

## Polish Immigrant Organisations in Italy within the Context of Invisibility

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In Italy, there are a number of formal organisations established and run by Polish immigrants and their descendants. The paper gives a brief account of the associations' characteristics and describes how their internal factors – particularly social and cultural capital – have been primary determinants of their condition. The impact of human resources is particularly pronounced, since the Polish organisations in Italy remain largely unseen, either from the perspective of the country of origin or the country of residence, as well as relations between them. The invisibility context in which they pursue their goals and activities is discussed. Also, the ramifications of invisibility as a concept are given careful consideration. The analysis is based on the findings of a study that was conducted in the years 2016–2020 within the framework of the 'Polish Immigrant Organisations in Europe' research project.

**Keywords** immigrant organisations, invisibility, integration policy, diaspora policy

### Introduction

Centres of cultural and political life on the Apennine Peninsula attracted foreign visitors and residents for centuries, including those from the territory of contemporary Poland. Yet, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Italy was not a highly popular destination for migrant Poles. Until a few decades ago, the country had a distinct emigration profile, as it was struggling with challenges represented by overpopulation, economic crisis and underdevelopment. It was only at the turn of the 1960s that an economic boom initiated migration from Southern to Northern regions of Italy (Enaudi 2007; Clark 2009; Bonifazi 2013). External migration followed, which since the 1990s became increasingly considerable in scale. It was also the decade when the Polish population in Italy had grown substantially and is currently estimated at approximately 100,000 people.

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At present, there are about 40 formal Polish immigrant associations (FIOs)<sup>2</sup> in Italy. The paper outlines their characteristics while attempting to provide insight into what influences their condition. It is argued that factors connected to the organisations themselves, primarily the social and cultural capital available, has been of key significance. Their impact is even more profound since the analysed organisations are set in the context of invisibility, as they remain largely unseen from the perspective of the sending and the receiving country, as well as their bilateral relations.

## Analytical framework

The study on Polish FIOs in Italy was conducted in 2016–2020 as a part of the ‘Polish Immigrant Organisations in Europe’<sup>3</sup> research project. Its main objective was twofold: to capture their condition and to gain insight into what its determining factors might be. Numerous research techniques used provided qualitative and quantitative data. After the desk-research stage, the fieldwork in Italy was initiated which involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of Italian institutions responsible for immigration and integration policies. The main criterion adopted for sampling was selected to ensure that the perspective of all levels of the local government is taken into account. Due to organisational limitations, actors from primarily two regions were included; both located in the northern part of Italy – a traditional destination point for internal and external migrants. The sample also comprised representatives of civil society organisations that play a fundamental role in migrant integration in Italy, especially in the South of the country (Caponio 2004). At that stage, interviews with experts on Polish associative life in Italy were held.

Furthermore, five organisations were carefully chosen for in-depth case studies. To ensure the sample is as heterogeneous as possible, firstly, the age of a given FIO was considered to analyse associations at different stages of development, and simultaneously those created by representatives of various migration flows; Secondly, taken the deep cultural, political, economic and administrative diversity of Italian regions, the FIOs selected were those located in northern, central and southern parts of the country. Thirdly, the organisation’s size was taken into account so that the study would involve both local and umbrella organisations.

The collected material was used to capture the condition of the associations by looking at their legal status, location, scope and profile of their activity as well as their

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<sup>2</sup> Immigrant associations are understood here as in: Nowak, W., & Nowosielski, M. (2016). Zarys uwarunkowań funkcjonowania organizacji imigranckich – Propozycja modelu wyjaśniającego. *Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny*, 161(3), 31–52.

<sup>3</sup> The research project ‘Polish immigrant organizations in Europe’ (2015–2020) conducted by the Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw, Poland which was financed by the Cracow-based National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki) as a follow-up to the competition SONATA BIS (no. 2014/14/E/HS6/00731).

socio-cultural capital and material resources. Apart from its diagnostic objective, the study was also aimed at identifying factors that influence the FIOs' condition. Following the analytical model proposed by W. Nowak and M. Nowosielski (2016), the determinants were classified according to their source areas, i.e. linked to (1) the immigrant population and characteristics of the migration process, (2) the country and society of origin, (3) the country and society of residence and (4) bilateral relations between the sending and the receiving country.

The metaphor that well conveys the gist of the findings is that of invisibility. The term has been used not only in culture (mythology and literature in particular) but also in several academic disciplines: ranging from Physics to Social Science. To clarify its use within the study presented here, what follows is a brief conceptual mapping of its multi-faceted meaning and ramifications. Even a simple dictionary search reveals the intricacies of the term's semantic field (see: Chart 1). In its literal sense, it signifies the state of not being seen by the eye of the beholder, yet in more abstract terms, it can indicate a *lack of perception* where attention is not given either intentionally or not. In other words, it can result from the object of potential perception being too slight to be noticed (its imperceptibility), but it may as well name a conscious act of omission (exclusion). What is more, invisibility may regard an individual or a group and manifest itself as an individual act or a structured process of invisibilization (Herzog 2020) implemented through social, cultural and legal mechanisms (Hatton 2017). Invisibility might also be interpreted to mean a *lack of understanding* (Smith et al. 2018) when the object of perception is misidentified, which again may or may not be an intentional strategy. Also, invisibility may be regarded as desired or undesired (Smith et al. 2018).

Chart 1.

