

# From Potential to Actual Social Remittances? Exploring How Polish Return Migrants Cope with Difficult Employment Conditions

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*The aim of this paper is to examine individual social remittances in the sphere of employment, against the background of the changing employment patterns and flexibilisation of work. Through an analysis of life stories of post-accession return migrants from the UK to Poland, it investigates the way in which returnees' work experience gathered abroad impacts on their perception of employment standards in general. The revealed differences are understood as 'potential social remittances', i.e. the discrepancies acknowledged by returnees between the realities experienced during emigration and after their return (in this case to Poland). It is argued that the actualisation of the 'potential social remittances' depends on return migrants' coping strategies as well as on the institutional and structural settings in returnees' home country. The four main distinguished strategies are: re-emigration, activism, adaptation and entrepreneurship.*

*Keywords: return migration; social remittances; precarisation; employment patterns*

## Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that return migration impacts both the receiving and the sending countries in many ways (e.g. Carling, Mortensen and Wu 2011). Although financial remittances have gained much attention among migration researchers, the cultural transfers have also become a subject of their interest. Social remittances in the form of norms, practices, identities and social capital circulate across borders and, depending on circumstances, might alter migrants' attitudes and behavioural patterns as well as the local and national socio-cultural-economic reality (Levitt 1998, 2001).

An important part of social remittances are those connected with work and employment. Different career patterns, new meanings ascribed to work, as well as specific organisational solutions are among those social transfers which might be brought back by migrants. However, the acquisition and further deployment of social remittances depend not only on migrants' experiences and agency, but also on the constantly changing institutional and structural settings in the sending and receiving countries (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2013). Among the most discussed changes in contemporary societies are those in patterns of employment and, more generally,

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in the sphere of work. In recent decades Europe has witnessed a shift towards flexible employment forms, growth of the dual labour market, and an increase in labour precariousness (Standing 2011; ETUI 2015). Obviously the pace and the scope of these changes differ between countries, among others between those with advanced market economies and the post-socialist countries which joined the European Union (EU) since 2004 (Bohle and Greskovits 2012; Meardi 2012).

At the macro level the enlargement of the EU has been viewed as a chance for social and economic convergence among all EU countries. However the potential ‘Europeanisation’ of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) countries and their implementation of good working conditions characterised by the ‘European Social Model’ were opposed by the model and threat of ‘Americanisation’ and the further dismantling of the welfare state, including increased flexibility of employment in the core EU countries (Meardi 2012). With respect to employment standards in the CEECs, while much attention has been paid to the consequences of the new member states’ adjustments to EU law (Trappmann 2011) as well as the macroeconomic consequences of the EU enlargements, the impact of the post-accession migration and work-related social remittances brought by returning migrants remains a largely unexplored issue.

Therefore the aim of this paper is to examine the individual social remittances in the sphere of employment, against the background of the changing employment patterns and flexibilisation of work. Through an examination of the returnees’ life stories the paper investigates the way in which work experiences abroad impact return migrants’ perception of employment standards in general. The revealed differences will be understood as ‘potential social remittances’, i.e. discrepancies acknowledged by returnees between the realities experienced during emigration and after return. The main research questions focus on the return migrants’ responses (coping strategies) with respect to the tensions, both real and imagined, created by the differing employment standards, and what role this plays in the actualisation of the potential social remittances.

The case study concerns post-accession migrants who have returned from the United Kingdom to Poland. These two countries were chosen for a variety of reasons. Poland, with its embedded neoliberal regime (Bohle and Greskovits 2012), belongs to those EU countries with the highest share of atypical employment contracts (ETUI 2015). Moreover, after 2004 it was the country with the highest, in absolute figures, migration outflow. At the same time the UK, with its liberal market economy (Hall and Soskice 2001) and one of the most flexible labour markets in the world (Schwab 2014), became the most popular destination of Polish post-accession migrants<sup>1</sup> (CSO 2015). Furthermore, Polish migrants in the UK are in jeopardy on the labour market for at least two reasons. First, similarly to many other migrants (Piore 1979) the incomers from the CEECs tend to work in the low paid, insecure jobs, characterised by a high level of numerical flexibility and precariousness in industries such as hospitality, catering, construction and manufacturing (Currie 2007; Ciupijus 2011) Second, not only were they migrants, but in addition young people – most of them being between 15-34 years old (Okólski and Salt 2014) – who nowadays tend to have structurally worse positions on the labour market than the middle-aged (Standing 2011; Hodder and Kretos 2015). On the other hand, Polish migrants in the UK are better educated than the pre-accession migrants and those remaining in Poland (Trevena 2013; Okólski and Salt 2014). Moreover, there is empirical evidence from other countries suggesting that migrants’ young age fosters their socio-cultural integration and thus improves their labour market position (e.g. Fokkema and de Haas 2011).

Migration, however, is not always permanent. Researchers have characterised the post-accession movement of people in terms of its ‘liquidity’ (Grabowska-Lusińska and Okólski 2009; Engbersen, Snel and De Boom 2010) and migrants unwillingness to pre-determine the length of their stay abroad (Drinkwater and Garapich 2013), which has been called ‘intentional unpredictability’ (Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich 2007). Eventually many Polish migrants either return (at least temporary) to their country of origin or move to another country (Smoliner, Förschner, Hochgerner and Nova 2011; Lang 2013). Depending on the time period examined as

well as the definition of return migrant the estimated numbers of Polish returnees vary between 580 000 and 2 900 000 (Anacka, Matejko and Nestorowicz 2013). Although the scale of return migration from the UK to Poland is imprecise, the very fact of return migration is undeniable. Moreover, most of the return migrants worked abroad (CSO 2013), which in turn leads to questions addressed in this paper.

