



# UNDERSTANDING MIGRATION'S EFFECTS: INHABITANTS' PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN DEEP PERIPHERIES OF THE EU

Barbara Szejgiec-Kolenda , Tomasz Komornicki 

Institute of Geography and Spatial Organisation, Polish Academy of Sciences  
Twarda 51/55, 00-818 Warsaw: Poland  
b.szejgiec@twarda.pan.pl • t.komorn@twarda.pan.pl

**Abstract.** This article examines how the circumstance of being located in a left-behind region of the EU's eastern deep periphery shapes people's perceptions of migration flows (emigration, immigration and internal migration), and how inhabitants are affected. We have used semi-structured interviews with local-government representatives and inhabitants of a sending region – the county (*powiat*) of Łuków in eastern Poland. We illustrate how long-term depopulation mainly due to migration outflows is able to encourage perceptions of the situation in the region that are described mainly in negative terms, especially when it comes to social capital and the lack of prospects for young people. The results also highlight the importance of place-based migration policies being introduced to overcome the negative effects of depopulation.

**Keywords:** migrations, perception of emigration, peripheral region, Poland.

## Introduction

Post-2004 (and hence the full onset of EU integration among the weakly-developed Central and Eastern European Countries, as well as the developing migration crisis and associated mass-movement phenomena), a major focus of interest in academic debate has been the influence of migration on receiving countries (Dustmann et al., 2005; Ulcuse et al., 2022). In contrast, there has been much less interest in tackling the subject matter of, and assessing, what these trends mean for sending countries and regions (Noja et al., 2018; Schneider, 2022). While there are relevant works concerned with policy-related and economic practice (programme documents, national and regional strategies), the approach is often limited to proposals as to how the negative consequences of depopulation, the flight of young people and 'brain drain' might be counteracted. In Poland likewise there is a very rich and multi-stranded literature on the geography of migration, in both the theoretical and empirical aspects (e.g. Śleszyński et al., 2021). In particular, there has been exhaustive reconnaissance of migration regions (like Opole-Silesia; Jończy, 2010; Heffner & Solda, 2020). We thus differ from other researchers here in focusing, not on an effort to assess the possibilities for 'stemming the flow' of inhabitants as migrants out of an area, but rather on an evaluation of consequent change, as that is perceived by those who stayed where they were.

The aim of the work detailed here has been to contribute further to the development of cohesive knowledge on how migration is perceived, and the way that links up with a region's different areas of development, plus the wellbeing of inhabitants, where that region qualifies for the adjective 'sending'. The region chosen to exemplify that situation is at the *powiat* (i.e. county) level of the Polish administration, and is the one encompassing the eastern Polish town of Łuków. This was a conscious choice, given the peripheral location and status, in relation to both larger urban centres within Poland, and indeed Poland as a whole, and given the proximity to the country's eastern border, which is also the frontier of the EU. The peripheral status is further emphasised in economic terms.

Opinions on this *powiat* are and are felt to be of significance, given the dynamic to change that the region is displaying, and has been displaying over what is still a relatively short period of time. This makes it a suitable target for intra-generation assessment, as a 20-year period since 2004 has seen EU membership for Poland, and a furthering of the systemic change ushered in by the events of 1989, which included also an aspect of migration only intensified after 2004, and increasingly involving destinations abroad, though often elsewhere in the European Union. That has meant destabilisation of the demographic structure and the labour market (on which gaps and shortages have appeared). Another aspect, obviously intensified vastly in the recent period, is that of the influx of migrants from nearby Ukraine.

The detailed questions the work has posed are: 1) how do inhabitants perceive their region's socioeconomic development as set against migratory outflow from the *powiat*? 2) Which component elements of this are especially noteworthy? And 3) How do inhabitants of the *powiat* assess the influence of migration on the material and emotional/relational levels, given an aspect involving their own families as well as inhabitants of the region more generally?

Following this Introduction, a section on 'The state of the art' offers the core conclusions reached as regards the place and status of peripheral areas and left-behind regions in the circumstances of ongoing migratory flow, the challenges posed to shrinking regions, and the ways in which migration processes are perceived by individuals. There is then a brief discussion of the study area, as well as the materials collected and methods applied. The Results section then turns to an analysis of trends as regards the region's migratory movements, as well as the way such migration is viewed within Łuków *powiat*, including with account taken of relevant personal and family stories. The article culminates in a summary of results and conclusions as these might potentially shape policy pursued and developed on a territorial basis (not least cohesion policy *per se*).

## The state of the art

As relatively recently as at the start of the 1990s, regional geography was still being seen as 'an acceptable form of professional nostalgia' (Thrift, 1994). However, in the early 2000s, Macleod and Jones (2001) put forward an idea regarding the renewal of geography of the regions as an interdisciplinary approach that assigns it a key role as we seek to understand the world we live in – and its contextuality (Thrift, 1994). The main aim of today's geography of the regions is thus to show the way in which the specifics of a given place 'work together', or else 'react to' global trends in societies and the economy (Gilbert, 1988). Over time, this gained its confirmation in practical activity, e.g. of the European Union – expressed in the place-based approach (Barca, 2009), as well as the paradigm of territorial cohesion based around endogenous factors of regional development (Zaucha & Bradley, 2017).

It is also for this reason that a region, and fuller understanding of its specifics in the light of global population processes represents a basis for the approach to research that the present analysis adopts. For, as is claimed by Gilbert (1988, p. 217):

*Regions develop from regional social interaction while being both the condition and the outcome of the social relations between individuals, groups and institutions in regional space. They are structured in the process of being transformed through these relations of which they are the medium. This dialectical process – the regional conditioning of society and the effects of society on region – creates the internally homogeneous mode of thought and action which distinguishes one region from another. In other words, the region is itself a process.*

### **The situation faced by peripheral regions**

Earlier studies on territorial disparities often concentrated on rural areas, which were treated as developed only weakly in comparison with towns and cities. However, that was a decision or approach that ceased to hold true as time passed – first in the countries of Western Europe (i.a. Scott et al., 2007), and later in the so-called new Member States of the EU (i.a. Komornicki & Śleszyński, 2009), as well as in rapidly-developing states on other continents (i.a. Chen et al., 2020). This was all a reflection of migration processes, declines in levels of employment in agriculture, and an intensification of long commutes to work (Andersson et al., 2018). In its place the division capable of serving as a basis for policies reducing territorial disparities rather became the classical one between core and periphery.

