

Central and Eastern European Migration Review

Received: 27 January 2015, Accepted: 13 May 2017

Vol. 6, No. 2, 2017, pp. 163–175

doi: 10.17467/ceemr.2017.21

— RESEARCH REPORTS —

# Participation of the Vietnamese Community in Poland in the Socio-Political Life at the Local Level: Present Situation and Prospects for the Future

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*Recently, the issue of intercultural relations between immigrants and the host society has been widely discussed. Taking into account the increasing spatial mobility of non-EU foreigners, it seems highly important to examine their relations with the host community on the local level. This article presents the results of the qualitative study conducted in the first quarter of 2014 in the Lesznowola municipality (Mazowieckie province, Piaseczno district) in Poland. It aims at analysing the situation of the Vietnamese community and its engagement in the local life of the municipality and examine attitudes of both Vietnamese and Poles towards prospects for granting local voting rights to migrants in Poland. Through several years of successful business and social cooperation, the Vietnamese immigrants have become a recognisable part of the social landscape of the municipality. The degree of social and political participation at the local level on the part of the Vietnamese community has also increased, which can be observed, for example, through such practical indicator as cooperation with local educational institutions. Therefore, we can argue that the Vietnamese community has been transforming itself from a marginalised and self-sufficient homogeneous group into more and more self-aware and active socio-political group of actors.*

*Keywords: Vietnamese community; economic migration; public participation; political participation; voting rights*

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## Introduction

In recent years many European cities have been facing the challenge of an increasing number of immigrants from distant countries settling down in major agglomerations. As Michael Alexander (2007) states, ‘This challenge is no longer limited to the traditional “gateway cities”. In Europe, alone, hundreds of towns and cities now host a significant proportion of foreign-born and second-generation immigrant populations’ (*ibidem*: 1). Therefore, the task faced by the authorities of the host country manifests itself not only in rudimentary spheres, such as providing proper housing, welfare and education for the newcomers, but also in the need to include them in the socio-political life of the local community.

This article aims at providing an illustration of the process of socio-political inclusion of the Vietnamese immigrants residing in the Lesznowola municipality (including the village of Wólka Kosowska) on the basis of the qualitative study conducted in 2014. The unusually high proportion of immigrants living in this community makes it an interesting and fruitful research case, presenting some multicultural challenges faced by the local authorities as well as by the host society and the immigrants themselves.

This article presents a characterisation of selected socio-political activities (e.g. municipal social life and education) of the Vietnamese immigrants in Wólka Kosowska, to demonstrate the basic spheres of their active participation, as well as analysing a socio-political context for the possibility of granting them voting rights at a local level. As Michael Alexander (2007) stated, ‘the interaction between the receiving society and individual migrants (and immigrant groups) takes place in the very concrete contexts of streets, neighbourhoods, schools, work places, public spaces, local organisations. In other words, integration takes place at the local level, even if some of its mechanisms are steered by institutional rules that have been established at higher (regional, national or international) levels’ (*ibidem*: 5). And that is the local context of the immigrants’ socio-political participation that is taken into consideration in this article.

The empirical part of the study, presented in this article, is divided into three sections, showing different spheres of immigrants’ activity in the Lesznowola municipality. The first one presents the very beginnings of settlement of the Vietnamese community in Wólka Kosowska, reconstructing the first reactions of the authorities and the host community to the presence of the newcomers. The second section outlines the deepening engagement of the immigrant community with the social life of the host community in Wólka Kosowska, including social relations with Poles and interactions of Vietnamese migrants with educational institutions. The third section addresses the political activity of the Vietnamese immigrants in Lesznowola and attitudes of both Poles and Vietnamese towards the possibility of granting foreigners voting rights at the local level.