Following a brief overview of historical examples of social remittances in the sphere of work brought by Polish returnees, the paper reviews the existing literature devoted to the specificity of the post-accession migration to the UK and return migration to Poland. Next it outlines the methodological background used to obtain the research results, which is divided into two main parts. The first part presents the narrations of selected returnees concerning the disadvantages of work in Poland as compared to the UK, whereas the second part discusses coping strategies employed by returnees facing the described discrepancies, and assesses their potential for the actualisation of social remittances. Finally, the identified strategies are juxtaposed with the ideal types of responses given by members of organisation to various discontents, as described by Albert O. Hirschman (1970) in *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty. Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*.

### **Social remittances and Polish migration after 1989**

Return migrants have played a crucial role in the changing attitudes towards work in Poland following the systemic transformations in 1989. It is estimated that between 1989 and 2002 more than 80 per cent of immigrants arriving to Poland had Polish citizenship<sup>4</sup> Almost half of them were experts (31 per cent) or managers and high administrative officials (16 per cent) (CSO 2013). Qualitative research on the post-transformation, highly skilled return migrants, conducted by Britta Klagge and Katrin Klein-Hitpaß (2010: 1643), found that ‘[i]n general, during their time in Western capitalist economies, the interviewees [returnees] acquired (tacit) knowledge not available within the Polish workforce’. This subsequently helped them to advance their positions on the labour market and to accelerate their careers. While in the beginning of the 1990s many types of skills were expected from the highly skilled returnees (e.g. language, marketing and managerial skills), with the passage of time and improvement of the Polish education system the employers’ expectations changed. Managerial and communication skills, but not purely linguistic, became the most desired characteristics sought from the returnees (Klagge and Klein-Hitpaß 2010). Analysis of the interviews led the afore-mentioned authors to the conclusion that ‘return migrants make important contributions to introduce organisational changes and new management styles in (some) work environments and thus support the adaptation to Western standards’ (Klagge and Klein-Hitpaß 2010: 1693). The social remittances transferred by highly-skilled returnees were deemed an important element of building the new capitalist order. Return migrants from the Western capitalist economies belonged to those persons serving as role models of the entrepreneurial, active, self-reliant *homo economicus*, in contrast to the passive *homo sovieticus*, pictured as dependent on the state and other people (see Buchowski 2006). However, not all return migrants remained permanently in Poland, as almost one third of them re-emigrated (Fihel and Górny 2013).

In other countries researchers have also concentrated on the impact of diaspora and return migration on the (economic) *development* of the origin countries, seeing in returnees a chance for modernisation of the so-called developing countries (Dahles 2009). With the passage of time, however, scholars have come to acknowledge that the returnees’ transfers might influence not only the economy but also other spheres of life and that they should not always be evaluated positively (Levitt 2001). For example, return migrants could use their entrepreneurship for developing criminal activities or, in less extreme cases, adhere to the values which are not held by the majority of a conservative society. This in turn leads to the crucial question: in what circumstances might return migrants become agents of change and successfully transfer social remittances? In analysing situation of migrants returning in the 1970s from the US to Italy, Francesco Cerase pointed out a structural

factor constraining their agency. As summed up by Jean-Pierre Cassarino (2004: 258), ‘Cerase observes that these returnees [the innovators] are unlikely to be actors of change in their home countries because of the resilience of strong power relations and vested interests which prevent innovators from undertaking any initiatives that could jeopardise the established situation and the traditional power structure’. On the other hand, the structural and institutional powers can also facilitate the returnees’ agency and their real impact on their society. For instance, since the 1990s the Chinese government has actively supported the return of highly skilled migrants, who have transferred not only economic but also cultural and social capital. Therefore, Chinese returnees are expected to ‘eventually transform Chinese business culture and make it more adaptable to the global economy’ (Dahles 2009: 6). However, it remains underexplored what role is played in the transfer of social remittances by the returnees’ individual attitudes and strategies. This issue is particularly relevant in today’s era of hyper-mobility and the transformation of transnational spaces, such as the EU.

Following the enlargement of the EU in 2004 the opportunity structure for the new EU citizens changed, as labour market restrictions were gradually withdrawn, which was followed by a mass East-to-West migration. The post-accession Polish migrants in the UK differ with respect to their socio-demographic characteristics from both the pre-accession migrants and migrants to the ‘old destination countries’ such as Germany, Austria, Belgium, Italy and France. In general, Poles in the UK are relatively young and their median age is 6–7 years younger, compared to the Polish migrants in Germany (Kaczmarczyk 2012). There is also an overrepresentation of migrants with tertiary education (Trevena 2009). However, despite the relatively high level of education of Poles in the UK and their high economic activity rate (85 per cent), this does not necessarily translate into good positions on the British labour market (Currie 2007). As noted by Okólski and Salt (2014: 14), with the increase in the number of Polish immigrants in the UK their occupational structure has changed, shifting towards basic and low-skilled jobs. For many young immigrants, work in the UK was their first experience on the labour market. Paulina Trevena (2013) pointed to the combination of the structural demand on the British labour market for the migrants’ low-skilled labour, the unprecedented number of young graduates in Poland, the existing migrant network, and finally the migrants’ temporary acceptance of low-skilled jobs in exchange for relatively high earnings, which allowed them to lead a certain life style. Nevertheless, over time some migrants managed to climb the career ladder (Knight, Lever and Thompson 2014), overcoming not only the dual labour market but also gender divisions (Aziz 2015). Other findings (Cieślik 2011; McGhee, Heath and Trevena 2012) showed that already while in the UK some Polish migrants became aware of and dissatisfied with the differences between Poland and the UK in terms of work and earning conditions, which in turn contributed to their reluctance to return.

