

Poland across the Rio Grande

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or the past two centuries, Central and Eastern Europe have been consistent, substantial reservoirs of labour for the West. As the capitalist countries took turns in leading the phenomenon of industrial development and economic growth, the masses of population which emigrated westward headed either for European or non-European countries. The reasons for this massive outflow were both numerous and powerful, ranging from a relatively high rate of natural population increase and strong demographic pressures to relatively less attractive employment opportunities in the homeland. Political instability in many Eastern European countries greatly contributed to the high propensity of their populations to emigrate.

After World War II, these factors by no means ceased to exist, but the political division of Europe prevented their operating. Indeed, in the forty years between 1950 and 1990, all Eastern states (with the only notable exception that of Yugoslavia after 1965) suppressed the right of their peoples to free movement across borders, and frequently inside their own country, as well. Foreign travel was allowed only in an extremely truncated form, and the communist regimes allowed emigration only in cases of family reunification. In reality, however, this label concealed the trick of tying emigration to certain ethnic minorities, an attitude allowing the emigration of members of a given ethnic group only, in an irregular manner

and exclusively on the basis of bilateral inter-government agreements. In principle, only the members of German and Jewish communities were allowed to leave their Eastern countries of origin. But in the late 1980s, a few other groups (Armenians and Greeks living in the USSR) enjoyed the "privilege" to emigrate.

Another important group of emigrants from Eastern Europe comprised those persons on official business trips or on holiday in western countries, although this was never formally acknowledged by the Eastern European regimes. Most of these immigrants accepted by Western countries received political refugee status or were identified as members of a particular welcome ethnic group, but when this was not the case, these asylum seekers simply became illegal aliens. In any case, the number of persons arriving due to this form of emigration was negligible (except in West Germany) because of restrictions on foreign travel in most Eastern European countries.

Finally, official temporary emigration of workers (and their family members) did not play any significant role in movements of Eastern European populations, Yugoslavia being the only exception (notably between 1965 and 1975). As a matter of fact, the number of Polish workers (the second largest labour-exporting nation) legally employed in EEC countries in the 1980s decreased from 45,000 to 10,000.¹

Inversely, many countries of Eastern Europe were not prepared and, indeed, did not wish to receive foreign tourists. Thus, only a few countries regularly admitted Western visitors. Moreover, these visitors moved within the country with a minimum amount of freedom and usually were obliged to use certain services and facilities separating them from the local population. And by the same token, actual settling of persons in Eastern Europe occurred only in a few individual cases (mostly repatriation of former emigrants). Eastern Europeans could not travel freely in the Eastern bloc as they were subjected to severe restrictions, and hardly ever left their countries of origin (in this case family reunification was virtually the only reason for emigration). The notion "refugee" did not even exist in the legal codes and practices of Eastern European countries.

The rush of '89

The situation changed radically in 1989 and 1990, when foreign migrations accelerated at an unprecedented speed. Thus, while 2.6 million Eastern Europeans emigrated between the 1981 and June 30, 1990 (an average of 260,000 per year), during the last 18 months of the same period the region lost 1.2 million people (800,000 per year), or in other words, almost half (46 per cent) the total emigration of the previous decade.²

Undoubtedly, the major factor which contributed to the change was political: more freedom was allowed in foreign travel. In 1970, no more than 500,000



The border checkpoint

citizens of the three most liberal countries, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland (excluding Yugoslavia) visited the West, of whom half were in the West for business reasons. But in 1989, the analogous figure had climbed to 12 million, or 24 times that of 1970 (and almost 4 times that of 1988).³ The flow of Polish tourists alone—100,000 exits to Western countries in 1970—was multiplied by a factor of 7 in 1980, and by more than 9 (exactly 9.4 million) in 1989. Altogether, 19 million persons travelling abroad were registered in Poland in 1989, and 22 million in 1990 (9 million in 1980).⁴

Movement in the opposite direction with the inflow of foreign tourists to Eastern European countries also increased considerably, though less dramatically. Polish statistics reveal that the number of visitors from Western countries, which between 1980 and 1987 was fairly stable (within the 600-900,000 range annually), reached 1.1 million in 1988, 1.6 million in 1989 and 2.4 million in 1990. The data concerning foreign travellers from Eastern Europe are even more striking. In 1990, the number of Soviet visitors recorded in Poland rose by almost 50 per cent (compared with 1989) to 4.26 million, compared with 720,000 in 1980. That increase was remarkable in itself, but also reflected a new phenomenon, for in the past Soviet citizens were rather carefully “protected” against direct contacts with Poland.

