, there were more than 12.5% more foreign students from countries that did not belong to the European Union in 2008 (1974 to 1537), but 2007-08 was the first year to see more European (2114) than non-European (2011) foreign students.¹¹ Although the overall number of foreign students has increased each year (from 3511 in 2003-04 to 4125 in 2007-08), one can state that this has not been caused by the so-called globalization or even by the European enlargement in 2004 and 2007, but by the boom of students from neighbouring countries and Southern Europe. This sheds a different light on concepts such as ‘brain migration’ and the ‘children of 1989’.

The developments at Leuven University do not seem exceptional. It is difficult to compare with Flanders’ second largest university in Ghent, since numbers are based on different criteria. Still, in 2002, 2003, and 2004, most Erasmus students in Ghent came from Spain (144 in 2004), Italy (81), and Poland (54).¹²

A mix of categories

These Polish students have stood in the shadow of the undocumented labour immigrant. The latter indeed have given a face to Polish (or Central European) immigration to Western Europe: the Polish plumbers in France, cleaning women in Belgium and barmen in Great Britain. However, as already stated in the introduction of this article, this juxtaposition is not correct. There are no absolute differences between the two categories. The paths of Polish students and workers in Leuven cross each other much more often than one might think. Students work and workers study.

⁹ About the historical contacts between Leuven and Poland, see: Louis Vos, "Leuven, Louvain and Poland", in: Idesbald Goddeeris & Michel Dumoulin (ed.), *Intégration ou représentation? Les exilés polonais en Belgique et la construction européenne. Integration or representation? Polish exiles in Belgium and the European construction* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia Bruylant, 2005), 13-29.

¹⁰ “Steeds meer buitenlandse studenten”, in *Het Nieuwsblad*, 22-09-2005, p. 18.

¹¹ In both years, we consider students from the 27 countries that belong to the EU as European students.

¹² *Het Nieuwsblad* (8-10-2002), *Het Volk* (21-10-2003), and *Het Laatste Nieuws* (28-05-2004).

Many Polish students indeed combine their studies with a job. Some of them do so simply in order to have extra money aside from their scholarship and the money they receive from their parents, but others have to work in order to pay their studies. Patrycja, for instance, a 23 year old student from Cracow, had arrived in Leuven for one semester only. She was enthusiastic about the exchange program and decided to prolong her stay by another semester. Since she was not entitled to a new Erasmus scholarship from her home university, she had to find a job in order to achieve her new plan.

Just like most other students, Patrycja works only a dozen hours per week. This contrasts with labour immigrants, who obviously work much more. Concerning other aspects, however, those two groups are much more similar. Many female students clean, iron and wash dishes, both in private houses and in restaurants, and many male students do some tougher work, for instance in the construction industry. As a matter of fact, they are forced to do such jobs since they do not speak Dutch and cannot have occupations that include contact with clients. Their environment – for instance Patrycja’s mother, friends and boyfriend – consider these jobs as very undesirable because of the hard work involved and their low social status. However, these students themselves do not agree and stress that other student jobs, such as waiting in a restaurant, are much harder and more exhausting.

Students as well as labour immigrants combine legal and illegal work. Hania, another student working in Leuven, works four hours as a registered domestic worker in a private house and six hours illegally, washing dishes in a restaurant. This is partly explained by the type of jobs (washing dishes is often done for cash in hand), but students also complain about the difficulties in getting a work permit. Hania related the story of a friend who had to wait half a year before she obtained such a permit. To avoid this, she had called and approached the municipalities’ responsible very regularly and even asked her future employers to do the same. As a result, she received her permit after a month.

Both ‘categories’ find their jobs by means of informal networks. Hania had found her jobs through intermediaries: the official one was suggested by the director of her student residence, the unofficial one by a friend, another Polish student who worked. Patrycja had obtained three different jobs at the job centre for students, an official institution at the university.

Another important similarity is the fact that students as well as labour immigrants plan to stay only temporarily in Belgium, but finally remain longer than they had initially planned, though they often continue to travel between their home and their host country. The example of Patrycja has been discussed before. Here, it is worth adding that she was not only impressed by the courses and the student life in Leuven, but that she also decided to stay for another semester because she had started a relationship with a new boyfriend in Leuven and that she is considering staying another year and following a second M.A. program. The possibility that she will develop from a student to a worker in Belgium is not unreal: she would not be the first. Adam came to Leuven as an Erasmus student, returned to Warsaw to finish his studies, but was offered a PhD scholarship in Leuven and came back again. He received his doctorate, found work in Belgium and still lives in Leuven today. In his case, it was not love and study, but work that influenced his decision made him settling.

