# Polish Immigrant Organisations in the UK after 2004: Between Lack of Unity and Increased Recognition

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the changing structure, characteristics, and condition of Polish Immigrant Organisations (PIOs) in the United Kingdom, from Poland's accession to the EU (2004) until the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote (2017). It suggests that they are an important part of the rich tapestry of civil society actors dealing with migrants' issues. It finds that the profound heterogenization of the landscape of Polish Immigrant Organisations can be attributed to a very diverse migrant community in terms of class, whose needs were not met by the hitherto existing organisations devoted to the symbolic affirmation of Polishness and in-group solidarity, chiefly along class lines. The resultant intergenerational tension between old and new migrants translated into the emergence of a new breed of migrant organisations that addressed the welfare needs of the underprivileged Polish migrants, especially on a local level, as well as their cultural belonging and social aspirations. The article is based on a 2-year multi-method study of migrant organisations across the United Kingdom that included surveys, interviews, and participant observation among civil society activists, experts, as well as civil servants.

**Key words:** Polish Immigrant Organisations; Brexit; Civil Society; EU Migration

## Introduction

This article[2] discusses the changing landscape of Polish Immigrant Organisations (PIOs) in the United Kingdom, from Poland's accession to the EU (2004) until the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote (2017). The analysis of the structure, the characteris-

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[2] The article is the result of a 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).

tics, as well as the determinants of the condition of those organisations suggests that they are an important part of an array of civil society actors organising community life and fighting for migrants' rights, especially on the local level. The article finds that the exponential growth of Polish migration to the United Kingdom that began in 2004, when the population swelled to hundreds of thousands, resulted in a profound heterogenisation of the landscape of PIOs. This reflects a very diverse migrant community in terms of class (economic, social, and cultural capital) in comparison to previous migration flows in the twentieth century that had been less socio-economically diverse. This increasing socio-economic diversity of the Polish diaspora meant that their needs were not met by the hitherto existing organisations devoted to the symbolic affirmation of in-group solidarity, class identity, and superiority distinguishing Polish 'political' emigres, from mere 'economic' migrants who came to the UK for materialistic reasons – a key distinction of Polish migration culture (Garapich 2008). While many new migrants needed help adjusting to life in British society, what resulted was an intergenerational tension between old and new migrants. This translated into the emergence of a new breed of migrant organisations that address the welfare needs of the underprivileged Polish migrants and often the wider Central-Eastern European (CEE) migrant community, alongside an affirmation of cultural belonging and social aspirations, especially on the local level. The article is based on a 2-year multi-method study of migrant associations across the United Kingdom that included surveys, interviews, and participant observation among civil society activists, experts, as well as civil servants.

In what follows, the article discusses the theoretical underpinning for the study of migrants, largely from a sociological perspective – it also outlines the methodological approach of the study, paying special attention to the epistemological limits of the inquiry. It also details the methods of investigation and the process of data collection and analysis. Subsequently, drawing on the analysis of relevant literature and the empirical data, the structure and the characteristics of contemporary PIOs in the United Kingdom are discussed. This is followed by a scrutiny of the determinants of their condition, which is subdivided into four elements. First, the process of migration from Poland since 2004 and the Polish migrant community in the UK are analysed. Second, the impact of civic life in the United Kingdom is analysed. Third, Poland's low levels of social capital and ever-increasing political polarisation are considered in how they influenced PIOs. Fourth, UK-Polish bilateral relations in the post-Brexit era are considered. Finally, a discussion of a new breed of migrant organisations is put forward, with a view for further research.

## Methods and Data Collection

This article, drawing on a set of interviews, and ethnography, analyses Polish Immigrant Organisations for the change they underwent because of the ten-fold swelling of the Polish diaspora in the United Kingdom between 2004 and 2017. It is based

on the results of a 5-year study entitled "Polish immigrant organisations in Europe" carried out between 2015 and 2020 by the Centre of Migration Research at the University of Warsaw – results from the other case studies are presented in this volume. "Polish Immigrant Organisations" is a term I adopted for the purpose of the analysis of these entities (Schrover 2005), which draws on the relevant literature on the topic that defines "ethnic organisations as non-profit organisations with a formal structure as expressed in a governing board whose mission is to provide services or collective goods for the ethnic group" (Fennema 2004: 440).

This article is based on the UK-specific part of this study that began with seven in-depth interviews with the representatives of the migrant-facing public sector in the UK (central and local government officials), as well as charity workers. Subsequently, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with the representatives of Polish migrant civil society in the UK, comprising journalists, representatives of umbrella organisations, as well as community leaders. Finally, I investigated five case studies of PIOs across the UK chosen to cover the geographic dispersion of Poles in the UK. I conducted twenty-one in-depth interviews with the representatives of five Polish Immigrant Organisations across England, Wales and Scotland covering both old "historic" and new "post-2004" organisations comprising various types of activity (cultural affirmation, community support, or both). All these semi-structured interviews took place face-to-face allowing for immersive and participatory research. This was particularly relevant for the last portion of the research which took place in five distinct geographical locales, where, apart from the sit-down interviews, I participated in formal and informal events with the representatives of PIOs spanning from two to three days. This ethnographic practice has considerably enriched the research material, which was complemented by a survey (online and postal) conducted by the University of Warsaw research team in 10 countries (n=190). The survey participants were chosen among the PIOs identified by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Consulates, and the Central Statistics Authority (GUS). The response rate for the UK was 22,3 per cent (n=21).