Despite the fact that some migrants in the course of life make binding commitments, the tendency is rather the reverse and more often migrants’ plans change (Drinkwater and Garapich 2013). It is worth noting that this also happens after return, which leads to re-emigration or, as dubbed by Anne White (2014) ‘double return migration’. Although freedom of movement within the EU, combined with the abandonment of work permission requirements, contributed to the already existing problems of adequate measurement of intra-EU migration flows and stock, there are some estimations with regard to the number of Polish returnees. According to the Polish Census 2011, between 2002 and 2011 almost 300 000 migrants who spent at least one year abroad returned to Poland (74 000 from the UK, and 51 000 of them between 2007–2011) (CSO 2013: 73). Other numbers are provided by authors of the report edited by Krystyna Slany and Brygida Solga (2014). Using yearly publications from the Central Statistical Office of Poland they estimated<sup>2</sup> that the number of migrants returning to Poland after spending at least three-months abroad varies between 723 000 in 2008 and 455 000 in 2011 (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Structure of the Polish citizens staying abroad and based upon it estimation of the number of return migrants in years 2007–2012 (in thousand)**

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Polish permanent residents staying abroad for at least three months	2 270	2 210	2 100	2 000	2 060	2 130
including:						
staying abroad shorter than a year	1 135	663	525	400	515	532
staying abroad longer than a year	1 135	1 547	1 575	1 600	1 545	1 598
Return migrants		723	635	500	455	462

Source: Słany and Solga (2014): 52, and author's own calculation regarding 2012.

While so far there is no quantitative research explicitly devoted to return migration from the UK to Poland, nonetheless a rough idea of its scale may be derived by the comparison of two datasets. First, from April 2004 to end of September 2014 there were 1 272 511 National Insurance Numbers (NINo) issued in the UK for Polish adult nationals (DWP Stat-Xplore). Second, according to the estimates of the Central Statistical Office of Poland, at the end of 2014 there were 685 000 Polish permanent residents (*zameldowani na pobyt stały w Polsce*) who stayed in the UK for longer than three months (CSO 2015). Due to the differing definitions of a 'migrant' (including or excluding minors and those not registered), these two datasets are not directly comparable, however one can deduce that there were *at least* 587 000 adult Poles who, between April 2004 and September 2014, obtained a NINo and at the end of 2014 were not in the UK (for longer than three months).<sup>3</sup> This does not necessarily mean that they all returned to Poland since they could have migrated to another country, died, or simply stayed in the UK during that time, but for a stay shorter than three months.

The main reason for migrants' return to Poland appears to be the accomplishment of their migration aims (either spending a certain amount of time abroad or earning a planned amount of money) (Anacka and Fihel 2013: 51). Moreover, the reasons declared for their return vary between those related to family and work, and often are a combination of instrumental and non-instrumental aims, all of which make up the returnee's life project, revised in the course of migration (Karolak 2015). Another characteristic of the post-accession return migration to Poland is its selectivity, which has led to the 'washing out' of certain groups from Polish society (e.g. people younger than 24 years old with secondary education) (Anacka and Fihel 2012, 2013) This selectivity led to a discussion on the long term impact of migration on both the migrants themselves and Polish society. The discourses of 'brain waste' and 'brain drain' were replaced by those of 'brain circulation' and 'brain gain' (Fihel, Kaczmarczyk, Wolfeil and Zylicz 2009). However, any unequivocal evaluation the results of migration is impeded by the diversity of return migration.

The existing research provides mixed evidence with regard to the return migrants' situation on the Polish labour market. Paweł Kaczmarczyk and Magdalena Lesińska (2012: 31) suggest that so far the migratory experience is not perceived as an advantage on the Polish labour market, in contrast to the knowledge of foreign languages and other soft skills. Nonetheless Katarzyna Budnik (2007: 14–15) states that:

*The return migrants had around three times higher probability of finding the job after a return to the source country than unemployed or non-participants. (...) If the return migrants were positively selected or they were able to accumulate a job relevant human capital abroad, an increase of emigration after 2004 might be seen as a factor reinforcing labour market activity foremost of those who would otherwise find it hard to enter employment.*

On the other hand, an analysis of the ethno-survey conducted by Izabela Grabowska showed that ‘only 8 per cent of Polish returnees could enhance their career after return, while the majority of the respondents state that either nothing has changed in terms of their career path or that the experience of migration has even enhanced the fragmentation of their career’ (as quoted in Smoliner *et al.* 2011: 6). Based on an analysis of the LFS from the years 1999–2009, Marta Anacka and Agnieszka Fihel (2013: 68) conclude that: in comparison with the non-migrants, [return] migrants are clearly less likely to find employment in Poland. One of the authors’ hypothesis to explain this phenomenon is that it could happen due to the auto-selection of the unemployed migrants, who initially had left Poland because they could not find employment. After return they presumably found themselves in the analogical situation. This explanation corresponds with the concept of a ‘migratory trap’ developed by Krystyna Iglicka (2010). According to her research, young Poles often work abroad below their qualifications in the secondary labour market, which significantly disadvantages their career prospects upon return. Encountering problems with integration into the Polish labour market, returnees often eventually decide to re-emigrate, which leads them to once again take an underprivileged labour market position, thus falling into the ‘migration loop trap’.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, there is a very clear increase in the percentage of returnees running their own businesses. While before emigration only 1 per cent of the future migrants had their own business, after emigration this figure has risen already from 12 to 19 per cent (CDS 2010; Iglicka 2010; CSO 2013). Some analysts have concluded that such an increase clearly indicates that emigration teaches self-reliance and awakens ‘the spirit of the entrepreneurship’ (CDS 2010: 56). However, the results of the census show that only 4 per cent (i.e. out of the 61 per cent of working returnees) employed somebody else, while 15 per cent were self-employed without employees (CSO 2013: 75). Taking this into consideration it could be asked to what extent such a high number of self-employed is an outcome of the returnees’ entrepreneurship, and to what extent it is a result of structural constraints in the labour market. As shown by numerous works (e.g. Standing 2011; Schmiz 2013), self-employment is one of forms of the ongoing flexibilisation and precarisation of the labour market. For many companies, pushing employees to become self-employed is a tricky way of lowering labour costs and shifting the risk of market fluctuations on sub-contractors. It would require further and more in-depth examination to determine what motives guided the return migrants to choose this form of labour market activity.