Selected aspects of the 'invisibility' semantic field

	DESIRED	UNDESIRED
<b>VISIBLE</b>	Understood Recognised Included Participating	Misunderstood Misrepresented Seen as particular Singled out Stigmatised
<b>INVISIBLE</b>	Transparent Hidden	Imperceptible Unnoticed Ignored Excluded Marginalised Disadvantaged

Source: own analysis based on Smith, W., Higgins, M., Kokkinidis, G., & Parker, M. (2018). Becoming invisible: The ethics and politics of imperceptibility. *Culture and Organization*, 24(1), 54–73; *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998). Oxford: OUP; *The Oxford Paperback Thesaurus* (2012). Oxford: OUP.

In Social Science, the metaphor of invisibility has been prevalently used to refer to the status of marginalised minority groups. Invisibilization is seen as a part of structural discrimination. Originally, with the publication of 'The Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison (1952), the term was applied in that context to Black Americans (Král 2014), to be popularized further with the conceptualisation of 'invisible work' by A.K. Daniels (1987). In other words, applying categories of invisibility/visibility has been framed as a process deeply embedded into power relations. Collins and Webb assert that:

*(...) the perspective of visibility/visibility is a metaphor that sets in place mechanisms of power and processes of knowledge formation. It is, after all, those who have the authority to say what is worth knowing that have the capacity to render others variously visible and invisible. To see is to know; not to see is not to know; to refuse to see is to render invisible, and irrelevant—to place the unseen or the mis-seen (...) The act of seeing is, then, a material practice; it engenders particular ways of knowing, being and doing, which Foucault terms 'power-knowledge' (2014: 493)*

Still, invisibility may also be perceived as desired or necessary (Smith et al., 2018). Rendering a group undesirably visible (particular) may result in stigmatisation. While becoming invisible inasmuch as it involves inclusion into the dominant social group could be perceived as a positive outcome. The privilege of the majority, due to certain cognitive phenomena at work (see: Wu, Dunning 2020), remains transparent until uncovered.

## The condition of Polish immigrant organisations in Italy

As mentioned, there are approximately 40 Polish FIOs in Italy, yet, their official registration has been relatively recent. None of the analysed associations had been registered before the 1990s. Most of them acquired the legal status of an organisation only after 2004<sup>4</sup>. Currently, it is still informal decision-making that seems to be dominant in how the FIOs are run. Ideas are often coined and implemented as a result of decisions that are taken regardless of the board meetings and sometimes the actual board structure. In other words, the associations are managed in a flat rather than hierarchical way. One of the interviewees highlights:

*(...) what is important is that any initiative that we take, it's not like it's me and (...) [vice-president] who take the decisions, it's not like we sit down and decide: this is what it's going to be like. (...) the whole content is created together. (17\_IDI\_O5a\_POIE\_Italy)*

Another confirms that informal decision-making practices are frequent, yet, is critical towards it:

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<sup>4</sup> That is not to say, however, there had been no structured associative life among Poles in Italy before. The origin of the oldest existing association goes back to the 1950s.

*Whatever you said, whatever you did, however you voted, it was the individuals who eventually decided. And in many cases, they took the decisions even without consulting the board. (16\_IDI\_O3c\_POIE\_Italy)*

The tendency for social participation to emerge in fluid organisational forms (Korolczuk 2017, Dzięglewski, Nowosielski 2021: 287) also manifests itself among Polish immigrants in Italy. As one of the interviewed experts notes:

*There are relatively fewer associations at the moment that would be set up by the newcomers (...) We are rather dealing with the phenomenon of provisional organisations. I mean people who stay in touch with one another on Facebook all the time and then they gang together to do something. (2\_IDI\_E\_POIE\_Italy)*

The overwhelming majority of the FIOs are relatively small in size and of no complex structure. There are two umbrella organisations, though: a major one established in the 1990s, and another created later as a result of a split from the former. A third federative body was established, yet it is aimed at integrating educational initiatives of Polish immigrants in Italy. Apart from Rome, which hosts several Polish immigrant organisations, typically, there is a single Polish FIO in a given location. The organisations are thus mostly dispersed throughout the territory of the country. They are also locally embedded not only because of their size but also through the scope of their activities. As one of the interviewed leaders confirms:

*I think we are rather talking about the local scale. (...) Generally speaking, we are dispersed and the associations – they integrate those small local groups; but there’s no single agenda that we have in common. (14\_IDI\_E\_POIE\_Italy)*

Despite some integration methods being made, the results remain largely superficial. On the one hand, as the conducted institutional survey indicates, the organisations engage in some form of cooperation; still, on the other, more than half of them (13/26) only do it occasionally. Also, typically they collaborate by exchanging information or participating in one another’s events. Cooperation based on joint activities or projects is hardly common. The same applies to the activities pursued under the framework of the main umbrella organisation. As one of the interviewees clarifies:

*[The umbrella organisation] has in fact no influence on the goals and agenda of the member organisations which comprise the federation because we decide each on our own. (15\_IDI\_O3b\_POIE\_Italy)*

The fragmentation of the Polish associative life in Italy is also evident from the tendency to set up new organisations rather than join the existing ones. As stated:

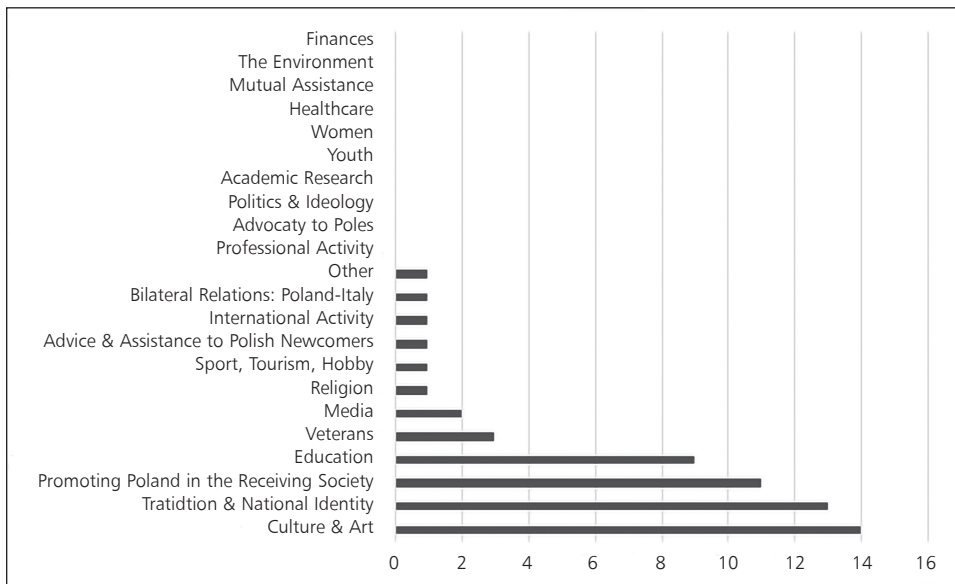
*(...) from time to time new initiatives appear. (...) a new association is established. So I call them and tell them ‘Maybe you would like to find out what we have done so far?’ But*

*they say 'no, no, no, it's not necessary.' They prefer to start from scratch with something they like. (13\_IDI\_E\_POIE\_Italy)*

In their activity, all the analysed associations focus primarily on socio-cultural initiatives. When asked in the institutional survey to enumerate areas where they are active, none of their leaders pointed to the categories of 'politics and ideology' or 'finance'; though some (11/28) indicated their organisation has been involved in "advocacy to Polish immigrants' interests". The socio-cultural focus of the FIOs becomes evident, once the key areas of their activity are considered. As Chart 2 shows, they most often regard 'culture and art' (14/28), 'traditions and national identity (13/28), 'promotion of Poland among the receiving society members' or 'education' (9/28).

Chart 2.

Principal activity areas of the Polish immigrant organisations in Italy



Source: own work based on the institutional survey conducted within the framework of the "Polish Immigrant in Europe" research project, SONATA BIS programme (no. 2014/14/E/HS6/00731).

Still, the associations vary significantly in how their role and aims are conceptualised. When considered in ideal-type terms, they are either orientated towards a mission of preserving and promoting the culture of origin or focused on meeting the needs of their target group. The former type, characteristic to the Polish FIOs run by the representatives of earlier migration flows, is primarily aimed at:

*(...) keeping Polish traditions alive, passing them on to Italians. (...) as Italians still sometimes don't know much about Poland. (5\_IDI\_O1b\_POIE\_Italy)*

In this approach, the focus is not only on the culture of origin but also the cultural heritage of Poles in Italy; whereas, the associations with a dominantly pragmatic orientation, typically established by Polish migrants from recent migration flows, concentrate on providing its members and target community with support and opportunities to socialise:

*Well, women meet because they feel lonely. (...). That gives us strength, for example, during Easter various excursions, when sharing problems and helping one another. (25\_IDI\_O6b\_POIE\_Italy)*

The culture and language of origin tend to be seen in that perspective as a communicative resource rather than a value for its own sake. The pragmatic associations often engage in educational activities in order to support the emergence of bicultural/bilingual competence:

*Some young mothers got together, those who felt the need to do something for themselves and their children. (...) [To create] a place where children would be able to learn Polish and have contact with Polish culture and their peers who already are or want to be bilingual. (26\_IDI\_O7a\_POIE\_Italy)*

In the case of numerous FIOs, it is the Polish institutional environment (particularly the consulates and the Embassy) that dominate their network of contacts. According to the results of the survey, all the analysed FIOs are connected to those institutions, and the overwhelming majority of the former (21/25) contact the latter on a regular basis. It is especially the long-standing associations that perceive the relations as vital and often amiable. As one of the leaders declares:

*We know each other, we simply know each other well. Both the consular staff and the consuls themselves. (...) They join us at all the events twice, three times a year. (...) So the cooperation is good. (4\_IDI\_O1a\_POIE\_Italy)*

As far as the principal sources of funding for the FIOs are considered, the pivotal role of Polish state institutions is again conspicuous. In the survey, the Polish actors were indicated 17 times as the major provider of funds, while their Italian counterparts were only named twice in that context.

Nevertheless, the Polish immigrant associations remain open to engaging with Italian institutions, particularly those at the local level. The contacts, however, are rather occasional. Politicians and representatives of the local authorities sometimes participate in the events held by the Polish associations. The municipality may provide them with premises, yet it is rather uncommon to obtain direct financial support.

The analysis of goals declared and activities pursued by the FIOs shows that the integration process of Polish immigrants within the receiving society is seen as welcome. Approximately one-third of the associations declared in the survey that their

target group included not only Poles but also 'Italians', 'Italians interested in Poland' and 'mixed marriages. To illustrate the point, one of the interviewees describes:

*(...) we organise presentations about various books, not only Polish but also Italian because our group is made of Poles and Italians. Italian families who have had nothing in common with Poland [before] make up one-third. (6\_IDI\_O1c\_POIE\_Italy)*

Thus, Italians are involved not solely as recipients of the associations' activities. Their presence is reflected by the membership composition, as well.

