

Views and Attitudes of the Polish Community and Poles Living Abroad on the Policy Towards Polish Expatriate Communities

Introduction

As a major country of origin for emigration, Poland stands to benefit a great deal from tapping the enormous social, economic and political potential of its émigré communities. The size of its diasporas and their internal diversity constitute a huge challenge for the Polish state. One of the tools for developing the relations between Poland and its expatriate communities is the diaspora policy. However, the past tenets of this policy and the way they have been pursued have failed to ensure the effective accomplishment of its objectives. An added challenge faced by the Polish institutions which formulated and carried out the policy was the rapid transformation in the nature and social makeup of émigré communities observed since 2004. Under such circumstances, it became necessary to modify the aims and precepts as well as the specific deployment methods of the policy on Polish expatriate communities. Although not enshrined in official documents such as the governmental program of cooperation with Polish expatriate communities and Poles living abroad, attempts to make just such changes have been made since ca. 2011. Some of the most important objectives of the “new” policy on Polish expatriate communities are:

- to define the policy on Polish expatriate communities in terms of the policies of the Polish state and, in particular, Poland’s foreign policy and the Polish national interests;

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- the dominant role played by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the programming and coordination as well as the financing and implementation of the policy on Polish expatriate communities;
- the strife to seek an understanding and support for Polish national interests among the diaspora and to activate its members to attain the related objectives and, in particular, promote Poland and conduct public diplomacy in its favor.

Defined in this manner, the foundations of the “new” policy on Polish expatriate communities nevertheless require verification. Specifically, it is essential to examine the willingness of Polish expatriate communities to embrace the policy as well as their views on its tenets. A study carried out by the Institute for Western Affairs within the framework of a project entitled *The Policy on Polish Expatriate Communities in Practice* provides answers to questions about the interest among Poles living abroad in contributing to the promotion of Poland and how to activate such Poles to further Poland's interests.

The findings

The survey of the opinions of Poles living abroad on the policy on Polish expatriate communities indicates an only moderate interest in supporting (and promoting) the policy. A number of factors have contributed to such a stance.

For one, a large proportion of Polish émigrés today are young working-age people many of whom are highly mobile and determined to remain abroad for an extended time. Their ambition is to integrate with the local community as quickly as possible, as demonstrated by the fact that nearly a half of the surveyed migrants establish and maintain social relations with members of other ethnic groups. Their interest in committing to pursue a policy towards the Polish community is relatively small.

Furthermore, the surveyed rarely engage in various areas of social life, be it political, cultural or organizational. Asked how often they voted (for elected officials in Poland and those in their host country, every third respondent (29.2%) answered their involvement was irregular, every fourth (23.2%) claimed to vote regularly and nearly a half (47.6%) admitted to having no involvement whatsoever. Only 18.6% of the Poles living abroad regularly and frequently participate in cultural events. Two fifths (42.7%) of the surveyed take part in cultural events several times a year whereas every eighth (12.4%) never attends them at all. Only every seventh respondent (13.7%) has indicated to have engaged in the work of a non-governmental organization in their country of residence. Furthermore, social activity as well turns out to be substantially lower among Poles living abroad. Such reduced



social participation, especially in politics, can be noted among the new immigrants who left Poland between 1990 and 2003 as well as those who did so after Poland's accession to the EU. The trend is disquieting as such inertia may hamper initiatives, including those designed to achieve the goals of the policy on Polish expatriate communities. The respondents are glaringly disengaged from any involvement in organizing their own communities. As they themselves indicate, they have little interest in becoming actively involved in the work of Polish community organizations and show limited will to engage in such activities in the future. Only every eighth respondent (11.9%) declared to have been involved in the work of Polish communities. This share corresponds to 22.8% of the persons who were aware that Polish community organizations existed and were active in their countries of residence. Asked whether they would be able to engage in the work of a Polish community organization operating in their host country, over one third (35.6%) of the surveyed replied affirmatively, while every ninth of them claimed they were definitely in favor of making such a commitment (10.6% of the responses were "definitely affirmative"). Close to two fifths (37%) of the surveyed expressed no interest in any organizational work in the Polish community. Every third respondent (27.4%) had no opinion on such involvement. The general observation based on the responses was that the surveyed knew very little about Polish community organizations, remained mostly uninvolved in their work and showed limited interest in engaging in the work of such organizations.

The trends go hand in hand with disapproval for Poland's policy towards Poles living abroad, ambivalent assessments of the work performed by Polish community organizations and Polish institutions abroad and limited knowledge regarding their activities. Only 8.1% of the surveyed expressed approval for Poland's current policies towards Poles living abroad while two fifths (44.9%) disagreed with such policies. The work of Polish community organizations has been appraised as good by one fifth (21.2%) of the respondents. Every ninth responded (11.4%) was critical of their activities. Close to a half of the surveyed (47.1%) were unable to make any such assessment whereas every fifth respondent was unsure how to evaluate it and stated they were neither critical nor approving. 25.6% of assessments of Polish institutions (embassies, consulates and the Polish Institute) were favorable, 18.7% of them were ambivalent and 14.8% - negative.