'Peripheral region' is a term taken to describe those areas characterised – and afflicted – by unfavourable developments in social and/or economic conditions (Czerny & Czerny, 2002). The idea of 'unfavourable' is often not viewed in isolation, it being typical for comparisons to be made with centres that are privileged in terms of their resources, to the extent that they have become better-developed. As Flaga and Wesołowska (2018) note, the term in question was popularised by the research into polarised development pioneered by Friedman (1967), who stressed the significance of space in differentiating processes of development. Against that background, today's applications of the term look broader, being applied by the economic and social sciences as well as geography, and now harking back to the original considerations of development in certain areas being weaker (Flaga & Wesołowska, 2018).

Parts that can be thought of as peripheral play an important role in the development of many European regions, in particular on account of the way that heritage (and also specific and special social or community relations) may be preserved there (Jaszczak et al., 2021). Such regions are also widely regarded as areas whose development requires support from outside; in which there is a need to limit the occurrence of long-term poverty and to initiate development activity (Nel et al., 2011). In developed countries, peripheral areas are targets for the action of various policies (in the EU, different Funds) that concentrate on infrastructural investments, financial incentives that will serve to attract investors, and often 'soft' projects for the development of human capital (Oxley et al., 2008). It is human capital that is present within the area of interest of researchers, as its role is felt to be greater than that of financial capital – though a lack of actual measurement means that definitive proof of this contention is still lacking (cf. Krueger & Lindahl, 2000; Oxley et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, the policies and instruments proposed to date for the stimulation of development have not yielded the anticipated economic outcomes, and nor have they stemmed outflows of population (Janicki, 2022). Moreover, Fertner et al. (2015) show that the development of small

towns does differ in line with their geographical location, as those located near metropolitan areas note higher values for indices relating to influxes of people than do those in peripheral locations. In peripheral areas, influxes of population most often result from family-related conditioning, or that which is otherwise linked with the given area (e.g. when returns are made for sentimental reasons). As a remedy for outflows of population from peripheries, Janicki (2022) proposes a Polish migration policy targeted at regional (or local) needs, which would incline migrants to remain and become 'anchored' in these regions.

## Depopulation and outmigration challenges for regions

In the view of de Haas (2010), general theories of migration do not focus on the influence of migration on development in sending communities, hence the need for debates over migration and development to be placed in a broader perspective that is both social and migration-related. However, it is certain that the heterogeneity of such impact needs to be taken account of, as it was by Taylor (1999) in regard to migration-related optimism and pessimism.

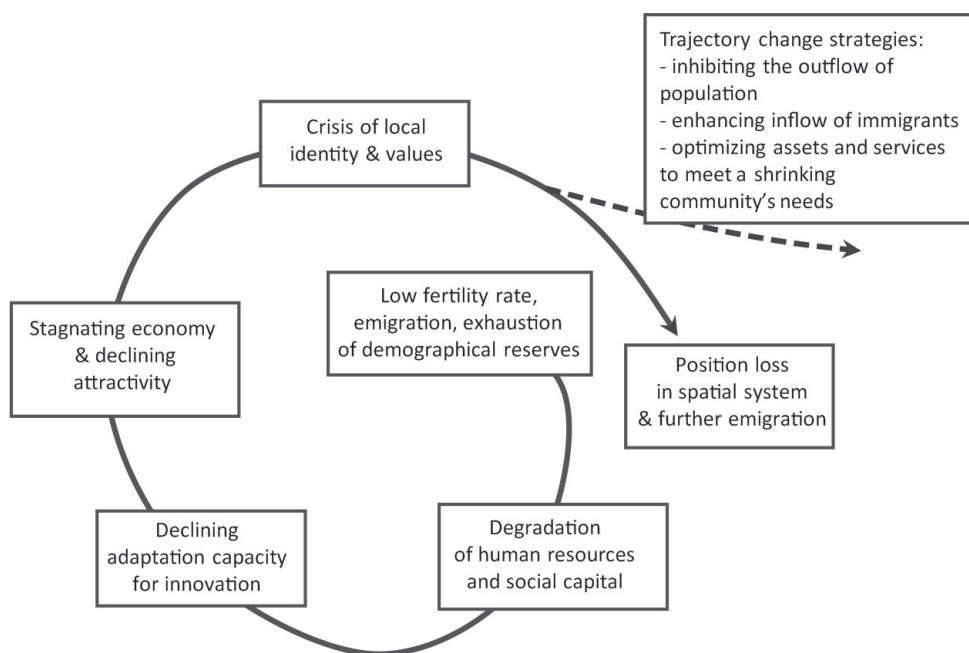
Speaking theoretically for the first of these ideas is the fact that migrations lead ultimately to labour-force shortages and problems with levels of remuneration in the sending societies, as well as to inflows of remittances as well as benefits deriving from the existence of a diaspora that influences a potential enhancing of capital and trade flows (de Haas, 2010), and the stimulation of political activity among returning migrants thanks to an acquired 'foreign' or 'outsider' perspective (Careja & Emmenegger, 2012). However, for that to occur in sending areas, there must be changes in the conditions that led previously to the travel – which the research done to date suggests has not happened to the extent that would exceed the costs. Moreover, Polish studies show that the goal of migration is most often the direct obtainment of economic benefit, which can denote the transfer into Poland from abroad of money or goods that are then consumed in Poland (i.e. Wieruszewska, 2007; Kaczmarczyk, 2008). In this context, the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) even holds that transfers of money can be a positive factor behind economic development, on the one hand on the individual scale as the budgets of particular families are increased, and on the other as the locating of obtained capital in new developments is favoured. In this way, in economies sending out migrants, the influence of outmigration may spread from migrant to non-migrant households (Taylor, 1999). Equally, such linkages are seen to be highly diversified in spatial terms – to the extent that researchers at local level can experience a real problem.