Many Poles found work at the university. Most of them have a temporary occupation, for instance working on a research project or enjoying a scholarship such as the Marie Curie Intra-

European fellowships offered by the European Union while others have a steady job. Beata, for instance, works as a lab assistant at K.U.Leuven. She had already settled in Leuven in 1991, after she had met her (former) husband during a stay of the folklore band she performed in. Beata had studied psychology in Poland, but her diploma was not completely recognized in Belgium and instead of following additional compensation courses, she enrolled for a second course in biotechnology. She married, started a family and found work at the university.

Although both Adam and Beata follow high-skilled professions, their examples show that the distinction between students' and workers' immigration is not absolute, with intellectuals and students finding their way to the labour market too. Conversely, a lot of labour immigrants have studied as well. Some of them have followed the example of Beata. Adam's wife had a background in economics and had worked in the clients' department of a big store, but did not like the job and profited from their stay in Leuven to retrain. She trained as a primary school teacher and now works in a kindergarten. Some of her compatriots have similar plans. Cecylia, who moved to Leuven two years ago and has made her living from cleaning, had been an accountant and had worked in a tax office. She has lately been thinking of taking some additional courses so that she can follow her former profession again. The case of Paulina, the dietician who works as a cleaning woman but is gradually retaking her old profession again among Polish immigrants and started studying Dutch in order to work among Belgians too, has been explained in the introduction to this article.

Indeed, many labour immigrants in Leuven learn languages, particularly Dutch. Most of them take an intensive course, which is sufficient for a basic knowledge that can be expanded on the work floor afterwards, but others are more diligent and continue their language study for years. They follow these courses at several language schools in Leuven, such as the Leuven Language Centre (CLT), an institution for adult education that is in association with the university, but not a formal part of it. These schools are partly financed by the government and can therefore offer courses for very little money (e.g. 150 euro a year, 50 euro for an intensive course). The registration fee is much lower than in Poland, which is an additional stimulus for Poles to follow such courses.

However, the low prices are not the only reason for labour immigrants to study again. It seems that the very migration is a deciding factor in this step. Initially, migrants are satisfied with the better living circumstances they have found abroad. Their decision to leave their country was mainly based on the hope of earning better money, and this need is usually definitely fulfilled. Even migrants holding master's degrees and who worked in the private sector in Poland, find their new situation in Belgium much more attractive than what they had experienced in Poland. Their salaries are a few times higher and their work is often undemanding, being free from stress and responsibility.

A good example of this is the story of Cecylia, which was mentioned briefly earlier. Cecylia had worked for a few years as an accountant in a financial company in a medium-sized Polish city. She decided to leave her job and country after an accident at work, in which she was treated unfairly by the owners of the firm. Her main drive to choose emigration as an answer to the troubles at work was the fact that she could earn easily higher amounts of money, even though the only possibility in Leuven was to work as a domestic worker. When she compares Poland and Belgium, she admits: *"Bialystok (her city in Poland) is not a good place if you want to earn decent money. It pays off to be here, just because you can get better money. (...) I feel really*

good since my work is quiet and stress free, since you can work as much as you want and you have good money out of it. But I'm not going to cheat anybody, I do not want to work as a domestic worker for the rest of my life. There is still some ambition lying dormant deep inside me. So, I need to start to work on myself, taking advantage of the fact that I'm having such a carefree time".

Indeed, after a certain period domestic workers do not compare their situation with the one in their homeland anymore, but with their new social environment. For many of them, this changing point of reference is an important source of reflection. They start to think seriously of how they could upgrade their social position and climb up the ladder of social hierarchy. Or they want some more stability and switch from the black to the official labour market. It is for these general reasons that they decide to resume their education.

Also, financial independence can provide migrants with more self-confidence and material possibility. Freed from the constraints of an extremely competitive labour market in Poland where unemployment of 20% made them choose occupations according to their prospects on the labour market and not necessarily to their abilities and personal interests, they seem to reinvent themselves once again. But of course, there can be more concrete reasons, too. Karolina, for instance, had left Poland not only for economic reasons, but also because of her bad relationship and the violence of her partner. She tried to take her son with her to Belgium, but the Polish court gave the child's custody to the father since Karolina, working on the black market, could not prove any source of income. She decided to learn languages in order to find official work in Belgium.