All in all, irrespective of the reasons for migration and subsequent return, the overwhelming majority of adult returnees had worked on the British Isles, often in precarious jobs. The divergent research results point to the fact that despite the attention paid to the subsequent employment of the returnees, the quality of the jobs found by returnees was often overlooked. The next parts of this paper explore in what way returnees perceive their employment in Poland, as well as how their experiences translate into social remittances and affect returnees’ individual strategies on the Polish labour market.

### **Research design and methodology**

Following the methodologies established in the biographical tradition of Fritz Schütze (2007), between November 2013 and January 2015 twenty-six biographical narrative interviews with Polish returnees from the UK (14), and re-emigrants to the UK (12) were carried out.<sup>6</sup> Biographical narrative interviews allow for capturing two dimensions, namely: the objective course of migrants’ work experiences, and the subjective perception of their own situation (cf. Hughes 1997). Knowledge of the entirety of migrants’ life stories is also important in order to better understand social remittances. As pointed by Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011: 2): ‘we argue that people’s experiences prior to migration strongly influence what they do in the countries where they settle; this, in turn, affects what they remit back to their homelands’.

The research concerned long-term migrants, who had worked in the UK at least one year, and after return lived in Poland for at least six months, irrespective of their reasons for migration, return, and re-emigration (if such occurred). Interviews with the returnees were conducted in the Lower Silesia region of Poland and in Warsaw, while those with re-emigrants were conducted in the major cities of Scotland as well as in London. Fourteen of the interviewees were women, and twelve were men. They were from different social, economic and educational backgrounds and aged between 23–50, with the predominant number of those interviewed being between 25–35 years old. The respondents were initially recruited by snowball sampling, mailing, and *via* Internet forums for migrants. During the second stage of the research the sampling became theoretical and interviewees were chosen from the established contacts database. This gave the possibility to explore more in depth categories emerging from the collected data and to aim at data saturation. The interviews included biographical issues, explored the motives and motivations for migration, return and re-emigration, as well as addressed returnees' post-migration experiences on the labour market. The interviews were analysed following the procedures of grounded theory methodology (GTM) (Glaser and Strauss 1967), including open coding and selective coding. A software NVivo 10 was employed for more systematic data comparison. The results of the research are presented in the next section.

### **Redefinition of normality**

It has already been acknowledged that living in a different society can lead to the development by migrants of a new version of normality (Rabikowska 2010; McGhee *et al.* 2012). While the previous researchers explored Polish migrants' attitudes toward the material aspects of life and highlighted their satisfaction with the broader possibilities of consumption (McGhee *et al.* 2012) as well as relative income security and different work standards abroad (Cieślak 2011), the redefinition of normality also concerns their perception of the work environment and work-related practices upon their return.

There were two groups of returnees: those who had never worked in Poland and those with work experience before their migration. The former group often treats return as a 'test' to 'see how it is'. As explained by Piotr: *We wanted to try. You know, if you don't experience something first-hand you won't know* (Piotr, male, 34 y, architect in London, re-emigrant). Return to Poland was also frequently not treated as a definitive move and migrants *did not want to burn bridges* (W8) behind them, maintaining open bank accounts and contacts with their previous employers in the UK. These returns were also combined with a search for a more prestigious occupation. Another group, in turn, consisted of target earners and those who return for non-instrumental, mainly family-related, reasons. An additional factor which was not without significance for their decision was the positive picture of a developing Poland presented by the media at the end of the first decade of the 2000s, as well as a conviction that many other migrants had also returned.

Irrespective of their work experience before migration, all the returnees I talked to had worked in the UK. Upon return those who took up a steady job compared different aspects of work 'here and there', redefining what is 'normal at work'. The returnees admitted that they *changed their expectations' and started 'thinking in an English way* (W3).

*I think that once you see that it can be otherwise, then you expect something else. I think that there are dilemmas, and perhaps everyone who returns experiences such a contrast. (...) I really realised that some things are not normal, and I had got used to normal* (Krzysztof, male, 30 y, receptionist in Wrocław).

This alteration of migrants' attitudes and expectations is a necessary, but insufficient by itself, condition for subsequent social remittances, which still need to be transmitted and implemented in a migrant's country of

origin. Hence this part of the paper focuses on those aspects of work in the UK which – in comparison to what returnees experienced on their return – appeared to them most striking, namely: more adequate earnings and better workplace relationships in the UK; while the assessment of the work–life balance was more individual and ambiguous, although generally favourable to the UK.

### *More adequate earnings*

Since the most popular declared reason for migration was the possibility of higher earnings, it should not come as a surprise that most of the returnees pointed to the differences in incomes. Returnees underlined not so much the absolute level of income as the possibility of living a ‘decent life’, maintaining themselves on a single and relatively simple job abroad (see also McGhee *et al.* 2012). Monika, who lived, worked, and studied in Scotland for six years, describes her two-year experience following her return to Poland. It is important to note that she had not worked in Poland before her emigration at age 20.