At first, the article presents the research results beginning with a historical perspective on Polish associationism in the UK, followed by a description of the reach, recipients, goals, and activities of the studied PIOs. This is complemented by data on how PIOs fare in the UK's institutional setting, how they collaborate with other organisations and wider civil society, and how they collaborate with official Polish state institutions, as well as the wider Polish community in the UK. The article then discusses the state of their personnel, membership, finances, property, and decision-making process.

In the analysis, the article employs the heuristic device of Nowosielski and Dziegielewski (2021), which stipulates that the condition of migrant organisations can be determined by four factors: (1) the nature of migration and the migrant community, (2) the characteristics of host state and society, (3) the characteristics of the sending state and society, and (4) the state of bilateral relations between the countries. The article shows the importance of the nature of migration and the migrant community

(Breton 1964), the increasing socio-economic diversity of the Polish diaspora (particularly the types of capital[3] at their disposal – Anthias 2007; Ryan 2008; 2015), and the characteristics of host state and society (Schrover 2005), including the type of local community and the changing political opportunity structures. The characteristics of the sending state and society (Poland), including its historically low civic participation and increasing political polarisation, are of secondary importance (Lesińska 2018). The state of bilateral relations between Poland and the UK, even in the context of Brexit, remains the least significant.

## Structure & Characteristics of Polish Immigrant Organisations

### History of Polish Immigrant Organisations

There is overwhelming scholarly consensus that the modern Polish migrant community in the UK originated with the outbreak of WWII (Garapich 2016). And while there had been prior migration to the UK from Poland, most notably by elites (such as Joseph Conrad), and Jews fleeing pogroms in the Russian Empire, which had a big impact on British society, the history of Polish Immigrant Organisations began in earnest in 1939. It was between then and the end of the war that around 150 thousand Polish refugees settled permanently in the UK laying the groundwork for Polish associationism (Sword 1996; Zubrzycki 1956). Because this migration was led by the emissaries of the Polish government and Poland's pre-war elite, first fleeing Nazis and then Communists, it meant that many of the political divisions and tensions of the interwar period had been brought over to London (Hirschman 1970). The Polish Government in Exile, which continued the legal existence of the pre-war Polish statehood, in opposition to communist-controlled Poland (later coined the Polish People's Republic), meant that this quintessentially political emigration competed for power and legitimacy among Poles abroad, but also internationally in the newly forming bi-polar world order (Friszke 1999; Habielski 1995). The legacy of the symbolic and political hegemony of "Polish London'' endured beyond the dissolution of the Polish Government in Exile in 1989 and influenced the makeup of Polish Immigrant Organisations in the decades to come.

The two historical staples of the field of PIOs had been Zjednoczenie Polskie ("Polish Union") – an umbrella organisation purporting the unity of Poles in the UK – and the decentralised network of local SPK clubs (Stowarzyszenie Polskich Kombatantów – WWII Polish POW and Veterans' association). Both entities benefited

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[3] "Transnational social spaces involve the accumulation, use, and effects of various sorts of capital, their volume and convertibility: economic capital, human capital, such as educational credentials, skills and know-how, and social capital, mainly resources inherent in or transmitted through social and symbolic ties" (Faist 2000).

from the economic and symbolic capital accrued by the generations of Polish migrants in the UK. In the Cold War era, cultivation of the myth of Polish statehood abroad suited Whitehall, although the Soviet-backed authorities in Warsaw were swiftly acknowledged by the West. In the UK, however, "Polish London" ruled, if not governed, in isolation. Even after 1989, when the pre-war insignia of Polish statehood were returned to Warsaw, the quasi-political and historic mission of the organisations associated with "Polish London" resulted in their remaining closed off to new modes of governance and sceptical towards recent migrants, especially women (Garapich 2008; Lencznarowicz 2005; Temple 1994). The hegemony of "Polish London", populated by a narrow West London elite, contributed to the archaic architecture of pre-2004 PIOs, which Sword saw as the cause of the decline of the organised Polish community in the UK (1996). Prior to 1989, the Polish Catholic Mission had also been an important part of that landscape, although its significance has waned, especially in recent years (Bullivant 2016).

Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, along with the end of labour migration restriction to the UK, was a game changer for the landscape of PIOs. It had at once revived the Polish diaspora and reignited old conflicts. An influx of tens of thousands of Poles – a net increase of that population year on year until 2017 – meant a rapid growth of organisations dedicated especially to community support and cultural affirmation (Dunin-Wąsowicz 2013). Prior to the Brexit vote, Poles in the UK were becoming an increasingly diverse group when it comes to their organisational structures, formed around a myriad of issues and causes (also diametrically opposing political ones), and without an externally recognisable and seemingly unified representation. Polish migrants were becoming visible in UK society at large by joining various kinds of civil society groups, apart from Polish ethnic ones, such as professional associations, religious groups, and trade unions, although the latter in much lower numbers than other groups (Potkańska, Owczarek 2016). The fact that the second decade of the twenty-first century brought about a rapid acceleration of digital communication only contributed to the abovementioned polyphony of modes of civic participation and further exacerbated the contestation by the newer "European" migrants of existing structures that had claimed to represent Poles in the UK before their arrival.