Migration affects origin communities and societies not only through the effects of remittances on investment, income and inequality (cf. Taylor, 1999), but also via migration-driven processes of cultural, political and social change (conceptualised as 'social remittances' by Levitt, 1998) in origin communities and societies. Cultural diffusion plays an important role in promoting entrepreneurship among immigrants (Levitt, 1998), as well as the 'importation' of political behaviours. International migrants are also agents of democratic diffusion. They spread attitudes and behaviours absorbed in democratic host-countries to their less-democratic home countries by way of three processes: (a) migrant returns, (b) cross-border communication between migrants still abroad and their friends and family back home, and (c) migrant information networks in high-volume migration-producing communities. (Pérez-Armendáriz & Crow, 2010).

A second (pessimistic) notion often present within the results of empirical research relates to the theory of cumulative causality – in line with which migration-related departures favour a 'development of under-development', with negative feedback mechanisms helping to embed and sustain 'the vicious circle of the migrant syndrome' (de Haas, 2010, p. 238). Of particular importance here is the experience of 'brain-drain' (loss of the most talented young inhabitants)

by poor sending areas, within which the possibilities for development to be stimulated are only curbed further as the situation progresses (Maleszyk, 2021). Furthermore, the work of Grabowska-Lusińska and Jaźwińska (2013) shows that migrations most often represent an 'interlude' along the career path, whereby there is a taking-up of temporary work not associated with the formal education received. Sometimes, thanks to such 'interludes', a career takes a new path and transforms into new activity following the return – professional development abroad is a continuation of a furrow first ploughed at home (capitalising on education and professional experience).

Such processes leading to a degradation of peripheral regions and shrinkage gained effective summary on the basis of work on small Hungarian towns by Pirisi et al. (2014, p. 143). Shrinking of regions is a multi-dimensional process. For emigration leads to a deterioration in human and social capital, and later to a disintegration in the (economic and social) frameworks holding together a community, with the result that there is an 'identity crisis' and frequent seeking-out of a new idea for a region (cf. Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** The vicious circle of peripheral and shrinking regions  
Source: author's own elaboration based on Pirisi et al. (2014, p. 144).

It is possible to mention many strategies seeking to counteract and combat the above vicious circle (Fig. 1). But these require a comprehensive approach, and are in fact seen to concentrate most on: 1) limiting the losses arising out of migration (e.g. through some 'discouragement' of emigration); 2) incentives for immigration (settlement in a given area); 3) adaptation to new demographic and social conditioning (e.g. by optimisation of the scope of accessible/available public services). In the subject literature, we find a claim that the most-sustainable of such strategies entail local regeneration policies that aim to attract new activities and populations and concern an enhanced quality of life (Fol, 2012, p. 267; Hospers, 2014).

Nel et al. (2019) state the need for a return to theories of endogenous development, with a view to facilitating explanation of how shrinking peripheral communities can somehow react to change at local level. Local leadership, with local entrepreneurs and institutions may obviously be the key actors in a process by which a return to success is somehow achieved in such places (see Nel et al., 2019, p. 167). For, as is noted by White (2021, p. 363) ‘probably the most important anchor keeping (...) in specific locations was steady employment’.

In the context of point 2, peripheral regions are only identified rarely as areas taking newly-arrived migrants. However, in the course of the political debate – in particular in countries manifesting a high degree of spatial polarisation – they are seen more and more often as areas which could accept migrants (including refugees) from outside the EU – with this helping to stem the decline in population (Meijer et al., 2023).

Adaptation strategies are a further example of the reaction to outflows of population, entailing as they do the redesign of the system of public services, as well as the kind of coordination of the provisioning of those services that will ensure access also adjusted to meeting the needs of remaining elements of the community locally (Tent et al., 2021).

Generally, these effects of migration are considered as follows: remittances and return boost development (‘brain gain’) in opposition to historical-structural analyses arguing that migration undermines development through depriving communities of their most productive members (de Haas, 2014). Moreover, we should emphasise how many migrations are indeed temporary—a fact that has often been ignored in the economic literature on migration (Dustmann & Görlach, 2016), despite its having a huge influence on potential consequences for areas of migratory outflow.

## The perception of migration

For many residents in countries experiencing significant migratory flows, mobility extends beyond a mere societal occurrence; as it also forms a component of ‘local knowledge’ as identified by Villa (2019). Assessing this phenomenon proves complex due to its many facets. Moreover, the effects and perceptions of migration can differ even among individuals within the same region – as van der Geest (2010) noted. Another critical aspect in the study of migration involves distinguishing between the sending regions or countries and those receiving (cf. Komornicki et al., 2024).

In terms of research within sending regions, there has been an emphasis on exploring how migration, including emigration and return migration, is perceived by both individuals and broader local communities. As was highlighted by van der Geest (2010), there is still much to learn about how these communities themselves perceive the changes brought on by migration. These assessments often vary. In developing countries, for instance, residents might view emigration negatively due to its social costs, such as the abandonment of children and risks to emigrants. However, emigrants who support their families financially from abroad are frequently seen as successful. Also, perceptions of seasonal labour migration tend to be positive because it enhances financial resources, even as views on long-term migration are more mixed, reflecting a range of attitudes toward its long-lasting effects. It also emerges that satisfaction with local conditioning (and the quality of various facilitations) relating to security/safety, public services, transport and residential infrastructure constitute an important stimulus able to influence plans to migrate (Dustmann & Okatenko, 2014).