## Vietnamese in Poland: review of empirical studies

The population of the Vietnamese diaspora in Poland is estimated at 25–30 000 (Wysieńska 2012; Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2014; Zieliński 2014), which makes it the second largest immigrant group in Poland. The majority of the Vietnamese residing in Poland live in Warsaw and its nearest surrounding area, of which the most popular municipality is Lesznowola, described in this article. According to the research conducted by Ewa Nowicka (2014) in 2001, the immigrants from Vietnam choose Poland ‘because of: (1) its relatively easy access, (2) relatively high standard of living, (3) safety and (4) high level of education’ (*ibidem*: 240). However, we must not forget about another – maybe even crucial – factor that encourages Vietnamese immigrants to come to Poland, namely social ties, which enable the newcomers to settle in already created networks, that have been built since at least the 1970s. Taking into consideration the benefits identified by Ewa Nowicka, as well as the historical and social context of the Vietnamese immigration to Poland, it should come as no surprise that the number of Vietnamese immigrants in Poland is consequently rising.<sup>1</sup>

Current studies of the Vietnamese community in Poland mainly concern three dimensions of their functioning in the host-society. These are: economic and labour activity (Bojar, Gąsior-Niemiec, Bieniecki and Pawlak 2005; Kłorek and Szulecka 2013; Hüwelmeier 2015); education and socialisation of the so-called second generation (Nowicka 2014); and – the most important in context of analysis presented in this article – social participation and integration (Fihel, Górny, Grzymała-Kazłowska, Kępińska and Piekut 2007; Grzymała-Kazłowska 2008; Łotocki 2009; Szymańska-Matusiewicz 2014, 2015).

Interestingly, next to numerous studies on community living in Warsaw (and nearby areas) there has also been research undertaken among Vietnamese dwelling in Poznań (Adamowicz, Bloch, Kochaniewicz and Rydzewski 2012; Buchowski and Schmidt 2012) and Cracow (Pędziwiatr and Brzozowski 2015). This research shows that the Vietnamese, compared with other immigrant groups residing in Poland (e.g. Ukrainians and Armenians), are noticeably more homogeneous and less interested in learning about, and exploring, Polish culture; however – after a long stay in Poland – their identity leans more towards Polish than Vietnamese (Pędziwiatr and Brzozowski 2015).

The Vietnamese minority and the extent of its willingness to integrate with host-country natives are often compared with other groups of immigrants settled in Poland. Perhaps due to the similar purpose of their presence in Poland (mainly economic migration), it is the Ukrainians who are most often contrasted with the Vietnamese residing in Poland (Fihel *et al.* 2007; Grzymała-Kazłowska 2008, 2015). Research carried out among the Vietnamese and the Ukrainians proved that there are some significant differences between these two communities, mostly as far as their openness and social activity is concerned. The noticeable cultural distance between Poles and Vietnamese means the latter are perceived as a rather closed group, maintaining strong interethnic ties, whereas the Ukrainians tend to integrate with the host-community much easier. Aleksandra Grzymała-Kazłowska (2015) emphasises also a higher density of Polish–Ukrainian relationships (including mixed-marriages), which can lead to greater autonomy of immigrants, and more individual migration as well as easier assimilation with the host-country.

The Vietnamese are also compared with their Asian neighbours from China, as an example of an immigrant group representing a similarly foreign and remote culture (Wysieńska 2011, 2012). The situation of the Chinese immigrants settled in Poland and generally in Europe is, however, significantly different. Firstly, the number of Chinese newcomers is significantly lower than the Vietnamese (approximately 4–5 000 immigrants from China compared with 35–40 000 from Vietnam) (Wysieńska 2011). Secondly, while the representatives of the Vietnamese community consider Poland as a destination country of residence their counterparts from China perceive Poland as a transit one on their way to Western Europe (Wysieńska 2011). Research conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs in Wólka Kosowska and Jaworzno showed also that Poland has never been and still is not considered an interesting and lucrative country for potential immigrants from China (Wysieńska 2012). Furthermore, the analysis of the rich migration history of the Chinese immigrants in Poland has proved that – in contrast to the Vietnamese, who have mostly come to Poland directly from their homeland – the majority of Chinese immigrants have already lived in many European countries before. It can be assumed, therefore, that their various experiences gained in other countries and societies make them less trusting to the welcoming community as well as to other immigrant groups residing in Poland (Wysieńska 2011).