These tensions have been observable throughout western Europe but have been most pronounced in the UK due to the ingrained political competition of "Polish London" (Garapich 2014). The arrival of a new wave of migrants has arguably been the most important change to the structure of the Polish diaspora in the UK since WWII. The new post-2004 PIOs reignited old battles over the historic right to represent Poles in the UK's, but also Poland's, political field. According to Garapich, those old-new conflicts, chiefly along class lines, have been waged to preserve the legacy of Zjednoczenie Polskie, which despite its decreasing significance remains the only pan-British umbrella organisation (2014). The subsequent sections discuss the findings of the study regarding the change in the structure and characteristics of PIOs in the UK. **51**

## Reach, recipients, goals, and activities

When it comes to the reach, recipients, and activities of Polish Immigrant Organisations the study found that even though their reach seldom extends beyond a populous council, a few counties, a medium-sized city, or a small region they are very much a staple of their local community. Only about 5 per cent of PIOs included in the survey are UK-wide. This localised character is very much commensurate with UK community life taking place somewhat in opposition to the political centralisation of London. PIOs cater mostly to Polish migrants, secondly to other Central-East European migrants, and only then to the wider local community (mostly native-born Brits). PIOs are focused on a very wide array of activities, which can nevertheless be divided into three categories (Dunin-Wąsowicz 2013): historic organisations symbolically linked to the legacy of "Polish London"; community-support organisations catering most to post-2004 migrants (86 per cent of PIOs included in the survey place themselves in this category); and professional (elite) associations representing skilled migrants, used as a vehicle for networking (a handful).

According to the survey results, the main goals of Polish Immigrant Organisations in operation today are (in fairly equal measure): "sustainment of national identity", "Polish-language education", "culture and arts promotion", "promotion of Poland in the UK", "help and guidance to newly arriving migrants", "representation of the diaspora", and "community support". The case study respondents, comprising mostly of the post-2004 organisations, maintain that an affirmation of Polish cultural heritage is a driver of intercultural connections with other minority communities and the public at large, and a tool to achieve a good public image of Poles in the UK. Newer PIOs intuit the way in which community-led affirmation of cultural diversity is part of the UK's model of multiculturalism. For those PIOs, the activities they undertake aimed at the promotion of Polish culture come hand in hand with community support. Conversely, older historic entities used Polish culture mainly as a glue to hold the diaspora together and often neglected the material needs of (especially newer) migrants.

> [Old] Polish emigres were political (...). This aim was not social integration in English society, but organic work[4], wherever it was, while the long-term goal was the return to Poland after regime change.
>
> (pre-2004) Polish Community Leader, London.

The activities of the studied PIOs can be categorized as belonging to the following categories: promotion of culture, community support, civic and political enfranchisement of migrants, and collaboration with UK institutions. The experts interviewed for

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[4] "Praca organiczna" is a term adopted by Polish patriots during the 19th century foreign rule over the country, it emphasised the value of everyday labour, rather than pointless armed struggle against much stronger adversaries (Russia, Prussia, Austria), in maintaining Polish nationhood.

this study maintain that only a few organisations, such as Zjednoczenie Polskie (Polish Union) and POSK (Polish Cultural and Social Association), have an established track record of influence on UK public institutions, due to their size and historic continuity. Those umbrella organisations are also still best placed to be the representatives of the diaspora, despite relatively unimpressive lobbying efforts – especially in comparison to other large ethnic/national minorities. Furthermore, such historic organisations are also overwhelmingly focused on providing symbolic leadership to Poles in the UK, which makes some of them neglect the everyday issues faced by the diaspora.

Conversely, most of the activities of the newer PIOs are formulated in response to the needs of migrants. At the same time, they are carried out on an ad-hoc project-like basis, made possible mostly thanks to voluntary work and thanks to the support of UK funding bodies. However, the research material provides evidence that the community-support organisations play an important role for the local community by delivering educational and cultural activities, by offering legal support and (language) skills workshops, and by facilitating intercultural dialogue between Poles, Brits, and other migrants (especially from CEE). Those new, post-2004 organisations working on the "here and now" fill in the void left by the older entities concerned with what they perceive is their "historic mission".

> The main recipients [of PIOs' activities – author] are local Poles who are interested in meeting new people, or in personal development (...). [T]here are people who are completely new to this city, to this country, and want to find out about how the health service works, where to receive legal advice, how the police function – [in order to provide this information – author] we invite partner organisations or local authority personnel.
>
> PIO Activist, North of England.