Yet, only to a varying degree do the Polish FIOs remain open to cooperation with other ethnic groups that comprise the Italian society. The results of the institutional survey indicate that a majority of the associations (20/24) have developed contacts with their counterparts run by representatives of other ethnic groups. However, only half of them stay in touch regularly. The mission-orientated Polish FIOs choose to cooperate primarily with those ethnic groups who are well-integrated within the Italian society and are associated with higher social strata, while they remain socially distanced from the other ones. The following quote well illustrates the approach:

*We don't want ethnicity to characterize us because, for example, the Peruvians – they go in groups and play some music in traditional folk costumes. But all that is a bit inelegant. Later, they cause some trouble connected with public order. They have a barbecue in public parks. People complain – and we don't want to be seen like that. (4\_IDI\_01a\_POIE\_Italy)*

It is more common for the pragmatically focused associations to develop relations regardless of the group's position in the receiving society. Yet, most often the contacts involve participation in one another's events. According to the interviewees, the cooperation is not likely to become enhanced because of the existing goal divergence:

*From time to time, we can meet but I can see in fact that on daily basis they are better on their own, when they organize their own stuff. (...) Each time we organize a bigger event (...) they also take part in it. It's really nice (...) and friendly. But it is not based on some deeper grounding. All that is in a way superficial. (21\_IDI\_O6a\_POIE\_Italy)*

There have been, however, cases when the cooperation with migrants of diverse ethnic backgrounds took more in-depth forms. For instance, when a project was launched by a Polish FIO that defined the beneficiaries in broad terms, regardless of their country of origin or ethnic identity:

*The project is mainly targeted at foreign women but it does not exclude the fathers and people who are not parents. (...) This is a project for foreigners and created primarily by foreigners. (26\_IDI\_O7a\_POIE\_Italy)*



The challenge that all the Polish FIOs in Italy face is their unstable financial situation. Most of them (16/26) own no property, office or computer equipment inclusive (17/26). In the majority of cases (17/26), their official seat is located in a private flat of the current president. Also, according to estimates, the annual financial resources of many of the associations (13/25) are in the range of 0 to 500€, while in the overwhelming majority of cases (21/25) they do not exceed 5,000€ annually. Occasionally, as one of the interviewed leaders indicates, it is necessary to use the members' private means to complete a project:

*When necessary, we use our own private funds. It has been so from the beginning, to be honest. (7\_IDI\_O5a\_POIE\_Italy)*

Despite at least some of the FIOs efforts to diversify their funding sources, their financial situation is seen by the interviewees as rather unpredictable.

Another common challenge that the analysed organisations face involves insufficient human resources. According to the estimates of the leaders, a substantial majority of the FIOs (18/23) have fewer than 50 formal members and the tendency in recent years has been for the numbers to remain stable or fall. In addition, only one-tenth of the organisations employ paid personnel on a regular basis. Hence, the effort lies mainly with the few enthusiasts and volunteers engaged in the daily running and development of the FIOs. As one of the interviewed experts clarifies:

*A lot depends on people, on those enthusiasts who are set on gathering others (...) the activities are organised by a leader who has the drive and determination and can organise people. (10\_IDI\_E\_POIE\_Italy)*

## Determining factors

The condition of the Polish FIOs in Italy can be thus characterised mainly by their relatively small size, shortage of financial and human resources as well as territorial dispersion and a hardly advanced integration process. What follows is a review of the key determinants that the analysis showed to be instrumental in shaping the condition of the organisations. Additionally, other factors are considered that comprise the invisibility context in which the associations pursue their goals.

## Immigration process from Poland and Polish population in Italy

The small size and territorial dispersion of the FIOs result from the sparse Polish population resident in Italy. Its numbers have been estimated by the interviewed experts and associational leaders at approximately 100,000. According to ISTAT<sup>5</sup>, there are

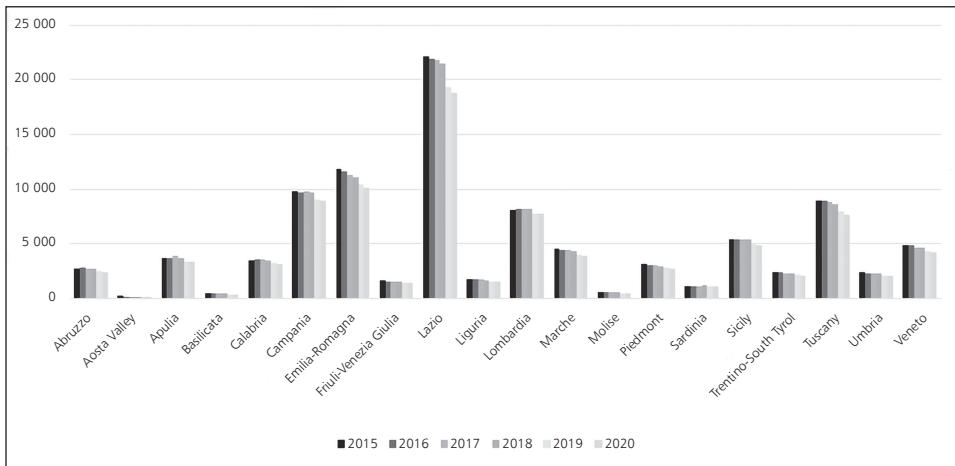
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<sup>5</sup> ISTAT – Italian National Statistical Office.

currently<sup>6</sup> 86,743 residents in Italy who hold a Polish citizenship. As Chart 3 shows, the population, distributed among all the regions, has been diminishing in size during the last few years. In 2020 in the region of Lazio, it decreased by 3.9%, which was the most dynamic fall among all other foreign groups resident in the region (IDOS 2020).

Chart 3.

Regional distribution of Polish citizens resident in Italy in the years 2015–2020



Source: own study of the ISTAT data (National Statistical Office of Italy), on: <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=19675#> (accessed: 15.02.2021).