*Every day it's just trying to make ends meet, each time it's from the first to the first [day of each month]. You never have money for a dentist or new shoes, never, never. If you compare this with the life, which in terms of ideas, organisation and finances is a life in which you just overcome obstacles and swim, here I have the feeling that I'm swimming not in water but in a tar. Very, very slowly (Monika, female, 29 y, NGO worker in Wrocław).*

Monika lacked the ‘income security’, identified by Guy Standing (2011: 10) as an ‘adequate and stable income’, assured not only by work itself but in case of lower paid jobs also by certain state policies such as minimum wage or progressive taxation. Returnees’ income insecurity also concerned its regularity, which in turn depended on the type of employment contract. Savings brought from the UK might serve as a buffer reducing income instability, however this could only be a short-term solution, as described by Maria and her husband:

*You know, first of all you need to have enough money to live. And this, so to say, wasn't our strong point in Poland. All the time we have lived from our savings or from that what Piotr [the interviewee's husband] brought in from his company. But he worked on different terms, he was employed on specific task contracts [umowa o dzieło], and each time the contract ended we were afraid there wouldn't be another one. So there was nothing stable for us (Maria, female, 27 y, office worker in London, re-emigrant).*

Maria’s experience was no different from that of thousands of non-migrants, since Poland is one of the European leaders in terms of atypical employment contracts (ETUI 2015). Besides the numerous fixed-term contracts, a specific feature of the Polish labour market is the relatively high share of persons employed solely on the least secure civil-law contracts (Mrozowicki and Maciejewska, in print). However, for some returnees the type of contract ensuring income stability was of secondary importance and only income adequacy was crucial for their sense of stability:

*(...) here you don't have a sense of stability like there, there you can do the worst job, but you feel secure, here you don't have this, you live a little bit like day to day. (...) In the UK I could have a civil-law contract [but] I felt like I would have had to do I don't know what to lose my job. Here it is not like that, at least I don't feel it (Krzysztof, male, 30 y, receptionist in Wrocław).*



Krzysztof's statement illustrates an interesting paradox. Although Polish migrants in the UK are often employed in the secondary labour market and migrants are considered to be in a vulnerable and precarious position, they don't consider themselves as such, since they use their previous experiences as a reference point. In Poland in turn, even with a so-called typical contract, due to inadequacy of income returnees' subjective sense of security is lower than it was in the UK. Since young people in Poland tend to normalise their work-related insecurity (Mrozowicki, Krasowska and Karolak 2015), the question arises whether the transfer of returnees' experiences might impact non-migrants' perception of work standards and contribute to the slowly growing protests against the precarious nature of work in Poland.

### *Workplace relationships*

Income and type of contract are not, however, the only components of a worker's sense of well-being. Return migrants also underlined the differences in the way they were treated as employees. They refer to the *professionalism, emotional moderation and diplomacy* of their bosses in the UK. As recalled by Piotr: *No one raises his voice, no one screams, no one tenses up, this is more a partnership approach* (M7). Polish employees in the UK felt that they were respected, which was often not the case in Poland. Moreover, the fact of being on a first name basis with all co-workers and bosses – a practice rather rare in Poland, especially between young workers and older superiors – is treated by the returnees as a sign of the modesty of the bosses. Stanisław describes it as follows:

*The bosses are as if equal with you, they don't have an exalted position. People [at work] are also helpful, there is not such a competition. In Poland it is more often a rat race. (...) [In the UK] people trust the employee. For example in the company in London where I used to work, quite often I worked from home. Nobody controlled me. I could just work from home, I worked on my computer, and nobody appraised what I did* (Stanisław, male, 33 y, engineer in Glasgow, re-emigrant).

While this relatively high level of worker's autonomy is appreciated by Polish migrants, it differs depending on the sectors in which the migrants worked. The 'partnership approach' and trust resulting from it is also perceived not only as a feature of the work environment, but more broadly as a feature of British society and institutions. Returnees complained about the lack of the mutual trust in Poland and pointed out that the same is also demonstrated by the state administration, which *assumes that you are trying to cheat* (M7) and expects to have official confirmation of all statements. On the other hand the migrants themselves do not trust their compatriots. In their narrations, success in Poland is often linked with fraud. *They need to cheat, play games. It's sad but you can't live normally and cope as a human being; you need to swindle, do monkey business. If somebody wants to live honestly, then it's rather hard or impossible* (W6). Although returnees noticed also negative aspects of the work environment in the UK, they tended to idealise it. This might have several sources. On the one hand, faced with difficulties after their return migrants might feel nostalgic about the idealised past abroad. On the other hand, in the case of re-emigrants the emphasis on the contrast between work in Poland and in the UK serves as a mean for easing the sometimes difficult transition between countries. Moreover, it might be understood as an element of the rationalisation of their re-emigration, by perceiving it as a necessity. It would however require further examination to fully explore and understand such attitudes.

### *Work–life balance*

Income insecurity, the low level of autonomy, and the stronger hierarchy at work translate into stresses related to work. However, comparison of the work–life balance experienced in the UK and Poland differs depending on the initial aims of the migration. The target earners often worked two jobs at the same time and/or took as much overtime as possible. Their sacrifice of free time was a conscious strategy aimed at maximising profits. For example, Andrzej recalls:

*The work was good but it was hard. Because I wanted to earn quickly I got the idea that every third week I will have only one day off. (...) I was totally exhausted and we had an hour-and-a-half commute to work every day, so I was at home around 8 p.m. [It was] operating at the limits. I managed somehow, but it was really tough (Andrzej, male, 50 y, production worker in Legnica).*

Both young and middle-aged target earners ‘bite the bullet’ and hold out in order to achieve their initial aim. For them their work after return, despite some of the already-described inconveniences, was a relief, made all the more valuable by the fact that they were closer to their families.

In contrast, those who went to the UK *not just to earn but to live*, complained upon their return to Poland about employers who expected them to work overtime, often without payment. Work in Poland was even compared to *slavery* (M7), driven in the returnee’s opinion by students willing to work without pay, just for the experience.