International migration frequently affects family structures and social networks, as Marchetti-Mercer (2012) noted. The growing tendency for women to emigrate has particularly transformed family dynamics. Despite these challenges, Ivlevs et al. (2019) found that, in nations with high rates of emigration, communities have developed strategies to mitigate the psychological

burdens caused by separation from family members. Issues considered most often in the context of migration among Poles are (on the one hand) material-demographic-cultural (i.e. macro-level), and on the other relating to a reconnaissance of the situations of individuals (families) hit by migration (thus on the micro-level), with associated issues being social, material and cultural implications (Kramkowska, 2016) – most notably as these reflect the splitting-up of families (children and the elderly). In the individual conceptualisation, certain researchers point to matters of the faltering of needs regarding security, utility, recognition, and even emotional support, leading to isolation and even a worsening state of health (cf. Kramkowska, 2016; Evandrou et al., 2017).

A primary motive for migration is the enhancement of financial status for oneself and one's family. Migrants frequently send money back home, providing financial benefits that elevate consumption levels, enhance living standards (Marchetti-Mercer, 2012; Garapich, 2016), or bolster financial security (Ivlevs et al., 2019) for their families remaining in the country of origin. In economically disadvantaged areas, these remittances are increasingly viewed as a crucial element of economic survival (van der Geest, 2010; Redehegn et al. 2019), yet they also pose a social challenge. There is a prevailing belief, as noted by Soruco et al. (2009), that families of migrants often fail to channel these funds into investments that could bring broader benefits to their local communities.

## Study area, materials and methods

The region of Poland under study exemplifies areas in locations peripheral to the main urban centres, denoting development that proceeds much more slowly than in the main economic centres of the country, as well as a struggle against Poland-wide demographic trends, i.e. depopulation and the ageing of society. Emigration abroad, but also moves within the country, represent a reference point when it comes to the perceptions of the region's inhabitants as regards processes ongoing in their vicinity.

### The study area

Łuków County is located peripherally in the northern part of the Lubelskie Voivodeship in eastern Poland (see Fig. 2). The capital – Łuków – is a town of 30,000 people located on the borderland between Mazowieckie, Podlaskie and Lubelskie, situated some 90 km away from the capital of the region of Lubelskie as a whole (which is Lublin), and 100 km from the capital of the whole country (Warsaw). The area is also 90 km distant from the Poland's eastern border, in this case with Belarus. Łuków has moderate transport connections with the cities of the region, as well as with Warsaw. By the standards of the settlement structure of Poland as a whole, Łuków is a medium-sized urban centre already assigned a status of threatened with marginalisation in line with the classification developed by Śleszyński (2017). The powiat is also part of an area threatened by ongoing marginalisation, as identified in the National Regional Development Strategy (*Krajowa Strategia Rozwoju Regionalnego*) (Bański et al., 2018). The region forms part of Lubelskie (Lublin) Voivodeship, the Polish region which is listed among the poorest regions in the European Union (GDP per capita around 40% of the EU average, before Brexit). Since 2007 it has been a beneficiary of additional support via the Eastern Poland Operational programme, within the framework of European Cohesion Policy. In the communist era, this was a location for large industrial plants, and an important centre for the leather and food (meat) industries – denoting a need for processes of restructuring following the systemic changes beginning in 1989 (Czerny & Czerny, 2002).

According to the 2021 Census, the region is currently home to just over 100,000 people. Almost 2400 are temporarily abroad (around 2.3% of the population). Furthermore, research by Śleszyński (2011) allows us to presume that the population size registered does not correspond with the real situation – in the sense that large cities will have more people (thanks to unregistered outflow of population that is still of an internal nature). As of 2019, the median age of the population in Łuków stood at 38.5 – which is actually the lowest figure anywhere in the voivodeship, for which the mean overall is 41.5. Paradoxically, this reflects the way in which this region has been an area of population outflow for many years.

Also, the share of elderly people (65+) among the population is growing steadily (recently approximately 2%). Within the economic age groups of the population of Łuków county, there has been a noticeable decrease in the share of the population in the pre-working age bracket. At the same time, the number of people in the post-working age bracket is increasing, and the number of people in the working age bracket is decreasing. This situation is worrying, as it indicates that the ageing process in Łuków society is intensifying. It is worth emphasising a small natural increase in the powiat (in 2019) – ensuring that it stands out against the background of the region.

A disturbing phenomenon in Łuków county is the successive decrease in the number of inhabitants. From the end of 1995 through to 2019, the population declined by 3550 people, i.e. by nearly 4%, from 111,187 to 106,816. The downward trend is also expected to continue in the coming years. It is estimated that by 2050 the county of Łuków will have only 88,221 inhabitants (Statistics Poland, 2022).

## Materials and methods

In the first section of results, the analysis concerned data on foreign and internal migrations in the powiat in the years 2005-2019, i.e. basically from the moment of Poland's accession to the EU. The time period ends with 2019, so as to avoid the bias associated with the COVID-19 pandemic on the one hand and the Russia-Ukraine conflict on the other. Cartographic analysis also made use of generally-available statistical data from *Baza Demografia* (Statistics Poland, 2022) on internal (powiat-to-powiat) migration registered in Poland. Data for 2019 relate to 369 fields encompassed by statistical confidentiality given that they relate to movements between Łuków powiat and others in Poland involving one or two people. In that circumstance, the movement of a single person was added artificially – a measure that had the effect of reducing the outflow of population from the powiat by 104 in comparison with the overall total equalling 1609. This denotes an error at the level of 6%.

Where the qualitative analysis was concerned, results were based on 17 semi-structured interviews given by inhabitants of the powiat of Łuków (as one of three chosen specifically for Polish research based around trends in migratory movements). The interviews were run in 2019, face-to-face, and as recorded where the respondent gave permission for that. The recruitment was achieved by approaching people in the street, with the basis for the selection of respondents being their maximal differentiation from the point of view of age and gender (but also education, profession and level of income). The outcome was 8 interviews carried out with women and 9 with men; among which there were 7 with people aged 18-44, 8 with 45-65 year-olds, and 2 with people in retirement age.