Note that in many cases, interest in becoming involved in the work for the Polish community is limited to particular circumstances and only expressed when national interests, seen in a variety of ways, were at risk (such as when Poland and Poles being portrayed unfavorably or as stereotypes).

Furthermore, it was noted that many of the activities undertaken by the respondents, which involved promoting Poland or anything Polish in their host country, were



conducted in the personal realm with no institutional dimension. This suggests that the surveyed tend to withdraw into their personal space and are not interested in supporting their communities in an official and organized manner. Such trends contribute directly to the reluctance to engage in furthering the policy on Polish expatriate communities. Analysis has shown that such unwillingness to become involved in any form of institutionally promoting one's community is due to the lack of appeal (failure to meet immigrant needs) on the part of Polish community organizations and their clearly elitist nature. This, however, is not to underestimate the informal efforts made by Polish immigrants. In fact, being relegated to such forms of engagement could be linked to the exclusivist nature of the formal activities.

In view of the above concerns, it is appropriate to ask the question of how to activate Poles living abroad to contribute to Polish communities or, in other words, what means and ways are available to remedy the situation. Such major problems require a multifaceted coordinated transformation at many levels, including awareness raising and institutional change.

One of the key findings of the survey is that a considerable discrepancy exists between the declared willingness to engage (in both the work of Polish community organizations and in supporting the policy on Polish expatriate communities) and the limited extent of actual involvement. The discrepancy, in fact, suggests possible ways to activate Poles living abroad – such activation is possible as long as certain prerequisites, as described below in the recommendations section, have been satisfied.

The results of qualitative studies on issues related to the policy on Polish expatriate communities show that Poles who rank high in their host communities have very limited knowledge of the past and planned policies on Polish communities abroad. Note that the involvement by members of Polish communities in activities which promote Poland abroad or further the country's interests does not necessarily result from increased interest in such matters.

The respondents assessed the proposed changes to the policy on Polish expatriate communities as good, but did not offer any further details. However, they expressed misgivings about the idea to shift the focus of activities from countries to the east of Poland to those located to its west and to concentrate support for the media in major cities.

One of the issues stressed frequently in the responses was that of the strong influence which actions taken by diplomatic and consular posts and their representatives had on the overall perceptions of the state's policy on Polish expatriate communities. In many cases, the most criticized efforts were the operational activities of Polish diplomatic and consular posts carried out in the pursuit of systemic policies.



An important expectation voiced by some members of Polish communities and identified during the study was to have the future policy depart from rigidly distinguishing between Poles living in Poland and Poles living abroad now that migration patterns and their geopolitical context have changed (one example of such changes being the newly-gained freedom of movement within the EU). Another expectation was to see more work conducted jointly among different ministries.

Those immigrants who were found to have the desire to engage in promoting Poland and representing its interests in the future appeared to be making general statements based on no specific ideas as to what such activities should involve. In addition, the belief that the perceptions of Poland and Poles in the country of their permanent residence affect their relations with people in their environments may have convinced them to consider the image of Polish communities and Poles as essential for them personally. One might also postulate that certain people of Polish origin who live abroad find it easier to identify with individual activities (such as upholding Polish work ethic or promoting Polish art and culture among friends) than with efforts requiring association, which to a certain extent is sure to result from critical views on some of the existing Polish community organizations. This provides reasons for optimism regarding prospects for reformulating policies on Polish communities abroad as well as an indication of the challenges to be faced.

Extended interviews have revealed the prerequisites that need to be fulfilled to be able to promote Poland and further its interests abroad. Such prerequisites concern:

- improvements in the operation of diplomatic and consular posts,
- a far-reaching reorientation of promotional projects to make the messages they spread and the formula they rely on more universal and easier to understand abroad,
- focusing the attention and activities on establishing social networks within the Polish community,
- modernizing the work of Polish communication organizations and including them in the process of planning the policy on Polish expatriate communities,
- treating younger members of Polish communities as equal and as a significant target group for the policy on Polish expatriate communities and for more general postulates such as improvement in financing,
- implementing a system which would allow members of Polish émigrés to promote investments in Poland or a system which would encourage Poles living abroad to become politically active.



Conclusions

The current tenets of the policy on Polish expatriate communities, which place considerable emphasis on links between such policy on the one hand and national interests and state institutions on the other, define the Polish government and, more specifically, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, not only as a coordinator but also as a central player in this realm. Studies show that the role of the state in pursuing the policy on Polish expatriate communities is best described as one of coordination and support. Such a role should center on ensuring a proper environment (financial, legal, diplomatic and organizational) to maximize the potential and resources of the Polish diaspora.

The policy on Polish expatriate communities should focus in such key notions as **cooperation and dialogue**, **decentralization**, **diversification**, **networking**, **activation**, **image** and **diagnosis**.