All in all, the fact that most returnees faced different treatment at work in Poland than in the UK led to discrepancies between their perceptions of ‘how it should be at work’ and ‘how it is’. If eventually these discrepancies could be eased at the workplace and returnees change the reality so that it meets – or at least approaches – their expectations, this would be a sign of social remittances. Thus in the next section I present types of coping strategies applied by the returnees in the sphere of work and discuss their impact on practices in the workplace in Poland.

### **Strategies of coping with work-related tensions**

Analysis of the interviews enabled me to distinguish four main strategies employed by return migrants facing distress resulting from the discrepancies between the employment standards they experienced in the UK and in Poland. It must be noted at the outset that these strategies are ideal types which emerged from analytical abstraction, and in certain returnees’ cases they overlapped or/and shifted over time. The identified strategies are: re-emigration, adaptation, activism and entrepreneurship.

#### *Re-emigration – exit*

The first identified strategy, re-emigration, refers to leaving Poland and moving back to the UK. The lack of formal barriers constraining intra-EU mobility facilitate this decision. In addition to short-term, seasonal migrants, who deliberately engage in back and forth migration, often earning abroad and living in Poland (Fihel and Grabowska-Lusinska 2014), there is another group consisting of those who, after long-term migration, decided to ‘give Poland a chance’ and treated their return as a test. When ‘the test failed’ these migrants – in their own words – ‘returned’ to the UK. Despite the reluctance of the most of the re-emigrants to make binding declarations regarding their future, their actions – such as acquiring properties or striving to obtain qualifications recognised in the UK – indicate that their second emigration to the UK might be expected to be more

permanent. The decision to re-emigrate was often triggered by impulse, and in almost all examined cases was preceded by contact with acquaintances, colleagues, or previous employers in the UK. In the opinion of the interviewees, maintaining the transnational ties, including after their return to Poland, gave them a greater sense of security, as they ‘could always leave again’. Interestingly, some of the interviewees felt committed more to the previous managers than the companies they used to work for. Grzegorz, explained how he left Poland for the second time, this time ‘for good’:

*It [the decision] was maturing in my mind. And it was that moment when I received my salary, a bag with coins. 360 coins – 5 Polish Zloty each, all together an enormous [ironically] amount of 1 800 Polish Zloty for spending all my nights there (...) it was when I got this salary in coins that something again broke in myself (...) and I told him [the boss], ‘pal, you better start looking for somebody for this evening’. Since I was working at nights and I was finishing at 8 am, I went to the Internet cafe and in just three days I found people going by car to Scotland. (...) Despite the fact that I had left [Scotland], I didn’t close all doors in different small enterprises where I’d worked before. So on Saturday I called a colleague of mine (...) and she told me that she would find a job for me when I came (Grzegorz, male, 40 y, small entrepreneur in Scotland, re-emigrant).*

Re-emigration was also sometimes a spontaneous answer to a job offer received from abroad. This might be interpreted in terms of the ‘exit option’ proposed by Hirschman (1970). Exit is perceived to be the easiest solution in cases of discontent with a particular sphere of one’s life, in this case the labour market conditions. The identified tensions are relieved by the employment of such an individualised strategy, and the ‘potential social remittances’ remain unrealised. It would require further examination to see if the ‘double return migrants’ raise their voices and engage in any actions from abroad in order to change the situation back in Poland, as was the case with the migrants’ communities in Boston actively supporting their compatriots in Boca Canasta (Levitt 2001), or the Moroccan diaspora in France (Sahraoui 2015). Although Hirschman (1970) saw a negative correlation between exit and voice, as in his view exit ‘drives out the voice’, when we take a transnational perspective we can observe that exit might also develop a voice (Hoffmann 2010).

So far Polish migrants seem to organise in the UK mainly in order to improve their situation there rather than change the (work) reality in Poland. Nevertheless some Polish political parties (e.g. the newly-established *Razem* [Together], which calls itself a party of the Polish precariat) search in London and in other British cities for active supporters, those who believe that they can contribute to the development of employment standards in Poland.

#### *Adaptation – loyalty*

The second observed strategy was gradual adaptation and acceptance of standards different from those abroad. Despite the clear differences observed in the sphere of work, a portion of returnees eventually adjusted to the Polish reality. For example Maja, after an initial period of disagreement, changed her attitude:

*You can get used to it. After one, two months in Poland, I was saying to myself: My goodness, that’s simply how it is here. ‘Maja, where are we?’ And I answered [to myself] ‘In Poland’. So you need to put your tail between your legs [podkulić ogon] and be nice to the lady who is the office clerk, because she rules here... (Maja, female, 26 y, self-employed copywriter in Wrocław).*

The lower income and worse employment standards are perceived to be a result of the 'Polish mentality' and Poland's economic position, sometimes ascribed to the post-socialist legacy. These factors are seen as structurally embedded, hence one needs to adjust. The returnees' conviction of their own agency is rather weak.

Adaptation was also a strategy employed by migrants who returned for reasons other than work-related. They knew that if they wanted to save the family, be closer with the elderly parents, or simply finish their education they needed to readjust their expectations.

*Maybe there [in the UK] I had more time to think everything through. And I realised there that I needed to lower the level of my expectations, so that I could also have satisfaction from a simple job. So I returned from England... found a job, a simple job in a facto for 8 hours a day – something I totally could not picture. Of course there are disadvantages because you have less money, but the life is more stabilised, more calm, because I'm with the family, and perhaps now I'm the most happy in my entire life (Andrzej, male, 50 y, production worker in Legnica).*

Adaptation, if translated into Hirschman's terms, might be compared to loyalty. The potential social remittances are not actualised and over time the discontent with work decreases, although it does not totally disappear. The adaptation might also be conditional, and once the reason for being in Poland is no longer relevant, the returnee(s) might consider re-emigration.