Promotion versus discrimination

It is not only the labour migrants themselves but also their children who study. The story of Marek, whose mother earns her living in Belgium as a domestic worker, is very illustrative: *"I began my studies at the polytechnic institute in Bialystok and I finished the first year there. After that, I started to think what I could do in Poland. Because everybody saw what the situation looked like then. It was extremely difficult to find a job even if you held a degree. Besides, the student life boiled down to drinking. I had relatively high marks and I was thinking that I could do something else. And then, our mother [who worked already in Belgium as a domestic worker] decided to bring us here, to Belgium. But I did not speak Dutch, I knew only English. So, at the beginning I thought about going to Ireland, but fees were completely out of our reach. Poland was not a member of the European Union yet, so it cost more than 10 thousand Euros. So, we decided to give it a try here, and we were pleasantly surprised because registration fees were about 500 Euros. It meant that it was practically even less than in Poland. And since Leuven is the best university in Belgium, we chose the best one. I chose computer science, because it is a very promising kind of education. Mathematics and physics had been taught well in Poland, so I did not have any problems. I was astonished because everybody kept scaring me of Leuven: very high level of teaching, best university in Belgium. So I took it very seriously and finished the first year with distinction. Huge surprise! It was worse later. Leuven is a wonderful city, tons of fascinating people, you want to get to know everything and lose interest in studying. (...) I also support myself, even though I live with my mother and sister. Of course, I can count on them, but each of us works and earns his own money. And what I do is usually similar to what other migrants do for work. I mean I am a sort of a handyman."*

Marek is certainly not the only domestic worker's child who started or continued his studies abroad. Some of them are not talented enough to enrol at the university, but their ambitions undoubtedly reach that far. The 18 year old Adrianna, for instance, makes money as a domestic worker, just like her unskilled parents, but studies four languages, one each evening, at the Leuven Language Centre and aspires to find an administrative job in Belgium later on. Lidia, another daughter of a domestic worker, studied Dutch for one year and then enrolled in the B.A. program in Slavic Studies at the K.U.Leuven. For some courses, especially those on language and literature, she had the advantage of being of Polish origin and having a Byelorussian grandmother (the Leuven Slavic studies consist of Russian and Polish studies), but other courses (philosophy, history, etc.) were much more difficult. Yet, she passed her exams and in the third year, she went to the Jagiellonian University in Cracow as an Erasmus exchange student.

The social promotion of these students cannot be exaggerated. On the one hand, most of them come from backward regions, such as Podlasie in Eastern Poland, which has been underdeveloped for historical reasons (foreign occupation and exploitation without modernization and investment, late and weak urbanization, dominance of small-scale farms and lack of trade, natural resources and industry). On the other hand, some of them come from classes or social groups among whom studying at university is not an obvious step. Lidia's mother is a nurse who had been forced by socio-economic reasons to work in low skilled jobs – she can still be considered as an educated person, though her education was local and not academic. Adrianna's father is a blue-collar worker who had stopped his education after secondary school.

Their parents' move to Belgium created enormous opportunities. Studying at a university had been beyond their imagination only a couple of years before, mainly because of financial reasons. It would have been expensive to stay a couple of years in a Polish university town and the many private schools that have appeared in Poland after 1989 ask very high tuition fees. Moreover, entrance exams and the limitation of the number of students at Polish universities are often psychological barriers for people who had not grown up in an environment that was familiar with an academic education. But now, these youngsters can study at a Western university, which opens the first year to all students at a relatively low fee resulting from the democratization policy of recent decades. Even more, Lidia could combine this study with a stay at the Jagiellonian university in Cracow, the oldest and one of the most prestigious universities in her homeland.

Such cases are extremely important for the broader migrant community. The fact that the children of domestic workers may successfully attend one of the best Belgian universities has a very stimulating effect on other migrants. It shows them that the gates of social advancement are open to everybody, regardless their national or financial status. It demythologizes the social "glass ceiling" which prevents immigrants from improving their social status and it creates invaluable role models for other young and educated migrants who live in Leuven. It obviously does not mean that all social barriers disappear altogether. It only deconstructs a certain social role defined by the situation of migration. Parts of this socially defined role assume that Polish migrants in the West should not aspire to better jobs. It is almost taken for granted that most migrants, especially from small communities in Poland, that you should forget about your professional aspirations while working abroad. These attitudes change quite quickly in countries where the labour markets have been open since 2004. In Britain for example the number of

Polish students rose from 2005/06 to 2006/07 by 56 percent.¹³ This spectacular increase means that Polish students outnumber Spaniards and Italians. The dynamics of European integration are uneven, and many Polish migrants who live in countries that keep their labour markets protected, do not realize that they have equal access to all of the educational institutions in these countries.