## Collaboration with civil society, with UK and Polish institutions, and relationship with the community

Polish Immigrant Organisations collaborate extensively with similar entities across the UK, less so in Europe. Most of the survey respondents maintain links with the umbrella organisations located in London (75 per cent). Yet, similar to their daily activities, collaboration is also mostly localised. Furthermore, the interviewed community leaders observe that there is considerable tension between the historic umbrella organisations and the organisations formed by the post-2004 migrants. Equally, many local PIO representatives accuse the existing pan-diaspora entities such as Zjednoczenie Polskie, of which they are members, of not fulfilling its statutory aims. They maintain that collaborating with local, sometimes informal, groups and initiatives (focused on community support or education) is much more important network-wise than belonging to a London-based umbrella organisation, which many consider to be "London- and English-centric".

> This subset of the Polish community, especially the London one, has become very inward looking ["self-adoring" – literal translation], to the point where one avoids it or simply runs away.
>
> <div align="right">PIO Board Member, Midlands.</div>

This is particularly true the further one goes from London, especially outside of England, and where local civic and cultural identities are particularly strong. Furthermore, the representatives of the studied PIOs admit that the connections they forge with other organisations or groups are made mostly because of geographic proximity and based on the similarity of goals and values. To them, local affairs and political kinship matters more than ethnic, or national, kinship.

> [G]enerally we collaborate with a large number of NGOs, who have similar aims, who work in different communities, who share our idea of society (…) and support multiculturalism and (…) equality.
>
> <div align="right">PIO Activist, Midlands.</div>

Considering the project-based character of PIOs' activities, roughly a third of them admit to being reliant on funding and operational support coming from local authorities, other local migrant organisations, and local civil society groups. This local aspect of collaboration is particularly evident when PIOs become partners of UK public institutions and civil society groups in Polish- and CEE-related matters. They are often the first point of contact, and consultation, for local authority councils and the police in migrant-related issues. This is how PIOs manage to exert real impact on policy on the local level. This is especially relevant considering the lack of a centrally coordinated policy towards migrants on the UK government level that prevents PIOs from successfully lobbying in Westminster.

Between 2004 and 2017 Polish migrants had moved from being yet another obscure national/ethnic minority (Myslinska 2019), to being recognised as the pillar of the UK's diverse CEE community. Ironically, it was the 2016 Brexit vote that sensitised especially local policymakers to the specific situation and needs of the Polish diaspora. The study's respondents maintain that Brexit made Poles more visible in the public sphere, and they claim that this newfound goodwill is largely underutilised by most PIOs (as identified by Fanning, Kloc-Nowak, Lesińska 2021) of which only a third regularly collaborate with the authorities and UK civil society. This is chiefly because prior to 2004 there had been virtually no legacy of close collaboration with the British state due to the quasi statehood of "Polish London" and its inward gaze. Historic pre-2004 PIOs still see little need to use the goodwill of the British state in catering to the specific needs of Polish migrants. Newer PIOs are working hard to bridge that gap, but mostly on the local level.

> [A]fter the referendum we had a meeting with the councillors, to let them know how Brexit would affect us (…).
>
> <div align="right">PIO Board Member, North of England.</div>

Almost all studied PIOs maintain links with the Polish Embassy and Consulates in the UK (90 per cent), especially for prestigious and symbolic reasons. This is because both the financial and operational support provided by those institutions is relatively modest. Many interviewed activists claim that since 2015, support has been distributed chiefly along ideological lines to PIOs aligned with the government in that regard, especially when it comes to activities touching on culture and identity. Equally, a large majority (70 per cent) claim to have established links with institutions in Poland. However when it comes to collaboration with the Polish state, the beforementioned ideologically-driven discontents are also present, including a new narrative of a "return to Poland"' actively promoted by the government (Fanning, Kloc-Nowak, Lesińska 2021).

When it comes to the PIOs' relationship with the Polish migrant community at large, one can observe a disjunction between the estimated few thousand migrants that are civically engaged and the estimated one-million-strong migrant community. At the same time, almost all the work carried out by PIOs is done by volunteers, and it is spearheaded by often charismatic, mostly female, leaders who claim to be introducing the best practices drawn from the British approach to community life and community organising.

## Personnel, membership, governance, finances, and property of PIOs

The personnel of the PIOs are mostly Polish nationals and Polish-speakers – 95 per cent of the surveyed organisations use Polish as the working language. At the same time, other residents, including Brits, often volunteer their time at various events. Most of the PIOs' members are between 30 and 50 years old, and there are more women than men. People with higher education degrees also dominate. There is also quite a substantial presence of students from Poland who study in the UK (as well as Erasmus students until recently). Over 90 per cent of the surveyed PIOs declare that post-2004 migrants constitute their membership base, most of whom are active members. Interestingly, it is the historic umbrella organisations and professional organisations that have the largest membership base. Community support PIOs are usually made up of a handful of paid workers supported by a larger cohort of volunteers. Only a little over half of the surveyed PIOs have paid staff. This is mainly due to the project-based nature of their work, and hence the precariousness stemming from insecure funding.

In most cases there is a charismatic leader at the helm of a given PIO, who has usually been the founder and remains the managing director. The way in which those organisations are governed is twofold – there are mostly unofficial boards and rarely formal ones that supervise their activities. However, considering the mostly small membership base, their reliance on volunteer work, and the role of the charismatic leader and their acolytes, many especially smaller PIOs are governed in an informal

and familial way, which, according to some of the study's respondents, detracts from their professionalism.