All the interviews embraced questions on demographic and socio-economic features (including 'anchoring' in the local community), experiences with migration and reasons for remaining, as well as three remains for wellbeing, i.e. aspects of a socio-economic (material), emotional and family- community-related nature. The questions were devised as one element to research



into the influence of migration on sending and receiving countries as realised in several different countries within the framework of the Project entitled *Horyzont 2020* Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe (IMAJINE).

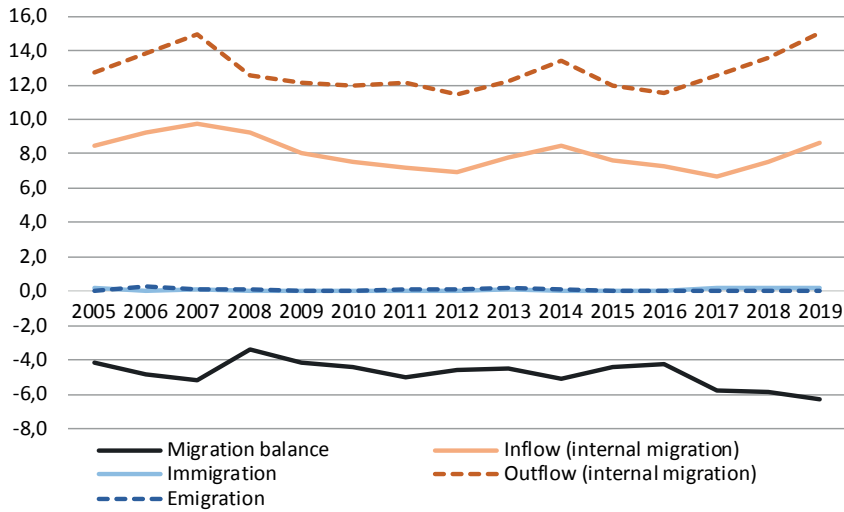
The work also entailed two in-depth interviews being run with stakeholders, specifically representatives of the Łuków Town Office (*Urząd Miasta*) and Labour Office (*Urząd Pracy*). The subject matter was an assessment of the situation in the powiat as regards migration, as well as the challenges linked with changes of population and their influence on the socio-economic situation of the region and its inhabitants. Data from the interviews was compiled along with that deriving from the official strategic documents of Łuków powiat, as well as its seat in the form of the town of Łuków (with conclusions presented in Section 2). Account was taken of *Program Rozwoju Powiatu Łukowskiego* (the Programme for the powiat's development) in the years 2021-2030; *Powiat Łukowski – Ziemia Henryka Sienkiewicza* (2020); *Strategia Rozwoju Ponadlokalnego dla Miejskiego Obszaru Funkcjonalnego Łukowa* (the Strategy for Supra-Local Development of the Łuków Urban Functional Area) for the years 2021-2030 (dated 2022) and *Strategia rozwoju lokalnego miasta Łuków* (the Strategy for the Local Development of the Town of Łuków) for the year 2015-2020 (dated 2015).

The qualitative approach allowed the authors to concentrate on the individual perspective, on individuals (inhabitants) and the ways in which they interpret reality. This was possible thanks to the resort to a qualitative-research approach that responds to 'how' and 'why' questions, thus providing for insight into the research problems's key context (Cleland, 2017 ; Aldaihani et al., 2021). It is worth stressing that, as they deploy an inductive approach, the authors are aware of the way in which progress with the study of the topic involved the issue being defined with steadily greater precision as data were gathered, and material was supplied in an ongoing way to meet the needs of analysis. This is something the literature tends to view as a flaw in qualitative research (Weiss, 1994; Gubrium et al., 2012; Deterding & Waters, 2021). Equally, this is a method that allows for a more in-depth study of an issue, with account taken of its social, cultural, economic and institutional context (Frątczak & Mynarska, 2007) – to the extent that insights are gained into people's motivations and actions (Cleland, 2017).

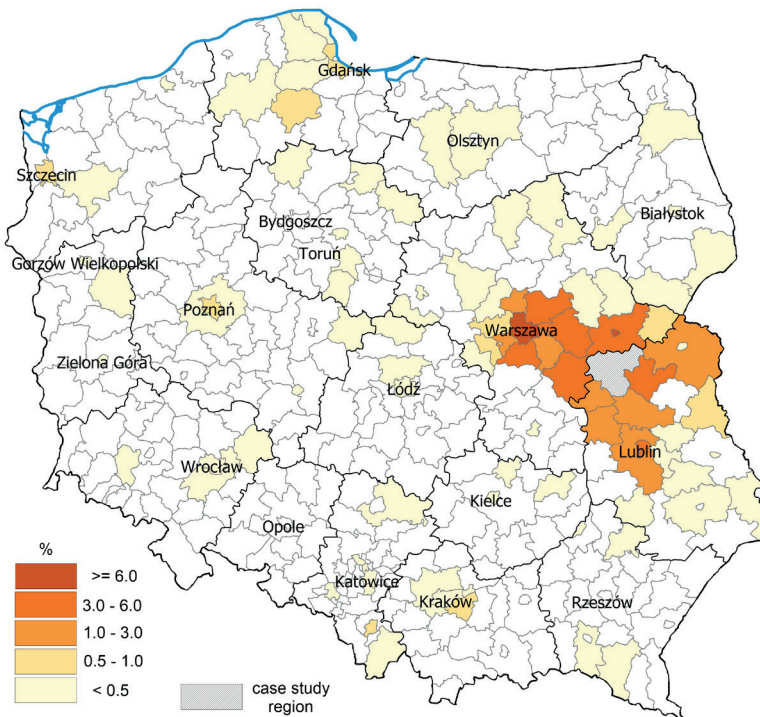
## Results and discussion

### Migration in the light of the statistical data

This section presents the main aspects to the migrations affecting Łuków powiat. As in the entire Lubelskie region (of which Lublin is capital), a negative migration balance is present (Fig. 2). In the years 2005-2019, Łuków powiat had a mean migration balance per 1000 inhabitants equal to -4.78. In other words, this is a typical sending region, vis-à-vis other regions both in Poland and abroad. Equally, the real-life scale of visits abroad to be observed following the opening-up of the EU labour market fails to find true reflection in the official statistics (cf. Śleszyński, 2017), *inter alia* also because these are of a temporary nature (e.g. involving seasonal work in agriculture), or else are prone to certain fluctuations (as with care over senior citizens).