Many Polish migrants are indeed unaware of the opportunities which are open to them. Obviously, if they compare their chances to local Leuveners, it is quite obvious for them that because of linguistic disadvantages and the closed labour market they are in a worse position. But, at least two things should be mentioned in this context. Firstly, most migrants are aware of the fact that they came and worked in Belgium while breaching certain legal rules. They are fully conscious that they cannot demand fairer treatment because they are also unfair. In other words, most of them abuse the system and accept the situation where they are being abused. They do not express it in an open way, but it seems to be pretty clear that they feel that they are not in a position to complain about it. One may even get the feeling that the fact that they often boast about their ability to work hard and without complaining, compensates for not being proper law abiding citizens.

Mutual contacts and perceptions

All the above mentioned examples show that the tracks of labour immigrants and students are interwoven and that no absolute distinction can be made between these groups. But do Poles in Leuven themselves perceive this as well? Do they have contact with each other? Can they, all together, be considered as a homogeneous group or are there still important differences?

The answer depends on the respondents. Students, or more particularly exchange students (thus not more permanently settled labour immigrants and their relatives studying languages or university programs), stress that they have no contact with their compatriots. Both Patrycja and Hania state that they had already heard Polish conversations on the bus or the street. They are keen to listen to them, but they do not search for any contact with their compatriots and feel themselves to be completely different. While talking about Polish labour in Belgium, Hania even spontaneously made the classic difference between students, who worked in order to support themselves and to pay their studies, and ‘the others’, who had not received any education and work in Belgium in order to buy a car or a house in Poland. It is striking that she did not explicitly perceive the important differences in the settlement process and the contact with the home country: domestic workers are considered as Poles and as temporary (or pendulum) migrants too.

The ‘others’, however, feel themselves much more connected to their compatriots at the university. If we may believe their story, there is intensive contact amongst Poles of all classes and generations. Some of the forums where they meet are very general. For instance, the Eucharist is celebrated in Polish each Saturday evening in the parish church of the Leuven suburb Heverlee. Almost all Poles who regularly attend these masses, stress the mixed character of the worshippers, who include both young students and older domestic workers. Another important element is the fact that many Polish labour migrants live among students, both in

¹³ Naomii Pollard, Maria Latorre and Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, *Floodgates or turnstiles? Post-EU enlargement migration flows to (and from) the UK*, 2008, Institute for Public Research (online at: <http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=603>).

student houses and in student dorms, which are the cheapest housing in Leuven. Some of these student residence buildings have even earned a good reputation among Polish labour migrants, especially for their low prices. Language courses are often an occasion to meet with compatriots as well. In the class of Adam's wife, there were thirteen Poles, from different generations and social backgrounds, and many of them went for a drink after class. Finally, there can be more particular occasions of contact. Some domestic workers had known a Polish student in Leuven before they immigrated to Belgium. Others are or feel themselves young and have found their closest friends amongst Polish doctoral students, even joining them in city-trips to Rome.

It might seem strange that the versions of Erasmus students and domestic workers about the issue of mutual contact are so different. This can be caused by a certain lack of representativeness of the sources, but it is more likely that this also mirrors the perception of contacts and solidarity. Domestic workers, indeed, feel themselves connected with the international student population, even if they don't have any real contact with them. Many of them express their appreciation of Leuven's academic atmosphere, especially in comparison with Brussels, 20 km farther on. Leuven is considered as less touristic, less violent, quieter and safer. The fact that one can go out at night without fear of violence is one that a lot of interviewees stress. According to one Pole, this should be explained by the higher real estate prices, which keeps lower classes and violence away, but many others refer to the student population. They give the city a young, but also international character. Because of them, migrants are perceived as a much more heterogeneous group in contrast to the large Moroccan or Turkish populations for instance which catch the eye in other cities. As a result, there is less xenophobia.

