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MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

ON THE WAY TO PARTNERSHIP



The issue of migration is one of the most important research topics today, also among sociologists. For at least a few years now, we have been observing an increase in migration movements. What are their causes? What are the consequences? These questions have been addressed by Rafał Cekiera, PhD, from the Institute of Sociology of the University of Silesia in Katowice, who specialises in the sociology of migration, religion, and the analysis of contemporary cultural transformations.

Migrants, emigrants, immigrants, refugees – these terms appear more and more frequently in public discourse; especially now that the war instigated by Russia in Ukraine has been going on for several months. First of all, it is worth sorting out these terms. A *refugee* is a person who has been forced to leave the place where they used to live.

The terms *emigrant* and *immigrant* describe the same person, but they are used depending on the perspective taken – whether the country is a ‘sending’ or a ‘receiving’ country. Emigrants and immigrants can be further defined by their purpose of departure, adding, for example, the term *economic*.

‘And here lies the issue consisting in the use of conceptual engineering, which is often exploited for political purposes. The intensified population movements in 2015 as a consequence of, among others, the war in Syria, are a case in point. At that time, a dispute began over how to define those arriving in Europe. Were they *refugees* or *immigrants*? People protested against calling them refugees, sometimes resorting to such absurd arguments as the fact that they owned designer clothes or smartphones. We faced a similar situation at the Polish-Belarusian border. Foreigners abused by the Belarusian regime were denied humane treatment, for example by not allowing their applications for international protection to be processed. Making arbitrary decisions on who is a “genuine refugee” and who is not clearly has its consequences. It makes it easier to absolve oneself of the responsibility for the tragic situation of these people’, says Rafał Cekiera, PhD.

The definition of a refugee, enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention, is very

rarely brought up in the public discourse. It was established after World War II as a manifestation of post-war reflection in the aftermath of the brutal wartime experiences. The Convention defines a refugee as someone who, due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or belonging to a particular social group, but also due to their political opinions, is outside the borders of the state of which they are a national. Because of these fears, such a person is unable – or unwilling – to seek the protection of their own state. Importantly, the Geneva Convention also prohibits the deportation or return of refugees to countries where their life or freedom could be threatened.

In recent years, Poland has changed its status from an emigration country to an immigration country – more people are arriving in Poland than leaving.

‘We are becoming an increasingly attractive place for immigrants seeking to improve their material status. The brutality of the wartime terror in Ukraine, forcing so many people to leave their homes and seek shelter abroad, adds an extra dramatic dimension to this phenomenon. All of this represents an important and urgent challenge in many different areas of our society. We must avoid seeing newly-arrived people solely in terms of cheap labour. Each of them has their own dignity, dreams, plans, expectations, and fears. Our job is to search for the ways to forge partnerships and manage them so that, without turning a blind eye to various potential problems, we make the most effective use of this intercultural encounter’, the researcher points out.

Another problem highlighted by the sociologist is the sense of temporariness experienced by some people outside their homeland.

‘It often seems as if we are leaving only for a while and will return immediately, and that our previous place of residence will be waiting for us unchanged. This is an illusion. In one of his short stories, Bohumil Hrabal describes the return of a character from the Netherlands to his homeland. He enters a bar where, just as 20 years earlier, the same people are sitting around drinking beer. The next day he goes to the barber, who asks him if he wants the usual. Such literary imagery in reality can be a dangerous trap. Often, it is only after returning that one discovers that life in fact went on in their country of origin. Our friends made a life for themselves, they have families and homes, while we have returned from a place where we worked jobs below our qualifications or ambitions, and now find it difficult to start the career we once dreamed of’, notes the sociologist.

Leaving the home country can also be a time of personal growth. Surveys among emigrants show that it is not uncommon for them to treat their stay abroad as a kind of school of life, which verifies resourcefulness, builds character, develops openness to others, and is a unique and empowering experience. An important context for this school of life is the attitude of host societies towards immigrants. Rafał Cekiera, PhD, emphasises the importance of mutual integration and its benefits for both those arriving and those already living in the area.

Integration issues are also extremely important in the current Polish context,

even if we are aware that a majority of Ukrainian refugees will probably want to return home as soon as it is possible. 'It would be a mistake to assume that since the refugees are with us only temporarily, integration efforts are pointless. The better we get to know each other, the easier it will be to live together. At the same time, the risk of various social tensions arising decreases. Integration measures are also a practical aspect of brotherhood.

Although integration must always be a two-way process, it is up to the host community to create the right conditions and social climate to foster it. Only a genuine openness to foreigners, based on a culture of solidarity, can make it possible to reliably communicate the rules of social coexistence, adherence to which we have the right to expect. We must remember that refugees and migrants will contribute to our society as much as opportunities we create for them allow. Lack of integration fosters social problems and those arriving are at risk of feeling marginalised.

We are currently undergoing an accelerated course in intercultural relations in Poland. There are also different attitudes towards integration.

We can distinguish two extremes. Some people believe an intercultural encounter to be dangerous, where-

as others assume that only positive things can come from the meeting of cultures. Both attitudes are, in my opinion, wrong. Living in a culturally diverse environment has enormous potential. If managed well, it can lead to cultural enrichment that benefits both parties. However, the sociologist warns against a naively optimistic approach. Despite globalisation, cultural differences simply exist and crossing them is sometimes difficult or requires compromise. This sometimes touches on serious issues, such as women's rights, which are understood differently in different cultures. Honestly presenting the differences rather than denying their existence is the first step towards developing optimal forms of social life.

Nowadays, we face questions about the shape of states and the functioning of nations. What will they look like and how will they define themselves in times of significant migration movements? The process of globalisation and the unifying efforts undertaken by EU bodies must be considered, while glocalisation should also be noted as its counterbalance aimed at elevating the importance of locality, the specific character of regions and nation-states. 'Various nationalist movements can be seen as a twisted response to the

current situation, and as attempts to express disagreement with the "blurring" of national identity. Their proponents perceive a real threat of the disintegration of structures that are familiar and acceptable; that are linked to a particular historical narrative and accepted traditions'.

The above-mentioned integration may be one antidote to extreme attitudes and radicalisation. After all, a society confident in itself, its norms and values, knowing and respecting its traditions, does not need to be afraid of encountering immigrants, offering hospitality to those in need, or following a humane migration policy. This is why education aimed at showing the diversity and non-uniformity of the world is so important. It also enhances intercultural competencies, which may include knowledge of one's own and other cultures, attitudes towards outsiders, and communication skills.

'An honest approach to refugees or migrants and their situation is essential. Many times throughout history, Poles have benefited and are still benefiting from other countries' hospitality. The migration experiences of so many of our fellow countrymen can now be extremely useful in recognising the needs of foreigners who come to us', concludes Rafał Cekiera, PhD.

War refugees, Irpin in Ukraine, 9 March 2022 / Photo: Mikhail Palinchak