#### *Activism – voice*

Activism is the third strategy and the one employed by the smallest group of interviewed returnees. Faced with tensions related to work they undertake actions in order to improve their situation. This strategy might be seen as a resort to voice, which is defined as 'any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, all objectionable states of affairs' (Hirschman 1970: 30). Activism and a conscious striving for change is a strategy undertaken by returnees convinced of the high level of their agency. Their stay abroad reinforced, or even brought about, their feelings of self-esteem and self-determination. Their actions can be taken either at the workplace or more generally at the local level. Furthermore, such actions can take either an individual or a collective form. While the former is mostly aimed at improving returnees' own situation, the latter answers the needs of a broader group and could, for example, take the form of involvement in trade unionism or engagement in a political party. Activism is the strategy most likely to support/contribute to the transfer and actualisation of social remittances in the sphere of work. However, direct actions aimed at levelling or reducing the uneasiness at the workplace do not always translate into change.

As pointed out by Levitt (1998), the successful transfer of social remittances depends not only on the will and agency of migrants, but also on the potential receiver's readiness to accept some new norms, practices and ideas. To understand how and why some returnees become actors of change, one needs to take into consideration the 'specific institutional, political and economic conditions at home' (Cassarino 2004: 270). In the case of potential remittances in the sphere of work, the crucial factor seems to be the structural position of the employee, defined in the relation to other employees and, most of all, to managers. A migrant's charisma and ability to attract non-migrants is also of significance. However, the relatively low autonomy experienced by employees in Poland gives them little space for change. Krzysztof, who following his return fell into the 'experience trap' and worked in a luxury hotel in Poland, offered this analysis of the impact of his experience from abroad:

*I think that it [the work experience from the UK] doesn't matter. I mean, I'm working here [and] I used to work in various hotels, (...) that were four–five stars hotels, Marriott, Hilton. It seemed to me that there were high standards and I was in some way trained, but it is not useful at all. This is not useful because coming back here, even if you wanted to implement these standards, you are alone, and after a while you start to work and behave exactly like the others (Krzysztof, male, 30 y, receptionist in Wrocław).*

In his case the failed attempt to 'implement British standards' led him to change his strategy to adaptation.

The activism of returnees could be also institutionalised and directly linked with their return, as was the case of 32-year old Michał, who came back to Poland because of a job offered him by one of the British trade unions. The British union, being aware of the global competition, followed the logic that supporting the organisation of Polish workers will translate into their better working conditions and higher wages in Poland. This, in turn, should lower the competitive pressures on the Polish companies and prevent the race to the bottom on the common EU market. Michał's involvement in trade union movements began in the UK, but currently could translate into improvement of the working conditions in a certain company in Poland. However, the results of his attempts are not clear yet.

#### *Entrepreneurship – exit, voice and loyalty all in one*

The last identified strategy is entrepreneurship, which usually takes the form of self-employment. A few interviewees admitted that among the reasons which pushed them towards working on their own account was 'the fear of working for somebody in Poland'. The decision was, however, also motivated by other factors, such as the desire for self-realisation, expectation of higher earnings, and a need for independence, even though the returnees did not perceive these as problematic when they were an employee in the UK. Indeed, those who eventually re-emigrated were usually employees in the UK (in one case the interviewee was formally self-employed, however he was a subcontractor providing services on regular basis for only one company). Below Stanisław recalls the time when he run his business in Poland:

*Well, in running a company I liked the fact that I was my own boss. I didn't have to work for somebody else. I liked that, but of course it also had some disadvantages. You know, most of the time bosses don't have weekends off, don't have holidays but... that was fine for me. When I already had the company I thought that for sure I wouldn't want to work for somebody in Poland, so later it wasn't even an option. Well, abroad it's totally different, you know (Stanisław, male, 33 y, engineer in Glasgow, re-emigrant).*

The self-employment of returnees might be seen as a specific form of strategy on the Polish labour market which combines all three options: exit, loyalty and voice. It allows the returnees to express their disappointment with the domestic labour market for employees and at the same time remain loyal to the country. Entrepreneurship is also a form of actively 'taking matters into one's own hands'. In the narrations of the self-employed returnees, the prevailing discourse is that of the 'self-made man', who achieved a goal with his/her own work.

*Now I'm aware that if you work hard and you want it, you can earn more and you can live at a different level. So let's say it's a motivation (Radosław, male, 30 y, self-employed translator in Wrocław).*

*Well, I wouldn't blame the employers. I see that there are a lot of shortcomings in my generation, especially with regard to the level of qualifications... I don't know, I think that if you really want to, if you really work*

*hard – we need to be clear about this – you can find the job which you want* (Gosia, female, 23 y, informally employed as a waitress in Wrocław).

Self-employment appears to be a strategy with a high potential for the transfer of social remittances. The returnees' combination of work autonomy and their developed sense of agency leads some to attempt to implement the different work standards and solutions observed abroad. The success of these efforts, however, depends not only on the returnee's will, but also on the general market conditions and the 'prevailing rules of the game'. Despite some positive examples, small entrepreneurs still complained about how difficult it is nowadays in Poland to be a good employer.

*We didn't want to employ anybody on the black market and we didn't want to give a starvation wage, but we just counted how much one needs to earn to maintain themselves in our city. And when we calculated that we'd need to pay all social contributions and pay somebody normally, not peanuts nor a huge sum but just normally, we found out that we couldn't afford it [laughs]* (Agnieszka, female, 25 y, engineer in Edinburgh, re-emigrant).

Piotr, after two years of running a business in Poland and finally re-emigrating, sums it up as follows:

*I mean, in Poland to run a company you need to have a specific approach. You know, that all the time you want to earn as much as possible all at once. There is no long-term thinking and you need to be ruthless to achieve success. And this is not exactly my feature, so perhaps I'm not suitable for doing business in Poland* (Piotr, male, 34 y, architect in London, re-emigrant).