The number of persons arriving in Poland from the former GDR rose by a factor of 7.7 (9.15 million in 1990). In addition, 325,000 Romanians entered Poland in what can be considered a real breakthrough, compared with 19,000 in 1989 (and similar figures in earlier years).⁵

In recent months, as the phenomenon of increased mobility has continued to develop, travel within Eastern Europe has intensified further. For instance, in March 1991, five hundred thousand visitors from the USSR entered Poland, and it is expected that the summer may see the arrival of 600,000 to 800,000 persons each month. This could bring the total number of Soviet visitors to 6.5 to 7.5 million per year.⁶

How can these increases be explained? Now, the Eastern European tourist often takes part in fly-by-night resale operations, become part of illegal or



Below the deck



of an emigrant ship

semi-legal labour markets in major cities, accept unauthorised jobs or (as in case of a large number of visitors from Romania) engage in organised begging.

Goin' East

An important novelty in Eastern Europe is gradually increasing immigration. On a larger scale this has been observed only in Hungary, where in 1990 more than 100,000 persons arrived from other countries. For the most part, these immigrants come from the USSR (Ukraine) and Romania. Though as a rule they belong to the Hungarian minorities, most of them remain in the country illegally.⁷ As far as Poland is concerned, immigration has mainly taken the form of short-term (from a few weeks to few months) visits of Soviet citizens for reasons of seasonal unauthorised work in the regions close to the Polish-Soviet border. It is estimated that 30,000 irregular guest workers were employed in Poland at the beginning of 1991,⁸ but some sources predict that after the summer of 1991, up to several hundred thousand workers from the USSR will have sought work in the Polish shadow economy.⁹

Some Eastern European countries recently have become a point of transit for refugees who intend to settle in one of the Western countries. It is believed that many of these refugees do not comply with the local laws, preferring to avoid registration and to attempt to get to the West "on their own", as soon as possible. Not all succeed: in 1990, some 300 persons were prevented from illegally crossing the Polish-German border. Most, but not all, of these refugees (70 per cent) came from other Eastern European countries (among them, 173 from Romania); there were 34 Pakistanis and 28 Ethiopians.¹⁰ But many refugees are successful in their escape to the West; it was recently reported that for \$500 to \$1,000, an immigrant can buy illegal passage from Poland to Germany.¹¹

However, some refugees officially seek an asylum. For instance, in 1990, eight hundred applications for refugee status from other Eastern European countries and one thousand from Africa and Asia were registered in Poland.¹¹ There is a growing incidence of refugees entering Poland with false Polish visas, and of deportations to Poland of those persons who were last in Poland (as the transit

country) before being caught while trying to enter a Western country (a typical destination is Sweden) without a valid visa.

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In order to cope with the problem of asylum seekers a network of temporary camps was established in Poland in collaboration with the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Many asylum seekers, though, have little chance of obtaining refugee status. In 1990, more than half of applications submitted by the citizens of Asian and African countries were turned down by the UNHCR.¹² The rate of rejection in the case of Eastern Europeans might be even higher, for many of them are young men trying to dodge the Soviet draft or who are AWOL, and thus ineligible for asylum.

In the recent months, some Eastern European countries have begun to serve as transit centres for Jews emigrating from the USSR whose destination is Israel. Three major camps located in Bucharest, Budapest and Warsaw can accommodate close to 70,000 persons at one time.¹³

Poland in the storm

Even in light of scant information available at the moment, it seems obvious that the 1990s thus far have been witness to an entirely new situation regarding population movements in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, sufficient time has not elapsed since liberalisation in order for the situation to reach an equilibrium.

The authorities of both sending and receiving countries for their own part have not been able to deal with the movements in a systematic manner. In particular,

Eastern European governments and societies, preoccupied with the emerging fundamental internal questions, have preferred to adapt and react spontaneously to the different problems generated by the current situation. The example of Poland is enlightening in this respect.

