

## **Negotiating the Recession? Polish Migrants in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland**

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After almost two decades of unprecedented growth during the Celtic Tiger years, Ireland has been severely hit by a recession. A dramatic decline in the housing market in conjunction with the global financial crisis dramatically altered the economic fortunes of the country. The Irish economy is expected to shrink by 14 per cent in the period from 2008-2010, the sharpest fall in economic growth of any industrialised country since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The unemployment rate, once among the lowest in the EU, now stands at 13 per cent and may further rise in 2010. In this paper we examine the impact of the economic crisis on recent East-West migration to Ireland in the context of EU enlargement. Ireland appears to be well suited to study the impact of the downturn on intra-European migration. The country has not only experienced large-scale inward migration from the NMS in recent years, but migrants have also been disproportionately affected by the recession, particularly in terms of job losses. What are the implications of this for Ireland's increasingly diverse workforce and how is social policy responding?

By drawing on an ongoing Qualitative Panel Study on the experience of Polish migrants in the Irish labour market, we examine how migrants adapt to dramatically changed circumstances in the context of a sharp economic downturn that Ireland experienced since 2008. Further we explore the strategies and tactics that Polish migrants have engaged in order to negotiate a route through Ireland's strained economic circumstances. We argue that assumptions that migrants will leave 'when times are getting tough' are misplaced. Even in times of recession there are employment opportunities and conditions in the home countries may be even worse. Furthermore, welfare state arrangements offer some protection against unemployment. Moreover, our interviews show that the decision to 'stay or go' is not only reached on the basis of economic considerations alone. Other factors, including the role of social networks and the search for a better quality of life also impact upon the migration-decision of people.

Therefore, it appears unlikely that the economic downturn will lead to large-scale return migration. Contemporary migrants from the NMS tend to be more mobile in the light of new travel opportunities and a free movement regime. Further, our research found that they are by no means confined to less-skilled occupations as previous generations of 'guestworkers'. Moreover, as they have the same employment rights as domestic workers, they have more opportunities to respond to worsening economic circumstances than were available to previous generations of European immigrants. Despite greater opportunities to move in a new European regulatory environment and a broadly well educated Polish migrant workforce in Ireland, there is an increasing number experiencing unemployment for the first time in their working lives. We explore how social policy in Ireland is responding to those subject to the downturn and how relevant social policy has been affected by the ongoing financial restructuring.

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