There are also numerous works concerning comparative research on social and political participation of the Vietnamese and other immigrant groups in Europe. This research direction started with Patrick Ireland's (1994) study of four cities in Switzerland and France, followed by Rex and Samad's (1996) analysis of British cities (Birmingham and Bradford) and Bloomaert and Martiniello's (1996) research on Belgian Antwerp and Liege. Besides these, three big international projects have been implemented, whose results have contributed to the international debate on European immigration. These were the UNSECO MOST project *Modes of Citizenship and Multicultural Policies in European Cities* (1996–2004), project IDEA, entitled *Mediterranean*

and Eastern European Countries as New Immigration Destinations in the European Union (2007–2009), and the European Foundation's project *Cities for Local Integration Policies* (CLIP), started in 2006 by the policy makers. The UNESCO MOST project aimed at systematic description and comparison of 16 European cities (and Tel Aviv) in terms of the political participation of migrants and local governmental policies; the IDEA project also addressed new forms of migration and new countries included in the migration processes as a result of globalisation, whereas the last initiative indicated here created a network of 25 cities which are cooperating to compare and rethink particular, specific aspects of their local integration policies.

These works have focused mainly on the political sphere of integration, taking into consideration policies related to the political and civic participation of migrants. The study presented in this article aims at deepening the analysis of social-political participation of the Vietnamese community in Wólka Kosowska, in the context of the key aspect of this participation, which is the process of granting them voting rights at a local level. As Richard Zapata (2011) indicates, 'Participation and representation require the granting of formal political rights and opportunities for political participation, as well as conditions, that encourage active civic engagement' (*ibidem*: 169).

## Data

The empirical base for this article consists of an in-depth qualitative study, which was carried out in Wólka Kosowska in the first quarter of 2014. The study was focused on accessing opinion leaders representing the whole spectrum of people involved in the issues related to the functioning of the Vietnamese community in the Lesznowola municipality: representatives of Vietnamese organisations, members of the Polish local community of Lesznowola, Polish activists from NGOs supporting immigrants, and local government representatives from the Lesznowola municipality (both councillors and municipality council staff). An essential part of the study was to observe and analyse the level and forms of social activity and political participation among the Vietnamese residents in Wólka Kosowska as well as the attitude of current local political elites towards possible legal changes that would finally lead to granting foreigners (TCNs) the right to participate in local elections. The main method undertaken in the study was individual in-depth interviews (IDIs), 19 of which were carried out, mostly in the Lesznowola municipality, in the Polish language.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the nature of the project, the in-depth analysis embraced only those members of the Vietnamese community in Lesznowola municipality who have gained a permanent residence permit, and therefore could personally benefit from the possibility of voting rights which may be granted at the local level to the TCNs (this issue is described further in the report prepared within the project) (Łodziński, Pudzianowska and Szaranowicz-Kusz 2014).

A research group defined in this way encompasses only selected members of Vietnamese community in Poland which consists of Vietnamese migrants with various legal statuses in Poland. Polish legislation regulates the official status of Vietnamese immigrants (as well as other TCNs) very clearly, recognising five forms of legality of their stay or residence in Poland and two additional forms of protection (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2008). These legal statuses are: a Schengen visa or national visa (authorising a stay (or stays) not exceeding the total period of three or twelve months), a temporary residence permit (entitling a stay in the host country of no longer than three years), a permanent residence permit (after up to 10 years), a long-term EU resident's residence permit (granted after five years of legal and uninterrupted stay in Poland, also allowing residence with no time limits), and Polish citizenship. According to the data of the Office for Foreigners, as of the first half of 2015 there were 10 234 Vietnamese immigrants in Poland, whose legal status is regulated: 4 990 of them had a temporary residence permit; 3 093 a permanent residence permit; and 1 805 a long-term EU resident's residence permit. There is also a group of immigrants who have been granted protection on

Polish territory: a tolerated stay permit has been granted to 239 Vietnamese, refugee status and subsidiary protection was granted to 102 Vietnamese. However, we can also observe a large group of Vietnamese immigrants, whose legal status is unregulated, and are therefore not included in official statistics at all.

Somewhat different is the situation of so-called second generation – the descendants of Vietnamese immigrants, born in Poland, and who have gained Polish citizenship (by virtue of the fact that one of their parents is a native or a naturalised Pole). As a consequence of their legal status, they enjoy a different catalogue of rights and permissions, such as active and passive voting rights (which mean a possibility to vote as well as candidate in elections).