The fact that the membership of the analysed organisations has either remained stable or declined is seen by the interviewed experts as linked to the socio-economic position and working situation of some Polish migrants. In that view, those Poles whose arrival in Italy has been relatively recent do not participate in the FIOs because of time constraints and the necessity to focus on the working life. Especially the figure of a female worker employed in the care and domestic services is mentioned in that context:

*(...) the majority are Polish women who come here to work. (...) They work 24 hours a day and because of that, they're not interested in anything. (16\_IDI\_O3c\_POIE\_Italy)*

Yet, it is the ideo-normative divergence between the mission-driven and pragmatic associations that seems to be the root cause behind the scarce inflow of new members and, rather superficial effects of the integration process. The divergent conceptualisations of Polish associative life in Italy seem to originate from the heterogeneity of the current Polish population in that country. It is constituted by migrants

<sup>6</sup> Updated for the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021.

from several different migration flows. Typically, four major ones are identified in this context: (1) the veterans who came to Italy with the Polish 2. Corps towards the end of World War II; (2) the 1980s migration associated with the Solidarity movement; (3) economic migration of the 1990s dominated by women who sought employment in care and domestic services; and (4) relatively recent post-accession flow comprising migrants of various social and cultural backgrounds (Kowalska-Angelelli 2007; Małek 2014: 149). The most significant dividing line that underpins the ideo-normative divergence is associated, however, with the distinction between pre- and post-1989 migration flows.

Even though, the overwhelming majority of approximately 100,000 Polish soldiers, who were stationed in Italy at the end of the Second World War, eventually left the country<sup>7</sup> (Morawski and Morawski 2006, Pyłat 2014, Paradowska 1992), those few who decided to stay laid the normative foundations of what would typically become mission-orientated Polish associations in Italy. The interviewed leaders of those FIOs often referred to themselves as members of political emigration and imagined the representatives of post-1989 migration flows as economic migrants. Such a distinction bears only limited explanatory power, especially in reference to the 1980s migration, since individual decisions to migrate could be rather located on a continuum between political and economic motivations (Kula 1995: 141–142, Romaniszyn 2000: 88, Małek 2014: 149). Yet, the distinction between political and economic migrants refers in this context to identity labels indicating two different normative orientations. Those who migrated to Italy before 1989 focused their social engagement on creating repositories of Polish cultural and historical heritage, in opposition to the undemocratic regime in the country of origin. The approach can still be seen in the goals pursued by today's mission-driven FIOs associations, such as preserving and promoting Polish culture, Polish cultural activity and historical traces in Italy. Now under the changed political circumstances, they typically display strong links with Polish institutions, which can be interpreted as a continuation of the previously conceptualised mission.

The leaders of the mission-orientated organisations tend to see representatives of the more numerous flows of the 1990s and later decades as unlikely to take over and continue their pursuits. One of the interviewees emphasises:

*There is such a diagnosis that labour migration is not capable of taking over the heritage. I confirm that. Absolutely (4\_IDI\_01a\_POIE\_Italy).*

The inability of the new migration to further preserve the Polish cultural heritage in Italy is thus referred to in terms of class differences by, for instance, pointing to the insufficient cultural capital of the economic migrants:

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<sup>7</sup> It is estimated that approximately two thousand Poles decided to stay in Italy in that period (Paradowska 1992: 633).

*And they speak (...) half Polish, half Italian. They lose their poor Polish and do not acquire the accurate Italian (...) That migration is getting more and more pauperised, proletarianised. And the cultural emigration – cultural in the sense that those are people who did something for Poland in Italy – has been in decline (...) So, in my view, the future (...) does not look promising. (12\_IDI\_E\_POIE\_Italy)*

The post-1989 migrants, labelled above as economic, do not constitute a homogeneous population. As mentioned before, the migration of the 1990s involved mostly female migrant workers (Golemo 2011) who found informal employment in the care sector. While they could be characterised by a relatively low level of education, especially at the beginning of the decade (Kowalska-Angelelli 2007: 2), Poles who moved to Italy during the post-accession period migrated not only in search of employment but also for education or self-development. Their level of education has been higher than typical in the 1990s (Małek 2014: 149). Despite the notable differences, both migration flows that occurred after 1989 share a certain degree of fluidity in their settlement patterns. In the 1990s, due to irregular employment opportunities (Weinar 2006), migration from Poland was often temporary and circular in nature. The most recent migrants have been fluid in their migration projects, which tend to get modified as the circumstances change (Kowalska-Angelelli 2007: 3). Those Polish FIOs, that are associated with post-1989 migrants focus in their activity on pragmatic objectives that address the needs of the target groups, by, for instance, providing various types of support or Polish language teaching for the children. The interviewed representatives of the most recently established associations put the goal divergence between the earlier well-settled migrants and themselves in terms of generational differences:

*They are an older generation, (...), the people who arrived here earlier than us and who have lived here for long. They have adult children, so they have also different needs than we do. (27\_IDI\_O7b\_POIE\_Italy)*

In practice, there is no complete separation between the typically mission-orientated and pragmatic FIOs, since the contacts between the associations of those two categories are maintained. Also, there is a certain degree of activity diversification within some organisations. However, the goal divergence remains distinct and profound as it originates in different normative visions of the Polish associations' role – the conceptualisations that were coined by migrants who left Poland in different times and circumstances. Thus, the fragmentation of the Polish associative life in Italy is also likely to continue in the future. The heterogeneity of the Polish population in Italy, combined with its relatively low (and diminishing) numbers as well as territorial dispersion, cause the Polish FIOs to remain largely unnoticed. As one of the interviewed experts remarks:

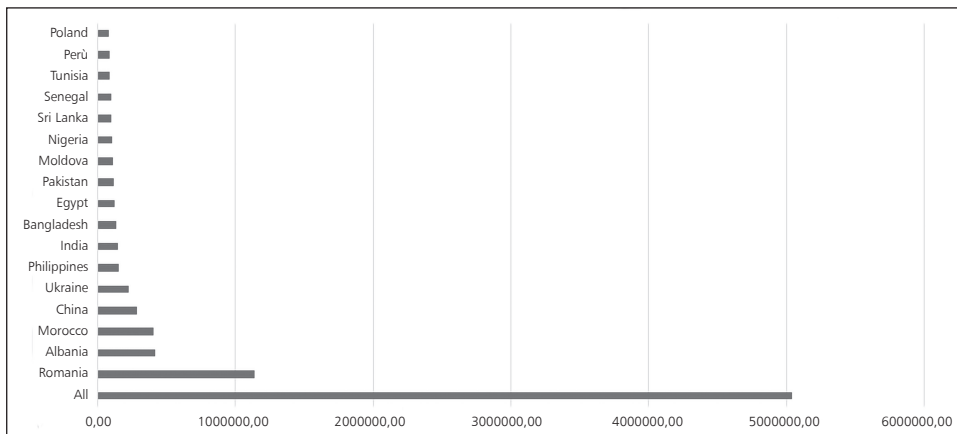
*The Poles, they are invisible (...) If we had not a thousand, but ten thousand associates, then we could organise ourselves – but what is that? Politically speaking, there is no clout.*  
(12\_IDI\_E\_POIE\_Italy)

## The country of residence

The Polish associations in Italy are alspractically invisible from the perspective of Italian integration policies. Firstly, because the Polish population amounts to solely 1.7% of the total number of foreign residents in Italy (IDOS 2020: 461). While, as indicated in Chart 4, the first five immigrant populations (Romanians 22.8 %, Albanians 8.3%, Moroccans 8.1%, Chinese 5.7%, and Ukrainians 4.5%) are present in much more considerable numbers (IDOS 2020: 461–463). What is more, Polish citizens comprise only one of as many as 190 countries of origin for immigrants who constitute the highly diverse immigrant population in Italy (IDOS 2020).

Chart 4.

Most numerous foreign populations in Italy (by citizenship, updated for 1st Jan. 2021)



Source: own study of the ISTAT data (National Statistical Office of Italy), on: <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?Query-Id=19675#> (accessed: 15.02.2021).

Secondly, Italian integration policies are addressed primarily – if not solely<sup>8</sup> – to *extracomunitari* (Third-Country Nationals, according to the EU nomenclature). One of the interviewed experts responsible for planning and implementing activities in that field clarifies why he does not know Polish associations by referring to the EU status of Poles:

<sup>8</sup> The exception to the rule are Romanians who comprise the most numerous foreign-born population in Italy (Legut 2019).

*I can't tell you anything about them; also because when we talk about Eastern Europe we are in the European Union. (POIE\_Inst3\_Włochy)*

With Poland's accession to the EU, discursive frames on Polish immigrants began to change within the Italian society. Previously, since the mid-1980s, when as a result of a considerable influx of Poles<sup>9</sup>, their increased visibility in public spaces (Maciotti, Pugliese 1998) and negative media coverage, the image of the Pole – doing menial, usually irregular jobs, such as that of *badante* (caretaker), *muratore* (construction worker) or *lavavetri* (window-cleaner) (Golemo 2011, 2013), entered the Italian social imagery. Then, in the period immediately before the accession, the image of the Polish plumber was added, whose increased presence was to threaten the local workforce with excessive competition on the labour market (Kowalska-Angelelli 2007). Yet, that type of frame in media coverage has been substantially reduced since Poles in Italy became EU citizens (*comunitari*) (Golemo 2010: 313) In consequence of the shift in their legal status, their presence within the Italian society has been in a sense 'naturalised' (Kowalska-Angelelli 2007: 5).

Poles in Italy remain thus beyond the main scope of Italian integration policies, which themselves are also not of central importance to the Italian state agenda. The policies have been focused primarily on the first reception (Ambrosini 2013), taking the form of crisis management rather than fully-fledged policy (Weinar 2006, Ambrosini 2013a). It had not been until the 1990s that the field of immigrant integration was provided with the first (though selective) legal framework. Integration was long perceived by Italian legislators and decision-makers as a virtually spontaneous process. The main focus had been to facilitate the immigrant's entry into the labour market (Caponio<sup>10</sup>, no comprehensive normative framework at the central level has emerged, which would provide a point of reference for minimal conditions in facilitating migrants' integration (Di Scullo 2020). The low priority given to integration at the level of the Italian state is also evident from the fact that the policies' implementation has been from the very start underfinanced and therefore marginalised (Caponio 2014: 9). As a result of the 2008 economic crisis, the available funds for integration activities were substantially reduced further (Accorinti 2013, Stuppini 2020).

The Italian integration policies' focus on Third Country Nationals does not entail that Polish immigrant associations in Italy are explicitly excluded in their access to programmes and funds. As one of the interviewed experts confirms:

*We work, first of all, with all migrants who come from the Third Countries. Still, I know that in some cases also associations run by EU residents take part in those programmes. (POIE\_Inst5\_Italy)*

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<sup>9</sup> For more, see: (Pugliese, Maciotti 1998, Golemo 2006).