Poland is totally unprepared for regular large-scale foreign migrations. Little awareness exists concerning the probable extent and consequences of these movements. Public opinion does not even seem to be particularly interested in the problem. Nor does there exist a single central organ clearly responsible for a comprehensive policy with regard to the circulation of Poles across national borders, or with regard to the visits, employment or settlement of aliens in Poland. Several organs do deal with a number of partly overlapping issues, but some issues are not covered at all. Relevant regulations do not fit the new situation; indeed, some of them contradict each other or are incompatible with international conventions or inter-governmental agreements. An "alien law" has yet to be enacted.

Since 1989, Polish registration of border crossings has been very limited in scope; practically no information on destination and other characteristics of Polish citizens travelling abroad or on foreign visitors coming to Poland (except in their country of origin) is available. The same is true as far as the destination, the length and the reason for visiting Poland are concerned. In addition, survey and population census data are greatly biased, and hardly can be used for analytical purposes. The national frontiers are not adequately watched (one guard per five kilometres on the eastern border); the situation is quite different from past years when the Soviet Union and the GDR employed such tight and rigid safeguarding measures that Polish authorities felt relieved of the burden.

Infrastructure to watch over the movements of persons between different countries is seriously underdeveloped and manpower resources are in short supply. Polish underdevelopment in this sense embraces a whole range of problems, beginning with those experienced by all travellers immediately upon crossing the national frontier (involving border guards, customs officers), and encompassing the lack of adequate border facilities (border check points and

custom facilities, banks, telecommunications) and shortcomings in the tourism sector in general (airports, motorways, hotels and restaurants).

Meanwhile, the Polish government has focused on the freedom of Polish citizens to travel abroad. This concern, above all, was inherent in the recent

negotiations with the co-signatories of the Schengen Agreement (which led to the lifting of entry visa requirements, effective April 8, 1991) and in similar negotiations with the Scandinavian countries. The negotiations with both groups of Western countries involved the question of common visa, immigration and asylum policies and practices, including policies toward third country nationals. Nevertheless, Poland has not devoted much attention to the possibility of incoming flows.



Freedom to the last drop

A glaring asymmetry in institutional and infrastructural framework can be observed between the Poles travelling to the West and foreigners coming to Poland. The waiting time to enter Poland due to passport control at border check points provides a spectacular example. It can extend to *90 hours* on the

Polish-Soviet border. The two-to-five hour normal waiting time on the Polish-German and Polish-Czechoslovak borders is a "pleasure" in comparison, although on some days the road travellers have to queue for up to 20 hours.

On the other hand, there remain some ultra-liberal regulations introduced for political reasons by the former regime, giving foreigners, and especially those coming from particular ("progressive" in the old communist jargon) countries, rights equal to those enjoyed by Polish citizens in their home country, and sometimes even privileges. In the case of travellers from some Eastern European or non-European developing countries, no visa is required. The significance of these concessions in the past, useful for propaganda purposes, in real life was purely symbolic. By means of passport and currency policies, the governments of the countries of origin themselves severely restricted the number of their citizens abroad.

Recently, however, these regulations have paved the way for thousands of persons who, under the guise of the innocent tourists, take part in smuggling, irregular work, petty crime and beggary. Due to an acute shortage of appropriate facilities in Poland and the scarcity of financial means on the part of visitors, the latter often camp at railway stations or car lots, and occupy centrally located parks or market places in major Polish towns for their trading activities. Neither a clear set of regulations nor sufficient executive power exists at the present enabling the authorities to monitor, record or tax the activities of these aliens, not to mention to combat the related problems of crime.

In addition, the Polish government's visa policy does not seem to be very coherent. Until now the Polish consulates were financed by charging the would-be visitors for the entry visas issued. In some cases common "market" principles were adopted by the consulates that, in introducing very cursory application procedures and charging low fees, strove to encourage as many foreigners as possible to travel to Poland. In reality, then, many non-European refugees found Poland the most easily accessible transit country in Europe.

Finally, as already mentioned, in 1990, Poland unexpectedly became a host-country for refugees. But it quickly became apparent that the country is

incapable of handling such a problem. Virtually no housing facilities exist and various state-owned resorts had to be turned into temporary refugee centres. This dramatically undermined an already thin national recreational infrastructure. Moreover, Polish financial resources are very limited, and there is no experience and expertise in processing applications for asylum. And since Poland has not signed the Geneva convention concerning refugees, in dealing with any individual case the Polish authorities have to proceed through the UNHCR office.