### **The very beginnings of the Vietnamese settlement in Lesznowola municipality**

Lesznowola is one of the fastest growing rural communities in Poland. It is located in the Mazowieckie province, in Piaseczno district (east-central Poland), in the immediate vicinity of the Warsaw southern district – Ursynów. It is bordered by municipalities of Nadarzyn and Raszyn (northwest), Piaseczno (southeast) and Tarczyn (south). Lesznowola covers an area of 69.17 square kilometres and is now – according to the official data – inhabited by 22 548 people (CSO 2013: 74), of which nearly 10 per cent are foreigners (including the largest group, which are the Asians, i.e. 1 199 officially registered Chinese and 708 Vietnamese). However, the Vietnamese immigrants openly admit, that approximately 30–40 per cent of their community are undocumented migrants (Wysińska 2011), so actually there are many more of them. Iga Mroczek, Monika Szulecka and Elżbieta Tulińska (2008) had a similar suspicion when researching trade halls in Wólka Kosowska. They indicated that it seemed to be impossible to estimate the actual number of immigrants residing in Wólka Kosowska, because ‘there were a lot of hotels and guest rooms located close to the trade halls, and the Vietnamese often lived in them permanently, without being documented’ (*ibidem*: 168).

The most popular location among the Asian immigrants settling down in Mazowieckie province is a small village Wólka Kosowska, situated near the main communication artery E77 (Gdańsk–Cracow). Wólka Kosowska was the winner of *Forbes* economic magazine’s ranking for business attractiveness (2009). Due to its favourable location and good communication with Warsaw city centre, Wólka Kosowska was selected by the Chinese immigrants arriving in Poland in the early 1990s as the optimum location for their newly established businesses.

The first Chinese trade hall in Wólka Kosowska (the GD company) was built in 1994 as logistics base and warehousing for the most important imported goods market, so-called *Jarmark Europa* taking place in the 10th Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw. Facing the decommissioning plans embracing closing of the market and restoring the original sporting character of the stadium (which were finally implemented in 2007), the Vietnamese also decided to move their trade centres to Wólka Kosowska (in 2002 and 2003). They openly admit that the choice of this location was based on the proximity of the existing Chinese centre and its effective advertising:

*Then we thought about where the new Vietnamese shopping centre [should be established]. One person came up with the idea, maybe next to the Chinese centre, since they have been established for five or six years and have already done their advertising? It was essential for us (IDI\_6\_NGO\_IMI).<sup>3</sup>*

Thus, through the co-location of the Chinese and Vietnamese trade halls in Wólka Kosowska, the country’s largest Asian wholesale and retail sale centre was established. Currently the shopping mall in Wólka Kosowska occupies an area of over 50 hectares and includes 17 halls, with more than 2 200 trade pavilions. The biggest workforce is the Vietnamese, who own, or rent from the Chinese and the Turks, the majority of the pavilions

and trade stands. In their hands are, e.g. the ASEANEU Centre, ASEANPL, ASG, ASG-PL and EACC Investments as well as a significant part of the Chinese GD trade mall. Some of the Chinese and Vietnamese merchants, who previously rented apartments in Warsaw, have decided to settle permanently in the municipality of Lesznowola, buying flats and houses in the proximity of the trade halls. It seems to confirm the thesis of Ewa Nowicka (2014), who has stated that ‘Poland is no longer only a transit country to other, more attractive countries; it has become an ultimate aim of migration’ (*ibidem*: 240). As pointed out by a representative of the municipal authority:

*An important point is that for a long time, most Asians lived in Warsaw, and only came here to work. Now a large number of them are living here, have their estates, their homes, and one of the subsidiary companies is engaged in building apartments and they are settling and living here in the commune of Wólka Kosowska (IDI\_3\_JST).*

The research carried out in Wólka Kosowska allows one to draw two conclusions. The first is that immigrants whose living situation in the host country is not yet established still need ongoing support and assistance from other co-migrants. As a result, they decide (or are forced) to live in Wólka Kosowska, in close proximity to their workplace. Their network is still very strong, constituting some kind of a hermetic community, based on inherent rules and its own dynamic. No external contacts are needed, as all needs are met within the immigrant community.