Polish workers enjoy this international atmosphere, but they have a less active participation in it. Students, indeed, seem to have a more international inner circle and transnational identity. Several students or former students have a foreign partner: Patrycja has an Italian boyfriend and Judyta, a 32 year old biotechnologist who arrived in Belgium in 2003 as a Marie Curie fellow, has a relationship with a Burundian (with whom she was expecting a baby). Hania does attend mass, but goes to a Belgian church in order to get acquainted with the local culture or to an English-language celebration, although she would like to go to the Polish mass as well and has not done so mainly because the church is further away. Many doctoral students see their stay in Belgium as temporary and dream of a postdoctoral career in another country, not in Poland, but in Western Europe or, even more, the U.S.

Yet, here too, it would be wrong to perceive this as an absolute difference and to suppose that the domestic workers' transnational identity is much more bilateral, i.e. Polish and Belgian. On the one hand, Polish workers prove to have limited contact with Belgians as well. When they meet, this is often on the working floor. Sometimes, their contact leads to a more stable acquaintance based on the duration of their working engagement, since many domestic workers have been employed for years now and have seen families growing up. But in many other cases, the contact remains limited because of the lack of a common language or the employers' absence during the working hours.¹⁴ All in all, most Polish domestic workers, just like Polish students, do not develop their social life with other Belgians, but with other Poles.

¹⁴ Influence in the other direction, i.e. from the Polish worker on the Belgian employer, is much more important: the Polish domestic worker is mostly the only Central and Eastern European individual with whom a Belgian has contact. This personalization of the grey immigration mass has an important impact

On the other hand, Polish workers prove to have international contact as well. They frequent night shops and telephone centres run by Pakistanis and Turks, too. Irek, who left Poland five years ago and initially worked in the U.K., founded a company with a Belgian of Turkish origin, selling bread and Polish products to small shops. After all, the cosmopolitan identity and open framework of references, that characterized Polish (and other foreign) students, can be found among Polish workers as well. Though both groups are not completely united by their ethnic origin and can feel divided by class or generation, the categorization between students and workers is much more a construction than usually supposed.

Heads and hands

All in all, it is clear that an absolute distinction between Polish students and workers does not correspond to the truth. Many Polish students combine their studies with some jobs, which are often the same as those of Polish labour immigrants (cleaning houses, babysitting, etc.). Conversely, many domestic workers are found to study. Some of them learn languages in evening schools, other ones attend courses to make their prior education valid in Belgium, and – even more important – some of their children enrol in Belgian universities. Next to this, both groups have other things in common, too. Many Poles, students as well as labour immigrants, have stayed much longer in Belgium than they had initially planned. They live in similar circumstances (domestic workers living in student houses or districts) and they meet on several occasions, in churches as well as language schools.

In spite of this, perception differs. Many students continue to differentiate themselves from their working compatriots, whom they perceive as coming from backward regions and lower classes. Domestic workers, conversely, are keen to see much more similarities. The way the autochthonous population perceives this heterogeneity has not been studied. Perhaps, there is no single Belgian view. Belgians who personally know students or domestic workers are mostly influenced by this individualization and are aware of the interwoven character of both groups while Belgians who do not, however, continue to think in clichés. And an absolute distinction between intellectual and labour migration is one of these typical stereotypes.

Quoted interviews (all names are pseudonyms)

(All together, forty interviews with Poles living in Leuven have been done in August 2007 and April 2008)

Adam: about 30 years old, higher education, living in Leuven (MG, August 2007).

Adrianna: 18 years old, from Silesia, living in Leuven since 2004 (IG, January 2008).

Cecylia: about 30 years old, higher education, living in Leuven for two years (MG, August 2007).

Hania: about 20 years old, from Warsaw, theology student, 6 months Erasmus in Leuven (IG, April 2008).

Irek: about 30 years old, from Silesia, average education, five years in Leuven (MG, August 2007).

Joanna: about 25 years old, from Wrocław, higher education, three years in Leuven (IG, February 2008).

Judyta: 32 years old, higher education, living in Leuven since 2003 (MG, August 2008).

Karolina: about 40-45 years old, living in Leuven since 2004 (DN, August 2007).

Lidia: about 20 years old, from Białystok, living in Leuven since 2001 (MG, August 2007).

Patrycja: 23 years old, from Cracow, European studies student, whole academic year in Leuven (DN, April 2008).

Paulina: about 26 years old, average education, living in Leuven for one year (MG, August 2007).