<sup>10</sup> (8.8% – IDOS 2020)

The law introduced in 1990, which enabled regional and local authorities to award grants to immigrant organisations, acted as an incentive to register organised social activity (Caponio 2004). The analysis shows that it has also had an impact on the formalisation of Polish immigrant associations. The interviewees often explained that one of the reasons behind the formal registration of their organisation was to ensure its access to locally available funds or other forms of support.

In Italy, it is the local and regional level that proves to be pivotal in developing, implementing and often conceptualising integration policies (Legut 2018). As a result, there is a wide diversity in approach and scope of the activities undertaken, especially that it regards the country with profound regional differences. As one of the interviewed experts emphasises:

*It is necessary to consider Italy in terms of territory. It is a highly diverse area – socially and structurally. It can be divided into the northern, southern and central parts. Culture in Italy is highly diversified, depending on the geographical context. As it's said, Italy comprises 'a 1,000-belltower culture' (cultura di mille campanili). We have so many provinces. In fact, there are 8.2 thousand of them. Even within the same region, two provinces can be completely different. (POIE\_Inst6\_Italy)*

The variety involves not only cultural traditions, local economies and dominant political affiliations but also organisational culture and social policy normative frameworks. In effect, different immigrant integration opportunity structures emerge (Campomori, Caponio 2013).

The regional and local diversity of Italian integration policies was found to impact the condition of the analysed Polish immigrant associations, in particular their funding opportunities. While in northern regions, the allocation of public funds through tenders based on selection criteria is a likely procedure, in the southern part of the country, where clientelist administrative culture is dominant, it is the social capital and individual power of persuasion of the applicants that seem to be the key determinants of success in obtaining some form of support from the local authorities (Campomori, Caponio 2013). Though, to a certain extent, the importance of informal relations is recognised throughout Italy. An interviewed leader confirms that:

*In many cases, the people have grown used to some kind of creative approach and certainly, the Italian reality allows in a way for such creativity to develop (...) all depends on interpersonal relations, so you need to go to the municipality, meet the official; the fourth time you are there, he knows what your point is, he comes [to your event] because you say there are some nice snacks to have, he eats and chats. (...) The organisations have understood that this is how it works. (2\_IDI\_E\_POIE\_Italy)*

Still, if the shortage of available funds proved to be a commonly shared challenge to all the studied Polish associations, those located in the southern regions of Italy

found it particularly difficult and unpredictable to obtain support, financial or other, from the local authorities. One of the interviewed leaders thus illustrates the context:

*If I, or other members of our board, do not get involved and do not have relevant – so to speak – private contacts, then, unfortunately, there is nobody we can count on. (...) If it is about, for example, even making some room available – for free – to an association so that they can carry out their activities there, that is often possible but you simply must have your own relevant contacts. (...) And this involves, I assure you, a lot of effort if you want to get anything. (...) We have some premises (...) [provided by the local parish] but if it wasn't for my friendship with the local parish priest, we wouldn't have any. (...) there may be a huge problem because somebody soon else is to take the position of the parish priest. (16\_IDI\_E\_POIE\_Italy)*

In a nutshell, the deep regional diversity of Italy translates into the local embeddedness of the Polish FIOs and influences their funding opportunities. Yet, the insufficient financial and additional material resources that they have access to is also a result of the general orientation of the Italian integration policies and their deprioritised position in the state agenda. The Polish organisations and Polish immigrants, since they do to have the discursive and legal status of the outsiders (the Third Country Nationals), have not been problematised within the framework of the integration policies. They have been largely transparent from the perspective of their country of residence because, as EU citizens, they belong to what is considered a majority group.

## **The country of origin: Polish diaspora policy**

The engagement of the Polish state through its diaspora policy was seen by many of the interviewed experts and leaders as insufficient, especially as far as the scale of the available resources is concerned. Coupled with the challenges posed by the framework of Italian integration policies, the meagre funds the Polish FIOs can apply for from the Polish state institutions negatively impact their financial condition and development opportunities.

One of the strategic aims of the current governmental programme on diaspora policy was to strengthen the position of the local Polish communities and their engagement in public life in their countries of residence (MSZ 2015). To enhance the visibility of the Polish immigrant organisations in Italy, the Polish consular officials have worked to facilitate contacts between the associations and the local authorities. It also appears that the Polish Embassy and consulates have had their role in encouraging Polish organisations in Italy to be formally registered. In the 1990s, the efforts were directed as well at enhancing integration between associations, though the main umbrella organisation was eventually established without the direct participation of the Polish state actors, since concerns were voiced on the part of the associations about potential political dependence (Legut 2020).



Since 1989, Polish diaspora policy, despite paradigm shifts, has remained relatively stable in one particular aspect: geographical differentiation of its target group into Poles in the East and those in the EU/EFTA countries (Nowak, Nowosielski 2017). The policy towards the former has mostly been based on the assumption that it is the duty of the Polish state to provide them with support and assistance. The latter were more likely to be imagined in terms of their duty towards the state of origin and expected to engage in public diplomacy tasks. Also, it was the Polish communities in the East who were prioritised within the diaspora policy most of the time (Legut 2013, Nowak and Nowosielski 2017).