The second concerns those Vietnamese who have decided to live outside Wólka Kosowska or even the municipality of Lesznowola. Their family situation is generally more stable and, due to the fact that they often have school-age children, they choose bigger agglomerations to settle down in, where a wider range of educational opportunities exists. One of the Vietnamese activists said:

*I think it is important, that one has a family, that there are children, because every Vietnamese family seeks a convenient location for their children and better schools. So, as I noticed, in Lesznowola live only those, who do not have a family in Poland (IDI\_8\_NGO\_IMI).*

The members of the Vietnamese diaspora who have already legalised their stay in Poland and are supporting a family do not need help from other migrants any more. Obviously, they keep in touch with friends and families in Vietnam, and their migration network still exists, but its density is lower than before. They also open themselves up to other relationships, including contact with the host society, and are more eager to get involved in public activity in various spheres. These Vietnamese are potential beneficiaries of the process of granting voting rights at the local level for non-EU citizens, because they have already met their rudimentary needs for security and decent living conditions, and – as the next step in Maslow’s hierarchy – have started seeking for respect and self-fulfilment and self-realisation, which can only be provided through social activity.

The large group of Vietnamese workers in Wólka Kosowska arrived in Poland during the so-called intellectual wave in the early 1970s as part of the governmental cooperation between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the People’s Republic of Poland (Wysieńska 2011). As one of the respondents said, *In the beginning there was such an idea that we will stay here for a while, just work a little, earn some money and go back home. But it turned out that here are better living conditions (IDI\_6\_NGO\_IMI)*. Therefore, most of the Vietnamese immigrants who had left Poland after their graduation decided to return to Poland in the mid-1990s.

The first reactions of the Polish residents to the appearance of foreigners in the Lesznowola municipality were rather ambivalent: *In the beginning... feelings were mixed. There were some concerns too. Residents feared these new nations. There was distrust, there was a distance and staring at each other (IDI\_16\_JST)*.

Not without significance, however, remained a lucrative offer made by investors from Asia, who searched for suitable areas for their future investments. They wanted to buy some land from the Polish landowners, for which – according to opinions of the local inhabitants – it was difficult to find other buyers (due to waterlogged ground and little fertile soil). As mentioned by one of the councillors: *People sold the land, because, if the farmers, the people here had not sold it, nothing would have been created here (IDI\_14\_JST)*. According to relations of the Polish respondents, through several years of successful business and social cooperation, the situation has been normalised and immigrants have become a natural part of the social landscape of the municipality. Their presence also ceased to arouse extreme emotions, in accordance with the principle, quoted by one of the Poles, that *If you cannot love something, then you should try to understand and like it (IDI\_1\_NGO)*.

### **Social relations and contacts with educational institutions of Vietnamese migrants at the local level**

Considering the situation of the TCNs in Lesznowola it seems necessary to draw attention to their relations with the Polish host community. These relations extend across several levels, from the everyday contacts in the trade centre in Wólka Kosowska, to regular cooperation with educational institutions attended by foreign children. All these areas of immigrants' activity directly shape their image in the eyes of Poles, influencing the course of the relationship with the local community and its representatives in the organs of power.

First results of the study indicated that the presence of immigrants in the local community had become an everyday occurrence. Poles had become accustomed to people of different origins that they meet at work, in the place where they live, in shopping centres and during events and celebrations organised by local authorities. According to what the representatives of the municipal authorities said, immigrants were generally accepted by the majority of the host inhabitants, for the Vietnamese had put a lot of effort into being perceived as an open, and not troublesome, group of immigrants. They also declare, they appreciate a friendly attitude of the Poles from Lesznowola towards other cultures and openness to dialogue, resulting in a large freedom given by the Poles to the representatives of the Vietnamese community in cultivating their own traditions, religion and language.<sup>4</sup> At the same time the Vietnamese respondents declared a desire to integrate with the local community and get actively involved in its functioning: *We want to create a society here, of course, to preserve national identity, but also to integrate in different areas (IDI\_6\_NGO\_IMI)*.