Over 60 per cent of the surveyed PIOs declare they have sufficient financial resources to carry out their statutory work. The surveyed organisations highlight the following funding sources: membership dues (29 percent), UK NGOs and charity support (19 percent), Polish Embassy (19 per cent), Polish NGOs (14 percent), national UK institutions (14 percent), individual donations (14 percent), local UK institutions (14 percent), the EU (5 percent). Some of them run small businesses on their premises. At the same time, as has been made abundantly clear during the case study research, the funding provided by the British state and the UK charity sector (Lottery Fund) is the greatest in terms of magnitude. Without it, hardly any of the post-2004 entities would be able to exist, as they do not have property like the historic umbrella organisations do – most notably the Polish Social and Cultural Association (POSK) in Hammersmith, London. The project-based nature of most PIOs is a consequence of the precariousness of funding sources. This is because UK sources dispense funding mostly on a case-by-case basis, while Polish sources often entail political patronage and favouritism. All of the above adds up to a rather bleak material condition of PIOs – over 70 percent of them declare having no more than 10 000 euro in the bank.

## Determinants of conditions

### Migration from Poland since 2004 and the Polish Migrant Community

The type of migration and the characteristics of the migrant community are found to have the greatest impact on the condition of Polish Immigrant Organisations. Most notably the research identifies the socio-economic diversity of the community as a pivotal factor in that regard. This is evidenced by the intergenerational and class conflict between old and new organisations. The magnitude, the geographic spread and the changing needs of migrants have played a role too, as did the charismatic individuals at the helm of many studied PIOs.

As discussed above, the post-2004 "European" mobility from Poland to the UK arrived in an already complicated landscape of the Polish migrant community. It had been shaped by interlinked waves of migration from Poland since the beginning of WWII. It was characterised by the enduring symbolic legacy of "Polish London" with its internal political squabbles and politics of class distinction inherited from pre-war Poland and borrowed from the English (Friszke 1999, Habielski 1995, Sword 1996, Zubrzycki 1956). Especially before, but also after 1989, each successive wave of migrants (although in fact very much connected and overlapping with the previous one) had to prove its allegiance to the national cause of Polish statehood abroad.

In that sense, the Polish migrant community was very much a space of political struggle that was closed off to newcomers. Many of the study's respondents speak of the difficulties post-2004 migrants faced when attempting to join the ranks of the historic organisations, or to have a say in them. The class and ideological differences between old and new migrants resulted in conflicts between them, lack of synergy between their organisations, and lack of unified and coherent representation of Poles in the UK public sphere. As a result, Poles in the UK do not speak in one voice.

> [W]e [Poles – author] should have a stronger representation, and that's expected of us. (...) Any kind of planned policy [affecting] the Jewish or Muslim community is widely consulted with them before it becomes public... in the case of Poles this doesn't happen, not because of ill will, but because there is no strong partner on the other [Polish – author] side other than the institutions of the Polish state in the UK.
>
> Polish Journalist, London.

Poles are, however, increasingly heard by the UK public opinion. This is large due to the sheer magnitude of the migrant population. The fact that there were so many Poles in the UK prior to Poland's accession to the EU meant that already shortly after 1989 Polish citizens had an easy access to the UK labour market. This had made its complete liberalisation in 2004 by the government much easier from a public policy standpoint (Garapich 2016). Still, the UK government's expectation of the arrival of migrants from Poland as being in the low tens of thousands was a gross underestimation (Lemos and Portes 2008). Merely three years in, in 2007, Poles became the largest national minority (ONS 2017). And in the year in which the bulk of the empirical work was carried out (2017), Poland was the number one country of origin for foreign-born migrants with 922 thousand present – a substantial rise from the 726 thousand reported in 2013. In 2017, there were over 1 million Polish passport holders in the UK, constituting roughly 10 percent of the migrant population. However, following the UK's official withdrawal from the EU on the 31st of January 2020, and taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, estimates of the current Polish migrant population should be reduced by 150–200 thousand.

Still, the growth, the scale and the reach of the Polish migrant community remained unprecedentedly large in comparison to other groups in the UK in recent decades. At the same time, as suggested by recent research, Poles in the UK remain closely linked to the sending country and operate in a transnational migratory space (Bivand Erdal, Lewicki 2016; Pustulka 2012). The research material corroborates this phenomenon. Poles in the UK remain connected to their country of origin thanks to familial connections, enabled by ease of digital communication and affordable travel. It is partly thanks to this new quality of migrant experience, straddled between Poland and the UK, existing in both, rather than in a dichotomous emigration-immigration paradigm, that the Polish migrant community remains highly heterogeneous. **57**

Poles in the UK no longer need to rally around the flag abroad as it had been the case in the past.