The objectives towards Poles in the EU/EFTA countries are formulated in the current governmental programme (MSZ 2015) in generalised terms, without taking into consideration specific contexts of particular countries of residence, Italy including. An interviewed expert points out that:

*Here it is necessary to give more attention to those organisations (...) because they have had a lot less support than the organisations which are located in the north of Europe.*  
(1\_IDI\_E\_POIE\_Włochy)

The main goals – addressed to the target group broadly defined as Polish immigrants in the EU/EFTA countries – involve strengthening links to the country of origin and facilitating return migration (MSZ 2015). As one of the interviewed experts highlights the focus is on supporting that activity which involves fostering the culture of origin:

*Certainly, at the moment, we focus on two areas, judging by the shape of the budget for the civil society organisations. We always take into account culture and education.*  
(2\_IDI\_E\_POIE\_Włochy)

The analysis of the Polish associations in Italy showed that there is a certain degree of disparity between the goals of the current Polish diaspora policy and the actual needs of the local Polish communities in Italy. An interviewed leader describes one such example:

*(...) what we need here is a psychologist. We applied twice and got rejected. Counselling is definitely needed. Sometimes it seems to me that the assistance we get from Poland looks the following way: we will help you but the way we want (...) and they send us piles [of books]: Polish-English dictionary, Żeromski, Sienkiewicz.* (6\_IDI\_O1c\_POIE\_Włochy)

As far as the provision of funding for Polish FIO is concerned, those in the EU/EFTA countries have been deprioritised in comparison with their counterparts located in the Eastern countries. Yet in 2012 with the introduction of the New Public Management principles into the procedure of allocating Polish diaspora policy funds, the grant system for instance (Nowak, Nowosielski 2018), a wider range of Polish immigrant

organisations abroad received support. In particular, a higher number of associations located in the EU/EFTA countries became beneficiaries of support than previously (Nowak, Nowosielski 2017). Yet, some interviewed leaders of Polish organisations in Italy complained about the administrative challenges posed by the changed application procedure, yet acknowledged the readiness of the consulate officials to provide assistance in that respect. However, in the case of Polish associations in Italy, due to the insufficient funding available, it did not translate into stabilisation of their material standing or a developmental boost.

The Polish FIOs in Italy are thus – to at least a certain extent -invisible also from the perspective of their country of origin in the sense that the Polish diaspora policy fails to give careful consideration of the specific context in which they develop their activities.

## **Bilateral relations between Poland-Italy**

Contacts between the two societies go back several centuries. Travellers from the territory of contemporary Poland are known to have visited political and cultural centres in the Apennine Peninsula at least since the Middle Ages (Bernatowicz 1990, Golemo 2010). The relatively low cultural distance between the countries may be seen as a factor influencing Polish migrants' openness toward the receiving society and culture. As an interviewed expert indicates:

*The Polish community in Italy (...) they feel kind of at home. (...) I think those historical, cultural relations, traditions we have in common, are of key importance because they give the Polish organisation some grounding here. (2\_IDI\_E\_POIE\_Italy)*

Added to that, the Polish public opinion polls show that since the 1990s Italians have been one of the most respected nationalities in the view of Poles (CBOS 2020). None of the analysed Polish associations in Italy have adopted a distinctly isolationist approach or pursued goals that would actively hinder the process of integration of Polish migrants with the Italian society.

As far as political relations between Poland and Italy are concerned, K. Strzałka, described them in reference to the interwar period as characterised by “difficulties to find areas of common geopolitical interest and geographical distance” (2001: 23). The same observation can be applied to the overall shape of the bilateral relations in the next decades. They have remained friendly yet of low intensity. Even after Poland became an EU member state and started to participate in a number of multilateral bodies and fora within the EU framework, there has been no major strengthening of the bilateral cooperation between the two countries (Strzałka 2007). After the Second World War, Poles in Italy and their associations have not been problematised within the bilateral relations. In other words, they have remained invisible from that perspective as well.

As the analysis showed, two major shifts in the international political context influenced the current condition of the Polish immigrant organisations in Italy. Firstly, the events associated with the year 1989, linked to the end of the communist regime in Poland, changed the legal and political situation of migrating Poles and affected the migration patterns in a way already described above. The representatives of either the pre- or post-1989 migration flows coined a substantially different understanding of the role of the associative activity. One of the main consequences, nowadays, is the fragmentation of the Polish associations in Italy. The second significant date is the year 2004, which marks not only Poland's accession to the EU but also the moment when Poles became EU citizens. The subsequent implementation of the Schengen acquis created a transnational space which, coupled with innovations in communication and transport facilities, make direct and day-to-day contact easily accessible, as well as over long distances. As one of the interviewees highlights:

*(...) people who are now in their 20s, 30s(...) stay in touch with friends in Poland, for them, it's easier to travel. They don't feel like socialising with people from older generations. (...) they simply know people directly from Poland (4\_IDI\_01a\_POIE\_Italy).*

The fact seems to be instrumental in the low engagement of newcomers from Poland into the formal associative life in Italy.

## Conclusion

The analysed Polish associations in Italy exist in a context of multi-causal invisibility. They are largely imperceptible because of the size and dispersion of the Polish population resident in that country and due to the characteristics of the migration process, especially the differences between the pre- and post-1989 flows. They remain also practically transparent for the Italian integration policies, since Polish migrants, now with the legal status of EU citizens, are beyond their scope. No to mention that the area of migrant integration in Italy is deeply diversified across the regions and is not seen as a priority in the state agenda. To a certain extent, the associations also remain invisible from the perspective of the Polish diaspora policy. They are misrepresented in as much as they are given only a generalised consideration which does not address specific features of their condition and the context in which they are set. Even though, both the country of origin and residence created some incentives to visibilise the associations by, first of all, encouraging them to be formally registered. Yet, neither Polish migrants in Italy nor their associations have been problematised within the bilateral relations between Poland and Italy. What becomes crucial to the condition of the associations set in the invisibility context is then the people – in particular their social and cultural capital – who are involved in the daily administration and development of the organisations.

What remains to be seen are the dynamics of the informal actional engagement of Polish migrants in Italy and its influence on the condition of the formal Polish associations in that country.

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