The visible effort that the representatives of the Vietnamese community put into adapting to Polish society slowly brought the desired results. Members of Vietnamese associations who participated in the study pointed to the fact that their children, whether born in Poland or in Vietnam, were attending Polish schools, and could make themselves understood perfectly (literally and figuratively) by their Polish peers:

*I think children handled integration much better than us. That's true, well, because there is no language barrier, it is firstly, and secondly – from the child, from early years they already live in such an atmosphere, in such habits, and they understand it (IDI\_6\_NGO\_IMI)*.

The issue of the so-called second generation is indeed one of the key dimensions of analysis of the process of immigrants' integration with the host society. The Vietnamese have decided to settle permanently in Poland, taking into consideration the future of their children: *Children, a very important thing – the children. Where they will be fine, their prospects, profession, etc. (IDI\_6\_NGO\_IMI)*. Furthermore, these children, who were born in Poland, but – what seems to be surprising – many of them don't even want to speak Vietnamese or visit their relatives in Vietnam, because – as they admit – they feel at home in Poland (IDI\_7\_JST).

In everyday life, however, it can be seen that – due to insufficient knowledge about each other – Polish–Vietnamese relations are still based to some degree of uncertainty and caution. Poles, having no clarity about the

expectations of the Vietnamese community, maintain restraint and distance in their official as well as private relationships:

*They are such a closed social group, that I was never really 100 per cent sure whether something was right or wrong, because they always nod with a smile. One does not know what they really think, that was the problem and I had a feeling that we are here, we are trying,, we want to make it right, but we do not know whether we are succeeding (IDI\_4\_JST).*

The Vietnamese behave similarly, who – according to interviews conducted with their Polish co-workers – are very careful to new contacts and as long as they were not sure where I am, who I am, they used to observe me very carefully, ensuring themselves, whether I should be here or not (IDI\_1\_NGO). Therefore, one of the most important challenges facing local authorities in the context of integration of the multicultural community is overcoming mutual stereotypes and prejudices discernible in the relations between the Poles and the Vietnamese. Certainly, it would facilitate multifaceted relations between the two communities on the economic, social and political level.

Furthermore, many non-UE immigrants who came to Lesznowola brought their families with them, often including children who are now attending Polish schools. These are the so-called second generation immigrants – raised and educated in Poland, and used to Polish culture, language and manners. They are considered to be the best chance for better integration of the foreign community, since they feel more comfortable in Polish life and also somehow mediate between the foreigners and the host community. These are probably well-grounded expectations because the second generation immigrants are eager to take up jobs, which will enable members of their community to adjust more easily to Polish life.

However, as the respondents say, the Polish system of education is not prepared for a big influx of foreign children, because such a challenge reveals

*a collision of our non-existing integration system and Polish multiculturalism in practice (...) what we can offer is an accelerated Polish course for children in the first year (five hours a week). This is too little for them. There are groups that send kids for private lessons after school, but it's mostly about Chinese not the Vietnamese people (IDI\_3\_JST).*

Furthermore, according to reflections of one of the respondents, Polish schools modify cultural habits of foreign students, in order to prepare them better to active participation in social life of municipality. The interlocutor pointed out, that at first Vietnamese students, who attend Polish schools thought that:

*You can't discuss with a teacher, you should treat him like a master, in front of whom you have to bow (...). A Polish student acting that way is considered as a less communicative, less intelligent. Here we promote students that are active, talkative, even if they argue with a teacher, that's great, because they know how to discuss (IDI\_3\_JST).*

Our interlocutors concluded, however, that this clear difference in behaviour started to fade gradually and now the attitude of the Vietnamese children is not much different to that of the Polish ones.