The geographic and socio-economic dimensions of the Polish migrant community are also relevant. Newer migrants are much more evenly spread across the UK than they were in the twentieth century (ONS 2017). However, the vast majority live in London, the South-East, the North-West and in Scotland (Hawkins & Moses 2016; National Records of Scotland 2017). While the post-2004 migration is comprised of mostly younger and better educated Poles, especially women, most Poles occupy unskilled or semi-skilled professions. In 2016, 69 per cent of Poles were between 25 and 49 years of age – double the proportion of the UK population in this age group (Hawkins & Moses 2016). Poles in the UK are also getting younger; as of 2014 Polish women had the highest birth rate of all immigrant groups. The Polish Consulate in London estimates that more than 100 thousand Polish children were born in the UK in the decade since 2004. As of 2016, 23 percent of all Polish passport-holders in the UK (and only 14 percent of the Poland-born cohort) were under 20 years old. This young population is also very much at work. According to the ONS, 84.6 per cent of Poles were in employment, versus the UK average of 70.4 percent. Yet, as shown by Lionel Fulton from the Labour Research Department, Poles are overrepresented in the industrial production, transport, storage, hospitality, and construction sectors versus the population at large (Potkańska, Owczarek 2016). At the same time, many of those migrants are, in fact, overqualified for the jobs they undertake (Fihel, Okólski, Kaczmarczyk 2008) and in comparison, to the pre-2004 migration cohorts (Drinkwater et al 2009).

This diversity of geographic location and socio-economic standing of the post-2004 migrants meant that new PIOs had to respond to their specific needs. The research finds that in their everyday activities they focus on the here and now on the local level. Around three quarters of them are devoted to "education", "upbringing" and "sustainment of tradition and national identity", around half provide "support services" to "newcomers from Poland" mostly by teaching English and providing guidance on life in the UK (survey). This also means that local PIOs no longer look to "Polish London" for guidance, even in Poland-related matters. This breeds division between them and the historic organisations which still seek to represent all Poles in the UK. Some of the interviewees lament that the post-2004 PIOs do not have any overarching ideational and explicitly political aims, like the pre-1989 "Polish London" used to have. However, this is precisely because of the varied socio-economic makeup of the migrant community, which is also not held together by collective bonds of anti-Communism. Furthermore, as shown in the proceeding sections, repetitive; perhaps rephrase to focus on official communities vs. inofficial ghettos mentioned in the quote – this is interesting.

We began (…) in parallel, because we use culture to promote integration and to break down barriers (…) that's our philosophy. (…) [M]any problems that Poles face are due to

low awareness and a language barrier. This is because Poles rely too much on informal sources of information, they do not form communities, (...) but ghettos.

PIO Board Member, Midlands.

Lastly, the role of charismatic leaders, especially women, is found to have an impact on the condition of PIOs. The interviewees maintain that the biggest strength of even the smallest PIOs is their human capital, namely the volunteers and staff working under strong leadership. Because the funding of most PIOs is precarious and their mode of operation is project-based, charismatic and enterprising leaders are key in maintaining their momentum. In the face of low engagement from the migrant population, a few individuals are often de facto responsible for the sustained activities of many PIOs. Their success is oftentimes built on their personal symbolic capital, rather than the social capital of the wider Polish migrant community.

## Public Policy & Civic Life in the United Kingdom

The hypothesis that the receiving country's institutional setting and character of civil society has an impact on migrant organisations is also corroborated by the findings. In the UK the key factors in that regard are: pragmatism of public policy regarding migrants, decentralisation and devolution, and the availability of funding. The research finds that the political opportunity structure for the existence of migrant organisations is very favourable in the UK. Despite the public's seeming preoccupation with migration, the United Kingdom does not have a clear and formalised policy regarding the handling of migrant populations. Public policy concerned with the integration of migrants (apart from the Refugee Integration Strategy) is dispersed among ministries and departments dealing with social cohesion more generally. Instead of a centralised strategy, one can observe what Favell calls a philosophy of integration, which is predicated on decentralisation and pragmatic adaptation to local needs (1998). The postcolonial and the European dimension of migration to the UK necessitated a laissez-faire approach to the handling of multiculturalism by the state (Düvell 2005; Panayi 2004; Uberoi, Modood 2013). Even though this model of "corporatist" multiculturalism is now highly contested, it has resulted in a bottom-up formation of civil society organisations dealing with migrants and representing them in the public sphere (Modood 2007; Vertovec 2007). While UK public policy towards migrants has been described by the respondents dealing with migrant issues on the central and local level as "messy", "reactive" and "ad hoc" it is first and foremost "pragmatic", as well as conceptualised and implemented on the local level. Migrants have been taking advantage of this and eagerly using the opportunities afforded to them by local councils and funding bodies, in much higher proportion than the native population (Düvell 2005).

The historic Polish Immigrant Organisations took advantage of the autonomy and agency afforded to migrants in their social organisation, especially when the Polish **59**

Government in Exile was in operation, also due to informal connections in Parliament. Since 1989, however, a lot of the resources provided by the British state have been underutilised. Those older PIOs also had very little historic know-how about how to cooperate with the authorities and procure funds for civic activities. As underlined by the respondents, "Polish London" wanted to be, and saw itself as, self-sufficient and a quasi-state entity. This resulted in its isolation and lack of engagement in community life. Though some of the post-2004 have inherited this institutional habitus, most of them had to engage with the British state to survive.