Obviously, the question of refugee asylum calls for a complex and consistent national immigration policy. A document which is designed to serve as an outline for such a policy has recently been proposed by the Plenipotentiary for Refugees of the Minister of Interior, the newly established organ playing the role of an immigration office.¹⁴ The proposal focuses on the needs, as foreseeable as they can be, over the next five years and considers those policy issues accorded a priority.

Most urgent, indeed, seems to be the necessity of developing a system of registration, processing and analysis of tourist movements and migrations in order to acquire a better knowledge of the phenomenon, as well as the establishment on a sound legal basis of a set of practices related to foreign tourism, illegal activities involving aliens, deportation, employment, asylum, insurance and other matters.

These are the minimum preconditions to make Polish legislation consistent with international conventions and bilateral (multilateral) inter-government agreements, to create the possibility of a permanent monitoring of foreigners staying in Poland and of a flexible adjustment of migration policies in accordance with changes occurring in the internal and international political and economic situations, and to guarantee the integrity of national boundaries against illegal border crossings by unauthorised refugees.

From refugees to hosts

What does the Polish example demonstrate? First of all, it does not seem that the traditional push factors conducive to migration from Eastern Europe have

been removed. On the contrary, as the “demand” for foreign travel, artificially suppressed by the communist regimes in the past, gradually resurfaces, the propensity to go abroad temporarily may increase even higher than under “normal”, stable circumstances. The possibility of many honest Eastern European tourists visiting the West for the first time in their lives, lured by the glammers of Western society and deciding to emigrate equally should not be ignored.

At the same time the East will no longer be closed to immigrants from Western countries, not to mention the inflow of regular tourists. In fact, due to a great curiosity in the West, tourist movements to Eastern European countries may soon intensify enormously, although this will reach a limit because of the poor infrastructure in the East. Immigration from the West should not be expected to take any significant leap; nowadays, as in the past, the operation of pull-factors seems to be rather weak.

Currently, Eastern Europe seems to be a very attractive and tempting destination for people coming from Africa or Asia. The main pull-factor here is its proximity to Western Europe, combined with the traditional openness of the Eastern European countries’ borders to the citizens of developing countries. In their quest not to become a transitory link between South and West or to get entangled in the complicated issues of alien refugees, however, the would-be host countries are, or at least will be in the near future, most likely to check the inflow of those persons and keep it at the lowest level possible.

What also is of concern in the context of foreign migration is the regular international circulation of people within Eastern Europe which only recently, and suddenly, has been made possible, bringing about rapidly growing flows in all directions. These movements probably will increase for two reasons: first, the fact that some countries are more attractive than others naturally affects the immigrant’s choice of destination, and second, because of the large disparities in the respect of human rights, one country may be chosen over another. As far as the latter argument is concerned, the important factor is that in some countries the immigrant has the possibility of receiving refugee status that could eventually open his way to the West.

Finally, the disparities observed among the Eastern European countries with respect to the tourist sector, the political situation and the economic characteristics (in particular, employment opportunities) imply a distinction not just between the motivations of potential migrants living in the various Eastern countries, but also between the countries of the East, the West and the South. Therefore, it is impossible and erroneous to label the Eastern European countries in a wholesale fashion, whether as "country of emigration", "country of immigration" or "transit country".

None of the countries of Eastern Europe, perhaps with the exception of Hungary, will become a typical immigration area. Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland might, under specific circumstances, establish lasting refugee "transit centres" on their territories, but on rather moderate scales. However, these same countries, possibly together with Bulgaria and Romania, might instantly turn into big "refugee grounds" if the gloomy predictions (recently disseminated by the media, see *The Economist*, March 16, 1991) concerning the USSR come true. On the other hand, some but not all the countries will continue to be (or will re-establish themselves as) a source of emigration, such as Yugoslavia, Poland and the USSR. The European part of the Soviet Union and, perhaps, Yugoslavia will be of great importance, both in terms of quantity, spatial diversity and distance. Finally, it might be expected that in some countries there will emerge local labour markets for workers coming from neighbouring countries. This is particularly true for Soviet workers who might be attracted by the Polish labour market, including the underground economy in Poland.

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