Co oznacza Brexit dla Polaków mieszkających w Wielkiej Brytanii i Polsce? Odpowiada Janusz Kobeszko na łamach najnowszego Europe's World.

Poles in the UK make up a large – 700,000 people – group of immigrants, but they have no real political power that could convince Britons to stay in the European Union. The potential decision to withdraw from the EU will, therefore, be made over the heads of this culturally and linguistically unified group, which chose Britain as their place of work and living.

Immediately after Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, it was thought that Germany would remain the country of choice for Polish labour migrants. London, however, turned out to be more attractive than Berlin due to the openness of its labour market, even though Poles had to compete there with other immigrants already in low-skilled professions – hospitality, construction, food processing. It wasn't only the openness of the British labour market, but also the capacity of this market, Britain's strong currency, its minimum wage four-times larger than in Poland and the citizen-friendly state.

The absence of more than two million people who, after 2004, migrated from Poland in search of work, created a large gap in the Polish tax system and social contributions – a particularly painful gap due to the growing number of Polish pensioners, currently estimated at five million. What's significant in the case of Polish migrants is that their departure weakened Poland's economy more than it built Britain's, where the value of their work didn't exceed 0.5% of the GDP.

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Recently, however, certain facts may persuade Poles to reconsider their return. Over the last three months, the pound sterling has lost 10% of its value against the Polish złoty, while the złoty didn't lose any value against euro. The good news continued on 1st April, when the Polish government introduced new child benefits allowing a mother of two to give up a minimum-wage job and still receive an equivalent of her salary in benefits until the child reaches 18 years of age. The first positive effects of the government's programme can already be noticed in the increase of consumer spending, more loans from the banks and the gentle growth of wages, which is meant to persuade employees not to give up their low-paying jobs in favour of raising children.

But a big wave of returning Poles shouldn't be expected, even in the case of Brexit,

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because Poland hasn't yet tackled its biggest nuisance since the restoration of democracy in 1989. The state continues to put too much pressure on citizens without offering them economic freedom comparable to that in the UK. In the latest Doing Business ranking, the World Bank places Britain in 6th place, with Poland at 25th. While Poland is at the top of table in the category of "trading across borders", setting up and sustaining your own business is still quite a challenge due to high social security contributions, the length of registration procedures and taxes.

Poland's good international reputation has been tarnished due to disagreements over the Constitutional Tribunal, but legal dilemmas don't trouble our emigrants as much as the złoty-to-sterling exchange rate. Brexit could be painful for their pockets. In the short term, due to the weakening of the pound, about 20-30% of Polish immigrants are expected to return home. The most likely to do so are those who emigrated only three or four years ago, and still have a strong relationship with people left in Poland. They may yet consider moving to another EU member state like Ireland, but if Brexit turns out to be a success for the Britons, another wave of emigrants may follow the return of a strong pound sterling.

If, after Brexit, the ensuing EU crisis causes more states to leave the community, a dismantling of Europe as we know it will probably occur. Freedom of movement would be obstructed, countries of the eurozone would return to their national currencies and the position of France and Germany on the continent would weaken. That would be a loss for all of us. After all, due to the extensive trade relationship between Poland and Germany, German weakness would deliver a severe blow also to the Polish economy and currency. What would be left is a mutilated version of the customs union that gave birth to the EU. Poland has received its last solid injection of subsidies from the EU's structural funds to make a development leap by 2020. But this goal if only achievable if those funds aren't diverted to the needy masses of refugees flooding the beaches of southern Europe and draining the welfare systems of northern European countries. This will be the dilemma of the next several years, and the result will strengthen or weaken the EU for decades.

There is a reluctance from Poles towards the culturally-different newcomers from the Middle East and North Africa, which stems from the fear that they constitute a competition for EU funds originally meant for the development of the European economies, including Poland's. Multiculturalism disappeared from the country in 1939 as a result of war and invasions from the west and east, so the influx of immigrants from Ukraine has proven much more welcome. But with the relatively low unemployment rate of 10% in Poland, they might be the biggest surprise of all

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for Poles returning from the UK. Their prospective jobs could already be taken by workers from Ukraine, who today number as many as one million.

The other 70-80% of Polish emigrants will likely remain in the UK regardless of the Brexit, because they have put down roots and sent their children to local schools. Those half a million people, though the most resourceful in coping with the UK economy and slow climb up the social ladder, will never be among the political elite of their new country. Despite appreciation for the openness of British institutions and fair competition, some must realise the dilemma they are faced with. A friend of mine recently returned from the UK with a wife and two school-age children after getting a doctoral degree in geology. He drew attention to this impasse, telling me that it was his academic mentor's words that finally persuaded him to return to Poland: "here you can be a small fish in a big pond, there you can be a big fish in a small pond".

Leaving the European Union would not weaken the strong economic ties between the Britons and the Poles, developed over years of searching for a better life. It will, however, weaken the appeal of the UK in the eyes of those who only found it attractive for its strong currency.

Source: Europe's World. Read more...

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