**Figure 2.** Migration in Łuków powiat per 1000 inhabitants in the years 2005-2019. Source: author's own elaboration based on data from Statistics Poland (2022).



**Figure 3.** The spatial breakdown to 2019 internal migration (outflows of population) from Łuków powiat. Source: author's own elaboration on the basis of data from Statistics Poland (2022).

In 2019, it was possible to note more than 1600 out-registrations from Łuków county. The migration catchment of the powiat is seen to be confined mainly to the mother region (Lubelskie Voivodeship), as well as Mazowieckie (Fig. 3). The most desirable direction for moves away is Warsaw (nearly 300 people, or 30.5% of all internal emigrants), as followed in the hierarchy by a subregional centre in the shape of the city of Siedlce (accounting for 10.5%). Paradoxically, the actual capital of Lubelskie – the city of Lublin – is the destination for only one-sixth as many people as Warsaw (with just around 5% of emigrants), with the same figure applying to the powiat of Radzyń. As early as in the first years of the 1990s, Rykiel (1995) discerned an underdeveloped region here, albeit with opportunities for the centre to strengthen its position using chances linked to a location along a transit route, as well as experience in dealings with the east. However, even before the introduction of trade sanctions against Russia, the advantage perceived was proving insufficient to curb the shrinking of the region, with the disparities between metropolitan centres and the peripheries only growing further. Post-2022, certain researchers began to consider the possibility that peripheral status might be overcome – and the region revived – by way of the influx of major new human resources in the form of refugees from Ukraine (cf. Meijer et al., 2023; Wiśniewski et al., 2023).

### **The view of the local authorities regarding migrations**

The local strategy documents only serve to confirm the difficult situation the powiat faces from a demographic point of view. Departures most often involve young inhabitants of the town, who elect, not only to travel in order to earn money, but also to take up educational opportunities beyond Poland's borders (RMŁ, 2015). Representatives of the local authorities opine that it is the UK, Germany, The Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries that are the most common destinations. The region is of course afflicted by processes of population ageing, with an increase in the numbers of people of post-productive age and thus a higher demographic burden – however, it must be conceded that these are trends to be observed throughout Poland, and indeed in all of the CEECs. Materials made available by the local authorities emphasise the selectivity with which migration is applied, with younger, better-educated people prevalent among those migrating – in such a way as to threaten the region's economic future and impoverish communities locally (RMŁ, 2022). Bluntly put, the region can be said to lack interesting and well-paid job opportunities that might be attractive to the young and educated, ensuring nothing else than a deepening of the structural maladjustment characterising education on the one hand and opportunities on the labour market on the other. Equally, young families with children are also among those deciding to move away (SPŁ, 2020), and, from a local-authority point of view, a departure from the model of multi-generation families means that inhabitants of advancing years will need to have their geriatric care safeguarded, e.g. to the extent that daycare for the elderly will need to be available, as well as clubs that OAPs can attend at their own volition (SPŁ, 2020).

The authorities of Łuków view departures from the town – made first and foremost by the young and mobile – as attempts to ensure that something in these people's lives is changed, notably of course in the direction of improved living conditions. And these are seen as chances for those who are courageous and/or competent at languages. The labour market is deemed to be saturated by those who have moved away, even as it is also full of the citizens of countries further to the east (Ukraine, Belarus and Russia – in what was still a time prior to Russia's offensive against Ukraine).

The local-authority representatives see the processes referred to as generating clearly-definable threats that cast a shadow on chances for development, given: 1) (the need for) increased

social welfare expenditure that must take place at the expense of lower investment outlays – also in the face of reduced inflow into the budget attributable to people in work; 2) the steady decline in numbers of pupils denoting increased unit costs of pursuing educational tasks, even as the closure of some institutions leaves educational services less available; 3) difficulties in the healthcare field, including when it comes to access to specialists (RMŁ, 2015); 4) growing problems with local-government tasks meeting the needs of the disabled, those who are dependent and those threatened with social exclusion; and 5) transport links in peripheral locations that look less and less viable economically with each passing year (SPŁ, 2020).

Interestingly, however, the interviews with representatives of local authorities bring to light yet a further aspect concerning relationships. Migrations made by certain family members are said to be leading to a loosening of ties with those remaining in the region, to the extent that there is at times a danger of ‘human dramas’ ensuing. Considering the shrinkage of towns, Pirisi et al. (2014) go a step further, focusing in on the threat to the values espoused by communities and even liveability. In a word it is the identity of depopulating regions that is seen to be in, or threatened by, crisis.

Crucially, while official strategy documents emphasise the clear downsides of outflows of inhabitants, the interviews also bring to light positive aspects that are to be observed – above all in relation to wellbeing. For migrations bring changes of perception where perspectives are concerned, conferring a greater openness to the world, not only upon those who actually leave, but also upon their families. A related positive is that the capital ‘lost’ quite often comes back, whether that be related to remittances of money to families or even to actual physical returns that people make (quite often with a view to setting up a business, as was for example seen in the work of Kerpaci (2019) – relating to entrepreneurship among return migrants). What is more, there can be and is a development of migration networks, with migrants focusing, not merely on making their own economic dreams come true, but also – sometimes – on taking care of those who remain behind in the source community. An example might be provided by one of the partnership agreements pertaining with a town in Norway – the direct result of personal contacts between migrants and the town’s authorities.