In case of the self-employed, re-emigration often took place after two years of doing business, when the entrepreneurs were faced with losing their special exemption for social services contributions. Faced with high competition, they often decided to close their small enterprises and leave the country.

All in all, the perception of migrants' entrepreneurship as a combination of voice, exit and loyalty avoids a simple dichotomy between passive workers forced into bogus self-employment, and entrepreneurs having a full agency, easily transferring solutions observed abroad.

## **Conclusions and discussion**

The aim of the paper was twofold: first to examine the perceptions of post-accession return migrants about the working conditions in Poland as compared to their (often precarious) experience in the UK; and second to analyse the way in which the comparison of norms and practices in the sphere of work in both countries might translate into social remittances brought by returnees to their home country.

The examination of the biographical narrative interviews with return migrants showed that from their perspective the main disadvantages of work in Poland (as compared to UK) are: 1) low earnings making it impossible to live a decent life; 2) hierarchical relations at work; and 3) the fragile work–life balance.

The research revealed additionally that both return migrants with no previous work experience in Poland as well as successful target earners strongly experienced the acknowledged differences. Moreover, in some cases the migrants' relatively low status on the labour market in the UK and status of being employed in precarious conditions was not perceived as such by the migrants themselves.

Most of the interviewed returnees admit that their emigration changed both their way of thinking and their understanding of 'normal' working conditions. The discrepancies and tensions resulting from the constant

comparison between work ‘there’ and ‘here’ underscored the norms and practices which have been conceptualised as ‘potential social remittances’. Their actualisation, however, depends on the coping strategies adopted by returnees, as well as their structural position and the institutional settings in the home country. Further analysis of the interviews enabled the creation of four ideal types of coping strategies employed by return migrants facing distress resulting from the discrepancies between employment standards. In most cases, re-emigration, activism, adaptation and/or entrepreneurship were the returnees’ main responses to the encountered tensions.

The first three above-listed scenarios correspond with the options described by Hirschman as exit, voice and loyalty. However, in contrast to Hirschman’s position, I argue that they are not mutually exclusive, can change over time, and take different forms in the transnational social field. It would require further research to determine, for example, in what way those returnees who decided to re-emigrate (exit) might undertake efforts from abroad (voice) to change the situation in Poland. The last distinguished strategy, entrepreneurship, is a specific combination of the three options proposed by Hirschman. In leaving the local labour market for employees, self-employed returnees remain loyal to the home country and, by their attempts to implement different work standards, raise their voices against those employment conditions which they find disappointing.

The actualisation of the potential social remittances in sphere of work appears most likely in those cases where returnees are involved in collective (usually institutionalised) actions, as well as in the case of those who choose to start their own business. Individual attempts to implement change turn out to be ineffective, mainly due to the relatively low autonomy of workers, and usually end with a change of strategy, either to re-emigrate or to accept the status quo.

The clear limitation of the presented research is that it provides the view only from the perspective of return migrants. To fully understand the ways in which social remittances might be transferred, adjusted and implemented would require a longitudinal in-depth study at the local level, which would take into account the experiences of both returnees as well as non-migrants.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In addition to Polish citizens, the UK also welcomed migrants from other countries which joined the EU in 2004 (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, Slovakia, Slovenia), in 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania) and in 2013 (Croatia). However, the citizens of Bulgaria and Romania obtained full access to the British labour market only in 2014 after the UK lifted the transitional restrictions. In the case of Croatia the restrictions apply until June 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The researchers used data provided by the Central Statistical Office of Poland, which since 2008 has started dividing migrants between those who are temporarily abroad for a period shorter than one year and those who are abroad longer than a year. They assumed that all temporal migrants in the  $n$  year, and in the next year ( $n + 1$ ) could be divided into two groups: 1) those who are abroad for longer than a year; and 2) those who returned to Poland. In this way, when one deducts from the total number of Polish emigrants in a certain  $n$  year the number of all migrants who are abroad for longer than a year in the following  $n+1$  year, one obtains the number of those who returned to Poland in the  $n$  year. These calculations yielded the results presented in the Table 1 (for more details, see: Slany and Solga 2014).

<sup>3</sup> This equation is highly speculative and should be read with great caution. However – assuming that the data provided by the British Department for Work and Pensions and the Central Statistical Office of Poland (CSO) are reliable, it reveals the scale of the potential return to Poland. The estimation was made using the following logic: 1) adult Poles who registered for the NINo spent at least a one day in the UK. Reasoning:

if from the total number of NINos issued for Poles from April 2004 to September 2014 one subtracts the number of Poles staying in the UK at the end of 2014 for longer than three months (thus excluding from the equation those who obtained a NINo between October and December 2014 since even if they were in the UK at the end of 2014 they stayed there for a shorter period than 3 months and were not included in the CSO estimations) one gets a minimum number of 587 000 adult Poles who from April 2004 to September 2014 obtained a NINo and at the end of 2014 were not present in the UK for longer than three months. This is a minimum number since there is an assumption that out of the 685 000 Poles reported in the UK by the CSO everyone obtained a NINo, what clearly is not the case. It is also unclear how many out of the estimated 587 000 NINo holders returned to Poland, migrated to another country or died. Moreover, there is a theoretical possibility that a person included in the first set obtained a NINo before October 2014, then left the UK and eventually re-entered the UK after October 2014. One can assume however that the number of such persons is rather low.

<sup>4</sup> This group consisted of migrants who physically returned to Poland and descendants of Polish migrants.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that there are differences in the level of returnees' integration, which depend on the region of Poland to which they return. However a detailed analysis of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper. (For more details, see: Brzozowski, Majka, Szymańska and Ułasiński 2015 and the series of regional research conducted by *Centrum Doradztwa Strategicznego*.)

<sup>6</sup> All interviews are anonymous and the names are fictitious. 'M' stands for man and 'W' stands for women, the figure indicates the number of the interview.

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