But school as an institution does not only socialise and teach, it also promotes and supports the 'cultivation of spiritual and personal worth' (Spence 2005: 112). As Jessica Mai Sims (2007) argues, 'Seen as the primary marker of social mobility, education provides individuals with the skills to communicate, relate and adapt to society, and qualify for employment' (*ibidem*: 4). Non-EU foreigners' relations with educational institutions

in Lesznowola municipality seem to take place in the atmosphere of cooperation and kindness. Particularly interesting here is the Public School Complex in Mroków, which is enjoying the greatest popularity among the Vietnamese. At the time of research (first quarter of 2014) in the above-mentioned school in Mroków, the proportion of foreign children counted for more than 10 per cent of all students (IDI\_5\_NGO). Meanwhile, *a few years ago... there were only a few foreign pupils in the classroom, now we have over 100 in three years* (IDI\_3\_JST). The increasing degree of cultural and ethnic diversity in municipal schools encouraged the authorities to initiate actions that would prepare teachers and other schools workers (in particular, these who are employed in the municipal school in Mroków) to work in the new multicultural reality.

Doubtlessly, bonds connecting immigrants with Lesznowola are getting tighter and leading to transformation of this marginalised minority group into a more and more active and self-aware social and political power. As some of the Vietnamese who participated in the study said, it is only a matter of time before the first Vietnamese representative joins a local authority.

### **Prospects for political participation at the local level of the Vietnamese migrants**

Interviews carried out in Lesznowola with members of the Vietnamese community revealed, that political integration is not an ongoing priority for them, although political life in Poland is eagerly discussed within the immigrant group. Similarly, our Polish interviewees shared the view that the main goal for the Vietnamese residing in Poland is the pursuit of an adequate life for them and their families. As one of the NGO-workers explained,

*The main purposes of the immigrants here, in Wólka Kosowska, are economic goals, it means multiplication of their property, sending money to their families and educating children, that is the second goal... So we must think about it, if their goal is most of all to earn – would they like to engage in the local politics?* (IDI\_4\_JST).

Today's legal acts regulate the status of the Vietnamese citizens in Lesznowola very clearly: only those representatives of the Vietnamese diaspora, who have already gained Polish citizenship are authorised to participate in all political activities on an equal footing with other Poles. They can, therefore, take part in direct and indirect democratic procedures, such as participating in elections (both voting as well as being elected), and taking part in referendums and legislative initiatives. The TCNs with a permanent residence permit cannot sign up to a political party but can set up and belong to an association or foundation. The possibility of granting local voting rights to the immigrants with permanent residence permits would change this situation significantly.

Observations conducted in Wólka Kosowska led to a presumption, that maybe the eagerness to participate in local politics lies in the immigrants' status: those who have already settled themselves and their families may be interested in local social life – but the others rather rarely. Rahsaan Maxwell (2010), who researched the political participation of minority migrant groups in France, pointed out to another factor influencing political participation of migrants. She claimed, that non-European-origin migrant groups had lower turnout rates than native French metropolitans, not due to their smaller interest in participating in local political life, but because of the poorer living conditions they faced (living in 'disadvantages urban areas'). There arises an obvious doubt, in such a pessimistic vision, whether there are any potential beneficiaries of granting voting rights at all. Would anyone benefit from it? One Vietnamese interviewee answered this question: *Honestly, I want the voting rights for me, for my family, for wife, for son – I do not have greater engagement in politics* (IDI\_9\_NGO\_IMI).

It is worth noting that there is also an active group of self-styled politicians, who are highly interested in local (and global) political order, and who keep track of the news and read the Polish press. As one of the immigrants said, *these, who have Polish citizenship, they exercise their right and vote, go for elections, because they feel, they have the right to vote, they feel the real right to vote, and they feel valuable* (IDI\_2\_NGO\_IMI). It means, that granting voting rights to the non-EU citizens with permanent residence permits could bring a visible change in local politics, including a wider group of inhabitants actively deciding on the social and political life of their community.

On the other hand, the respondents who took part in the study revealed that there is a big risk that immigrants would not be interested in using these new rights because of hermetic nature of their community and (especially in case of the Chinese and the Vietnamese) not being used to democracy. At the same time, they expect that foreigners' influence on local politics would slightly change the topics discussed during the council meetings rather than reshape the whole direction of decisions undertaken by the council. Therefore, expansion of voting rights wouldn't lead to a major change in the balance of power, but would make the immigrants' voice heard.