When it comes to remedies, those being put forward at present relate to improved quality of life (the region being shaped to look like an attractive place to live), even as expenditure on the upkeep of infrastructure has to be curbed. This is seen to denote: 1) the development of spatially contiguous spheres of a functional and spatial nature alongside units of settlement – in such a way that sprawl of built-up and built-on areas is avoided; 2) the making of clear progress with the recreational and nature-related functions being served; and 3) the shaping of opportunities for sports to be played and other active forms of spending time engaged in, through a steady enhancing of areas when it comes to their outfitting in sports-related and recreational infrastructure (RMŁ, 2022). As can be seen, the strategies for counteracting negative trends are based solely on the region’s own internal resources, along with its technical infrastructure and environment. Absent are proposals that would seek to work on inhabitants’ motivations, to actually keep them in the region; or else to attract immigrants into it. An issue here might be the one noted by Janicki (2022) – i.e. the need for regional migration policies to be put into effect. Moreover, Meijer et al. (2023) – in their work on refugees from Ukraine – note that, while immigration into Łuków powiat would be a desirable phenomenon for the region, the local authority failed to treat integrating activity as an obligation pertaining at local-government level (the approach was thus passive). Basically, the buck was passed to international organisations and NGOs, even as it was assumed automatically that local schools would be able to do their bit.

## Perceptions of migration in a region of population outflow

Inhabitants of Łuków powiat perceive their region's socio-economic development as a challenge in circumstances of migratory outflow and depopulation, with many a negative consequence – even if certain opportunities for improvement are also seen to exist. Development in a region hit by migratory outflow is to be perceived variously by that region's inhabitants, depending on their individual experiences and expectations, as well as the actual changes ongoing in the local environment.

The phenomenon of the out-migration of young people from the region leading to ageing of the population is confirmed in the way that, as young people cannot envision a future for themselves there, the response of emigration looks like an inevitable one. The region can only offer limited possibilities of employment, education or personal development:

*It would certainly be better if the region developed. Young people go away, while pensioners and mothers with children stay, because they simply can't get out. (...) Young people have no prospects, so their behaviour does not surprise me at all. (...) There is nothing to come back here for. (#03)*

This selectivity further illustrates that the erosion of social capital is felt not only collectively, in terms of diminished capacities for initiating community-led projects, but also individually, in terms of well-being and daily experiences related to the place (Ročak et al., 2019). The loss of young people can have long-term negative consequences for the societal, economic and cultural dynamics of the region, leading to yet-further stagnation or collapse. Opinions as follows often made their appearance during the interviews:

*(...) simply speaking there are no job opportunities here, nothing is going on, there are no enterprises, there is nothing at all. (...) Young people escape, my kids left home in the same way. They have a place to live, and what prospects are there here? You earn (...) the lowest wages in the country. (#10)*

Respondents emphasised that it was first and foremost social structure that was undergoing distortion and destabilisation. People moving out were those of ages characterised by mobility, along with entrepreneurs and the educated, or those seeking an education. A view to be sensed in inhabitants' opinions is that their region is in some way 'forgotten' by central government and investors alike. Faced with a situation in which the share of the elderly population is high, and the gender-structure distorted, Flaga and Wesołowska (2018) make reference to the region's 'demographic degradation'. While seen from the point of view of inhabitants, a decline in numbers of people and lack of new investments and developments can be perceived as a sign of neglect and a lack of prospects:

*There is no way emigration can fail to impact upon Łuków, given the sheer numbers of people that have gone away. Now Łuków has more older people and there is less dynamism in the town. The pace of life is slower. An image characteristic here is of the granny walking around with the grandkid, while the generation in between is lost somewhere. There are consequences for society. (#16)*

A lack of young people may be reflected in pessimism as regards prospects, especially where the outflows are perceived as denoting a lack of faith in possibilities for local development. Others may feel left behind and discouraged, with this having its own effect on how the region's future is seen. 'Our little town is becoming a sad place' (#02) – was how one inhabitant put it. Similar conclusions were arrived at by Hospers (2014), who claims that a common response to shrinkage often involves a sense of despair and pessimism.

Migration may be a source of deep conflict internally, given that both emotional costs and benefits may be involved. Decisions to leave or return often arise out of very complex considerations, with a need to balance diverse aspects of life like economic wellbeing, the quality of social and family ties, and feelings of affiliation and belonging. An awareness of 'not being from here' may last a whole lifetime, influencing how people feel about themselves, as well as about the places in which they are located. The responses of some attest to this: 'Following their departure, migrants enjoy their sense of freedom, until the time comes for your neighbours [from the region where you originate] to start calling you an outsider. And you live with that awareness to the end of your days'. (#01). Decisions regarding migration influence family life, especially where family ties and the emotional costs of separation come into play. Then the financial aspects may start to take second place: '[Because of migration], my family started to fall apart, and my husband and I came to the conclusion that the larger amount of money was not worth that; so we came back to Poland'. (#03).

It is important to note that areas in eastern Poland tend to be characterised by a degree of conservatism, and hence attachment to family, roots and place of residence (cf. Meijer et al., 2023). Nevertheless, in the face of relentless migration, the practice present until recently of a number of generations living under a single roof took a hit in the new reality:

*'Once older generations built two- or three-storey houses in the hope that their children would stay and live alongside them. Emigration changed that a bit. It is not unusual for houses like that to go up for sale, as those kids have gone away'. (#16).*

Migratory outflow may impact upon social cohesion, bringing about a weakening of bonds in the community, and indeed the feeling of community itself. Older inhabitants may end up becoming isolated as the younger generation leaves in search of better opportunities. In such conditions, inhabitants may regard their region's future as uncertain. As one put it: 'People don't make so much contact with each other when there are fewer people. Events to encourage integration are not held, and everybody just sits at their own place'. (#02). These results are in line with what was concluded by Fol (2012), Ročak et al. (2019) or Le Borgne (2024) – who all confirm a link between shrinkage of population in regions and a worsening in the state of formal forms of social capital, as well as weakened access to informal social networks (friends), including those serving as mutual-support networks.