- **Cooperation and dialogue** – standing cooperation with Polish communities abroad can only be established on the basis of partnerships relying on trust and solidarity. To initiate such cooperation, it is necessary to empower diaspora partners. To that end, it is critical to develop mechanisms not only for financing but also for unrestrained bilateral communication at various levels. In order to embrace dialogue and cooperation as a foundation for pursuing the policy on Polish expatriate communities, it is necessary to adopt the principle of mutuality which focuses on defining the goals of the parties and embarks on accomplishing them together rather than being limited to the provision of funds only.

- **Decentralization** – there is a strong need to tighten the cooperation between Polish communities abroad and the homeland beyond its present scope at the local and regional levels by, among other things, promoting the formation of HTA-type organizations (Home Town Associations). It is therefore advisable to drum up the support of the home country's local governments and non-governmental organizations for the objectives of the policy on Polish expatriate communities. Such decentralized links should be established particularly between representatives of Polish communities abroad and their counterparts based in the towns of origin, many of which are sources of massive migration. This holds the promise of being an effective way to increase the engagement of Polish communities abroad. Such decentralization has been incorporated into the program of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs entitled *Support for the Civil and Local-Government Dimension of Polish Foreign Policy*.

- **Diversification** – in developing a strategy underpinning the policy on Polish expatriate communities, one should note the many aspects in which such communities are diversified. Such a strategy itself as well as all specific actions undertaken within its



framework should become more tailor-made to reflect host country profiles (their political situation, relations with Poland, including any bilateral agreements concerning the diaspora, their economic positions and integration policies) and target group profiles (age, economic and social standing, degree of integration into the host society, types of relationships with the homeland and ethnic identity). As it appears, particular attention should be paid to ensuring that strategic documents and operational activities recognize ever more firmly the extraordinary significance and potential which younger members of Polish communities abroad have for the long-term pursuit of the policy on such communities (by e.g. establishing cooperation with Polish students enrolled in significant foreign universities and colleges) and with persons with a less privileged social status who, although perceived as having little promotional potential, remain an essential component of Polish communities abroad (this could be done by e.g. seeking to prevent marginalization, social exclusion, homelessness and racism, as experienced by such individuals).

- **Networking** – relates to the postulate of basing the policy towards Polish expatriate communities on the development of various networks and, in particular, thematic networks with a relatively restrictive participant profile such as professional and sectoral networks (doctors, IT experts, scholars, university students), age groups (young people, senior citizens), genders, regional and local groups (linked to regions of origin and regions of current residence) and status-related (networks of Poland or host country citizens, networks of Poles involved in relationships with persons with no ethnic or cultural links with Poland). Such networks could connect not only the immigrants themselves but also institutions responsible for planning and implementing the policy on Polish expatriate communities. Note that the reference to networks seems particularly appropriate for managing relations with Polish communities, many of which are not very well organized. The development and the support for the development of networks and of cooperation among Poles living abroad may be one of the most effective ways to build social backing for the policy on Polish expatriate communities. As a consequence, it is critical to develop programs and tools to initiate and stimulate the establishment of social networks within Polish communities abroad with the involvement of their representatives. To that end, use may be made of the experiences of other diasporas and of sociological knowledge.

- **Activation** – in view of the present precepts of the policy on Polish expatriate communities and the proposed changes to such a policy as required to continue promoting the activation of the community's members in cultural, social and political aspects, it is essential to make such communities realize that social engagement is a fundamental tool for their integration not only with their own community but also, and primarily so, with the host society, as well as for the development of the social capital. Activation programs should



rely on the experience and potential of institutions existing in the host country and those of the Polish voluntary sector in the field of social activation.

- **Image** – a significant lesson learned from the study is that the image of the Polish state and its policy towards emigrants is relatively poor among members of the Polish community abroad. Such an image may be a hindrance in pursuing the objectives of the policy on Polish expatriate communities related to the promotion of Poland abroad and building a Polish lobby in foreign countries. Hence, there is a need for solutions to improve that image and for changing the social recognition of Polish communities abroad. An effort is needed to build and maintain a favorable image of Poland not only as a home country but also as a state which actively supports its émigrés. One needs to improve the image of Polish institutions abroad, i.e. embassies, consulates and Polish Institutes.

- **Diagnosis** – to ensure effectiveness, the present state of such Polish communities living abroad and their anticipated condition should be properly diagnosed. The information on specific foreign communities should encompass their resources, needs and expectations. Once such information is recognized, specific actions can be customized for specific groups. What is more, the results of any actions should be continuously monitored and evaluated.



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Project details

The “Policy on Polish Expatriate Communities in Practice” is co-financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the competition to complete the project “Cooperation with the Polish Community Abroad and Poles Living Abroad in 2013”. Its aim is to expand the knowledge of any Poles living abroad who may be interested in contributing to the promotion of Poland and Polishness and supplying decision-makers in the field of formulating and pursuing the policy on Polish expatriate communities with knowledge on the views of Poles living abroad regarding the precepts of the new policy on Polish expatriate communities. A full version of the report on the study entitled “Policy on Polish Expatriate Communities as Assessed by Organizations Responsible for its Implementation and its Target Group”, Institute for Western Affairs Policy Papers No. 11, and the relevant e-guidebook are available for downloading on the website of the Institute for Western Affairs.

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