## Conclusions

This article aimed to present social and political activity of the Vietnamese community residing in Lesznowola municipality, and its development in the recent years as well as prospects for the future. Both groups of interviewees – the Polish and the Vietnamese – see that the participation of the immigrants in the social life of the host-community has increased noticeably. The shift also shows a clear evolution of the immigrants themselves, who – from a marginalised, homogeneous group – have become a much more self-aware and active socio-political force. According to the interviews, it is only a matter of time before the representatives of the Vietnamese community receive seats in the municipal council and in other (not only local) authorities.

The interviews with the key informants showed also that the possible future electoral power may be the younger generation (the 'second generation'), who – by winning seats in the municipality council – could work for the security of comfortable and dignified living conditions for the members of the Vietnamese community in Poland. The political, as well as social and economic, potential of the second generation is widely analysed and discussed in European literature. Susan Bagwell (2006), who researched Vietnamese immigrants in the United Kingdom, pays attention to the fact, that 'These groups (second-generation and third-generation ethnic minorities – J. P.), having been educated in the United Kingdom, do not face the same cultural and linguistic barriers as their parents or grandparents' (*ibidem*: 52), and, due to this privileged position, can become a link between their ethnic community and the British host society. Similar conclusions have been drawn by Aleksandra Grzymała-Kazłowska (2015), who had researched Vietnamese immigrants in Poland and stated, that: 'Vietnamese immigrants who were integrated with Polish society, such as pioneer immigrants, Vietnamese leaders, the spouses of Poles and representatives of the 1.5 and 2nd generations played the role of cultural brokers. They mediated between their compatriots and Polish society' (*ibidem*: 460).

Zygmunt Bauman (1995) wrote, 'All societies produce strangers; but each kind of society produces its own kind of strangers, and produces them in its own inimitable way' (*ibidem*: 11). In the case of the Vietnamese community in Wólka Kosowska, analysed in this article, we may argue, that 'the Polish stranger' is socially active and eager to participate in public life, although his political rights are still relatively limited. Therefore, one of the main purposes of researching immigrant communities' political participation at the local level, and hence one of the purposes of this article was 'to initiate a debate on granting voting rights on the local level to the immigrants with permanent residence permits'.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See: the demographic base of the Central Statistical Office, <http://demografia.stat.gov.pl/bazademografia/> (accessed: 2 September 2016).

<sup>2</sup> For the full list of respondents with their basic characteristics see Annex 1.

<sup>3</sup> The interviews conducted in Wólka Kosowska are marked as IDI and then with successive interview numbers.

<sup>4</sup> About attitude of the Vietnamese immigrants towards their traditions, read in: Szymańska-Matusiewicz (2013).

## Funding

Data analysed in this article were collected within the project: *Analiza procesu przyznawania praw wyborczych migrantom na przykładach wybranych krajów UE*. The project was conducted by the International Organisation for Migration and the University of Warsaw, and co-financed by the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals.

## Conflict of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Annex 1

**Table 1. The list of respondents**

Interview ID	Respondent's affiliation	Respondent's nationality	Respondent's sex
1.	Non-governmental organisation (NGO)	Polish	Male
2.	NGO	Vietnamese	Male
3.	The Municipal Office (JST)	Polish	Male
4.	JST	Polish	Female
5.	NGO	Polish	Female
6.	NGO	Vietnamese	Male
7.	Employee of the Municipal Cultural Centre (JST)	Polish	Female
8.	NGO	Vietnamese	Male
9.	NGO	Vietnamese	Male
10.	Employee of the Municipal Cultural Centre (JST)	Polish	Female
11.	JST	Polish	Female
12.	JST	Polish	Female
13.	JST, Entrepreneur	Polish	Male
14.	JST	Polish	Male
15.	JST	Polish	Male
16.	JST	Polish	Female
17.	Expert in the field of research on the Vietnamese community	Polish	Female
18.	JST	Polish	Male
19.	Expert in the field of research on the Vietnamese community	Polish	Female

**How to cite this article:** Pokojska J. (2017). Participation of the Vietnamese Community in Poland in the Socio-Political Life at the Local Level: Present Situation and Prospects for the Future. *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 6(2): 163–175.