It is possible to note a certain dichotomy when it comes to perceptions of migration – one is from the point of view of the experiences of individual people, and the other is seen more in terms of the consequences for the region as a whole. One inhabitant manifested the contradictions of that situation perfectly, saying that:

*'In my view it would be better if they didn't go away. It's bad that people leave. (...) Each person is looking for a better world. My kids moved away to other cities (...) and stayed there. My children have it better, and indirectly I have it better too'. (#02).*

Obviously, some responses were less pessimistic than others. There were many pointing out with some optimism that Łuków and the immediate surroundings *had* changed for the better, with progress on show ... and there currently being an actual shortage of workers, even as the cultural sphere of life was also showing signs of improvement. These kinds of opinion show an obvious link with material and life situations of those interviewed, as well as their personality types. One of the positive depictions came from a middle-aged, middle-class respondent whose full family was still in place:

*'I do not feel any diametric change in Łuków due to people moving away from here. There is always work to be found. (...) I feel that, where somebody goes abroad to work, that's a sign that they can't find a job here or sort their life out and so want to get out. But on the other hand, they may have greater needs or want to earn more.'* (#15).

Among the most-direct economic benefits are transfers in of money that emigrants make (the remittances they send) in respect of family remaining in the region. These sums may be significant in stimulating the local economy, given the effect of raising household incomes and stimulating consumer spending. Thus, a further person claimed that, thanks to remittances there was 'improvement in the material sense. People are managing better, Łuków is developing, changing for the better, becoming more beautiful.' (#04). However, the interviews were lacking in standpoints that would attest to any direct translation of migratory movements into business, as well as in reference to actual return migrations that would give rise to development in the local economy. Rather the focus was on a consumption-based approach to the utilisation of funds obtained (cf. Marchetti-Mercer, 2012; Garapich, 2016).

Migratory outflow not only poses challenges to the economic stability of a region. It also complicates spatial planning and the provisioning of public services, thereby necessitating strategic planning and innovative policy solutions to mitigate these impacts and foster sustainable development. As residents migrate, remaining infrastructure often falls into disrepair. With higher vacancy rates and less demand for real estate, property values tend to decline. Similarly, local governments may find it unsustainable economically to maintain the same level of public services, leading to impairment of public transport, healthcare services, educational institutions and emergency services (cf. Stawarz & Sander, 2019; Tent et al., 2021; Wiśniewski et al., 2021). However, the interviews carried out were lacking in perceptions of emigration through the prism of such changes across the region. This may in part result from the limited intensity of such phenomena that are taking place.

## Summary

Our article illustrates ways in which inhabitants perceive prospects related to emigration in a region affected by long-term depopulation largely caused by migratory outflow. Although this article focuses in on how migration is perceived, by way of answers supplied by interviewees, it was often difficult to distinguish between what was a perception of the phenomenon *per se*, as opposed to looks taken from the point of view of consequences (in different dimensions) – for families, friends and the region overall.

Summing up, we can say that inhabitants of regions hit by migratory outflow and depopulation may perceive their particular region's development in many and varied ways that range from pessimism to optimism, mainly in line with their own experiences, the nature of local initiatives, and the support they obtain from political and economic structures as perceived more broadly. It is to be presumed that a key element to the management of perceptions of a region affected by migration and depopulation, as well as its reality, lies in an active and thought-through local policy capable of minimising the negative effects, while potential benefits arising even out of these difficult circumstances are maximised.

Generally, the depopulation of the region, driven extensively by the consistent outflow of inhabitants migrating abroad, has profound and multi-faceted impacts. These effects extend beyond the immediate economic consequences to encompass social, cultural and spatial dimensions. Economically, the loss of a working-age population can lead to reduced productivity and a diminished

consumer base, which in turn may discourage new business investments and hinder economic diversification. Socially, the departure of key demographic groups, especially young adults, disrupts community structures, leads to the weakening of social networks, and may result in a diminished quality of life for those left behind. Culturally, the migration can lead to a loss of vibrancy, as the region's traditions and local customs erode steadily with the dwindling population. Spatially, the phenomenon manifests in the physical landscape, through the abandonment and eventual decay of buildings and infrastructure, contributing to urban blight and the degradation of once-thriving neighbourhoods. This cascading series of effects poses significant challenges for the region's current development and curtails its prospects for growth sharply, leaving it as imperative that policymakers address these issues with targeted interventions aimed at revitalisation and sustainable development. Not all of the potentially describable consequences were actually observed and identified by residents as of key importance during the research period.

The work carried out reveals that inhabitants (interview participants) are aware of the social consequences and outcomes of the processes taking place, not least because they feel and sense and witness it in their own lives. Awareness of the long-term economic consequences is only present at a lesser level. As the beginning of the period of mass migrations coincided with a time of very severe unemployment in Poland, the former were viewed as pretty much the only way of ensuring some improvement in the quality of family life. And they may have been assumed to be temporary – even by migrants themselves, let alone the families left behind. Such a view would only have been encouraged by the nature of trips abroad taken during the period prior to Poland's EU accession. Those were on the hand illegal (at least in terms of work being taking on in the destination country), but on the other even more lucrative, relatively speaking (given differences in costs of living between Western Europe and Poland that were even greater than they would be in the later period). The change perceived by some respondents concerned an expanded role for non-economic migration factors. It was as a result of these that migrations emerged as permanent. Equally, the problem not fully perceived as relating to small urban centres abandoned (like Łuków) ceased to be unemployment, and instead became a lack of hands to do work (most especially better-qualified hands).

Likewise, awareness and activeness on the part of local authorities relate to society- or community-related issues (adaptation of infrastructure, pluses associated with remittances), and thus tends to concern adaptation to the new demographic circumstances. But it fails to translate into more-proactive steps seeking to attract new migrants (including refugees from Ukraine in the present circumstances), to draw on the economic potential of one's own emigrants, and to prepare the town for any possible returns of people as they reach pensionable age.

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