While in the eyes of the UK policymakers Poles are a relatively unproblematic migrant communit, many within it face poverty and social exclusion or lack the skills to function in the UK. Those more immediate and economically determined needs of Polish migrants meant that especially the newer PIOs had to seek council and financial support with the British authorities, mostly on the local level. Those had responded in kind, by hiring Polish-language translators and CEE-specific community officers in local councils. At the same time, these were precisely the smaller and local PIOs that were eligible for both operational and financial support, rather than the historic pan-UK umbrella organisations. In other words, the support of the British state given to all ethnic and national communities on the local level enabled the growth and development of the post-2004 PIOs. The decentralisation of the British approach to handling multiculturalism facilitated the rise of local post-2004 PIOs that were unable to benefit from the accrued financial wealth of the historic organisations. Still, the study's respondents underline that the Polish migrant community could do better to utilise the goodwill of the UK, and that a few vibrant PIOs are not enough in that regard.

> I don't see how the goodwill of the British is being utilised. At the same time, [historically-author] there had been Polish organisations that could exert pressure on British elites, but completely ignore the [new] migration.
>
> Polish Community leader, London.

## Poland's Political Polarisation and Low Social Capital

The impact of Poland as the sending country, with its institutions dealing with diaspora, its politics, and its democratic culture has had some impact on the conditions of Polish Immigrant Organisations. The research material suggests that the relationship between PIOs and the Polish state is largely mediated by its diplomatic missions. Before 1989 there was little to no cooperation between "Polish London" and the embassy of the Polish People's Republic. Since the 1990s the historic PIOs have been rewarded with recognition and validation by the Polish state for their commitment to Poland's independence. At the same time the engagement of the embassy and consulates with the organisations of the Polish migrant community grew steadily alongside the post-2004 influx of migrants, especially when it came to the

operational, symbolic, and sometimes financial support given to the newly emerging PIOs. The research material shows that this changed in 2015 when the Law and Justice government took over in Warsaw. Since then, Poland's diplomatic missions have concentrated on supporting historic organisations or those celebrating a nationalist ethos. This point of view is corroborated by the study's interviewees who maintain that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw sees migrants and PIOs of similar ideological ilk as the country's informal ambassadors. At the same time, these respondents stress that PIOs have little to gain from such connections beyond the symbolic dimension of recognition by Poland's diplomatic mission to the UK. As shown before, the funds provided by the embassy are tiny in comparison to domestic sources. Most PIOs operate locally, they are themselves well networked, and they do not require the patronage of institutions located in London, Manchester, or Edinburgh, which are often far away.

The impact of Poland as a sending country is also relevant when it comes to the civic habitus brought over from the country of origin. The study's respondents, often informally, criticise the so-called "Polish national characteristics" and the leverage they have on their civic activity in the United Kingdom, especially when confronted with the British approach to such matters. They point out that Poland is infamous for its low social capital and does not have established traditions of bottom-up civic activism that isn't political. They attribute this to the legacy of communism and the low social trust Poles have in their own kind and in others that they carry over to the UK. They contrast this with the thick kinship bonds that characterise other national and ethnic groups in the UK who can translate them into collective action in the public sphere.

> [W]hen we look at [British – author] political structures, for many years now [minorities – author] have had their political representation. There are many Jews in Parliament because they identify with the country. There are many people from the Indian subcontinent because they came here to work and become British. Poles are absent.
>
> Polish Community leader, London.

## UK-Polish Bilateral Relations & the Post-Brexit Era

The UK-Polish bilateral relations and their impact on the condition of the PIOs is the dimension that has proven to be least significant as of the time of the study. Yet, the dramatic change of the UK's relationship with Europe, which reached its highpoint during and immediately after the Brexit vote in 2016, already had an impact on the PIOs at the time of the study (2107). At the same time, British-Polish relations cannot be reduced to those countries' overlapping membership in the European Union. As mentioned earlier, the relatively strong political position of Polish elites enabled easy labour migration to the UK right after 1989 and paved the way for its complete liberalisation in 2004. That began to change around 2016 when the public's preoccu-

pation with the rates of inward migration, fuelled by the right-wing media (Fomina, Frelak 2007; Spigelman 2013), reached its crescendo. Poles and other CE Europeans became vilified in the public debate on Europe. However, one of the most surprising findings of the study is that the Brexit campaign, and the surprising result of the 2016 ballot, resulted in increased recognition and awareness of the needs of the Polish (and wider CEE) migrant community by various British public authorities and civil society organisations, especially on the local level. Still, as early as 2017 the respondents from the study expected that the legal changes to the status of Poles in the UK due to Brexit would disenfranchise a great number of them.

> Brexit, (…), and the atmosphere, that's connected to it, and a certain kind of question mark regarding the status of Poles in the UK, regarding where the negotiations will end up, with what results and effects, are a stimulus for increased [engagement – author] – a greater number of people become interested (…) in Polish organisations which they can work with.
>
> Polish-British Community Liaison, London,

This expectation, shared by many in the community, had an electrifying effect and led to a greater vigilance on the side of PIOs regarding the impact of Brexit on the community. Here again, the post-2004, local-focused PIOs were at the forefront of the Polish community's response to Brexit. They were the ones that took part in public consultations organised by authorities and provided advisory services to migrants faced with uncertainty. The UK-Polish bilateral relations have so far had little impact on PIOs. They are also unlikely to play a major role in the years to come as most of the migration-related issues will be governed by the 2021 Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union.

## Conclusions: no unified "Polish" voice but increased recognition

The preceding sections discussed the structure and the characteristics of Polish Immigrant Organisations in the UK, as well as the determinants of their condition. This article argued that the dominance of the historic umbrella organisations has been disrupted by a heterogenisation of the landscape of Polish Immigrant Organisations in response to the magnitude of the "European" mobility and its needs. It has found that a new breed of post-2004 organisations is, in greatest part, determined by the increasing generational and socio-economic diversity of the Polish migrant community. The fact that most incoming migrants were younger and ended up in low or semi-skilled occupations meant their needs were no longer met by hitherto existing organisations. This has been paired with the decentralised and pragmatic approach to supporting migrants by the British state, which allowed newer post-2004 PIOs to

respond to the specific needs of migrants by operating locally, driven by charismatic leaders with high symbolic capital. Conversely, the impact of the Poland's social reality and politics, as a sending country, on the studied PIOs has been much lower. Even though the lack of social capital brought over from Poland by migrants is noticeable when considering low participation by the migrant community in PIOs, there is little evidence that this affects their overall condition. Equally, even though the Polish state has been prioritising historic and patriotic PIOs over community support ones, for the latter the patronage of the embassy had been mostly symbolic, deriving most funding support from UK sources. When it comes to the UK-Polish bilateral relationship the study finds that the Brexit vote functioned as a warning sign against the potential deterioration of the legal status of Poles in the UK for many PIOs but also had made their work, and the larger Polish community, more recognisable in the eyes of the UK authorities and the public.

Ultimately, it is the high socio-economic diversity of the post-2004 Polish migrant community that had the most significant impact on PIOs. The organisations that were formed after 2004 were equally varied in terms of their characteristics and aims, responding to the specific needs of migrants on a local level. This was because the historic organisations focused on strengthening the sense of nationhood among the community and remained insular, and were both "defensive" and "offensive" in setting themselves apart from British society (Marquez 2001; Olzak and West 1991). Until 1989 PIOs were focused on recreating a state-like structure, which from 2004 stood increasingly at odds with the changing wants and needs of most of the migrant community.

This intergenerational conflict further exacerbated the unprecedented degree of personal, transnational connections with Poland that the new migrants forged. They were becoming much more individualised and horizontally networked than the previous cohorts, which meant that many did not feel the need to join any migrant organisations. This is also because the post-2004 mobility from Poland to the UK operated within the EU framework of the Freedom of Movement. Many Poles began to exist in a transnational space between the two countries (Faist 1998; 2000). The "intentional unpredictability" of the life choices (Drinkwater, Eade, and Garapich 2007) or "deliberate indeterminacy" (Glorius, et al. 2020) – keeping their options open – of the post-2004 Polish community meant that the here and now began to matter more than the cultivation of cultural specificity. One of the main interesting findings is that national identity alone is no longer the only glue that binds Poles in the UK together. Rather, people tend to join PIOs for socio-economic, professional, and ideological reasons, alongside the celebration of their Polishness[5]. The "Polish cause" was not a strong enough rallying call to create a synergy between the historic and the

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[5] By "Polishness" I mean an articulation of national identity, be that through high culture or everyday performances, following what Billig understood as "banal nationalism" (2018).

post-2004 organisations. The newer entities tend to operate as independent actors. This means that Poles in the UK do not "speak" in a unified voice in the British public sphere but are very much increasingly "heard", especially in local debates, despite the seeming indivisibility of Poles as a community in the UK public sphere discourse.

Post-2004 PIOs constituted a new breed of migrant organisations in so far as they were born, or put in place by charismatic leaders, in response to the socio-economic necessity of the increasingly diverse, and often underprivileged, Polish community that grew year on year until 2017/2018. The novelty of their approach was to enfranchise Polish migrants both culturally and economically. They created spaces where Polish culture and heritage is celebrated that caters to the thick national identity of most migrants, but also where their socio-economic needs are addressed (welfare, coaching, legal advice). This holistic approach, paradoxically, allowed many of the new PIOs to open their doors not only to underprivileged Poles but also to other CEE migrants. This emerging phenomenon of the transnationalisation of migrant organisations is one of the main findings that requires further study.

This article examined the changing structure, characteristics and condition of Polish Immigrant Organisations in the United Kingdom. It argued that their proliferation can be attributed to a very diverse migrant community in terms of class, whose needs were not met by the existing organisations devoted to a symbolic affirmation of Polishness. The resultant intergenerational tension between old and new migrants translated into the emergence of a new breed of organisations that addressed the welfare needs of the underprivileged Poles while celebrating their cultural heritage and fostering a sense of community on the local level. The lack of strong umbrella organisations means that Poles in the UK do not "speak" in a unified voice, but the vibrancy of local organisations means that they are increasingly "heard".

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