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Free Movement in the EU: Promoting Mobility Not Migration

Roderick Parkes

British Prime Minister David Cameron has announced that the EU's free movement regime is encouraging "benefit tourism." Citing the particular example of Polish workers, he stated his intention to revisit treaty agreements, not least in order to prevent EU citizens claiming welfare benefits for family members not resident in the UK. In so doing, he is seeking to marshal a coalition of Western states, notably Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, to restrict migration within the EU, hinting also at the possible introduction of quotas. Poland's robust response to David Cameron has been widely welcomed as an example of that nation's commitment to free movement and as a political coming of age. In reality, though, the episode risks undermining both its political principles and its long-term positioning in the EU. Poland must clarify that free movement is about short-term mobility and not long-term migration. Rather than engaging with the UK, Poland must quarantine it politically.

Mobility, Not Migration. Following Warsaw's robust response to the British prime minister's statement, Poland has been widely welcomed as a champion of the EU's current free-movement regime. In reality, its position on the issue is more ambivalent. It is not just the "receiving" countries such as the UK that today face difficulties with labour flows in the bloc. For Poland, as for other "sending countries," east-west migration brings the risk of brain drain and demographic decline, as well as populism at home from "trapped populations" (i.e., frustrated citizens left behind to deal with national problems such as debt or recession).

And yet, these potential drawbacks for both "sending" and "receiving" countries explain why the EU's goal has been a system of European *free movement* rather than *migration*. Free movement, in the sense of short-term, temporary labour mobility, rather than permanent migration is in the mutual interests of both sets of states: in a system where workers are encouraged to move abroad in the EU for a brief period, receiving countries such as the UK gain access to a flexible, young labour force and allay the need to integrate the newcomers permanently or pay for their long-term social care; sending countries, such as Poland, gain in remittance and knowledge, without the drawbacks of permanent brain drain or demographic decline.

This is why the UK's policies are so misguided. A clamp-down by the British government on the right of EU citizens to claim benefits for non-resident family members will reduce mobility but create permanent migration: it will not dissuade workers from travelling to the UK but from leaving. After all, these welfare rights were put in place to facilitate mobility, allowing workers to leave their families at home; its removal will encourage family reunification and permanent settlement. London's hints about capping the numbers of EU workers at 75,000 will have a similar effect: the uncertainty will persuade EU citizens currently in the UK to remain permanently, for fear of leaving and not being allowed back.

In opposing such moves, however, Poland it is not standing up for short-term mobility. The UK, together with Austria, the Netherlands and Germany, has shifted the terms of the debate. These governments now refer to the "immigration" of EU workers, and criticise Brussels for pretending that "free movement" is something else. By engaging in this debate, Poland thus finds itself supporting "migration" not "mobility" and bolstering the unsatisfactory status quo. Unlike the UK (where immigration actually stands to make it the pre-eminent European

economy by 2030 and a key player under new EU voting rules which give weight to demographic prowess) Poland really has nothing to gain from creating a European migration regime.

Inter-governmental Relations. This debate on free movement has also been welcomed as the moment in which Central Europe gained its voice, with Poland leading a coalition of new Member States, including its partners in the Visegrad group—the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia—along with Romania and Bulgaria—in favour of EU principles. Again, however, Poland is finding itself pushed into a role not of its choosing: Poland had emerged as a key player in the EU long before this debate, charting a steep rise since its Presidency of the Council in 2011. Yet, this rise relied on two trends which are now being reversed by its role in the debate on free movement.

The first was the replacement of east-west tensions following the 2004 enlargement by a north-south division. Poland's role as a mouthpiece for Central Europe was a means for rapprochement with Germany, providing a common front in efforts to deal with Mediterranean debt issues. Poland has little interest in seeing that reversed, or in having to fight Berlin on behalf of Romania and Bulgaria or even its closest eastern neighbours: after all, the Visegrad group is still less a tool for representing mutual interests than a format allowing a Member State to retain respectability in the EU even if it undergoes a shift to a controversial government. Poland risks becoming its respectable face.

The second factor was the UK's weakness. In the course of the debt crisis, Poland has replaced the UK as Germany's partner of choice. However, the free movement issue is just one of a range of questions among which Poland finds itself at risk of being pitted against a re-emergent British–German tandem. In the run-up to the September Bundestag elections, for instance, Angela Merkel seemed to hint that she was open to repatriating competencies from the EU to the Member States. This echoed similar debates in other "old" Member States, such as the UK and the Netherlands. Moreover, Germany was a co-signatory, along with Austria and the Netherlands, of a British letter about the problems of "EU immigrants."

The irony is, of course, that these issues can only be solved by eastern and western Member States working closely together. Both sets of countries are, after all, bent on the common goal of a flexible European system of mobility and exchange. The UK's creation of an artificial cleavage between east and west is, however, encouraging its western partners to railroad through an agenda unnecessarily prejudicial to both sides. In finding itself emerging as the leader of an eastern coalition, moreover, Poland is unwittingly adding to that cleavage whilst undermining the foundations of its political power in the bloc.

Recommendations. Poles have been understandably angered by the British prime minister's decision to single them out in his speech. Some view it as an example of racism dressed up as principled "Euro-scepticism". Yet, it also reflects a growing awareness in London that many of the issues facing the UK in Europe simply cannot be solved without getting Poland on side.[1] In other words, it is a grudging mark of respect. Yet, whilst closer cooperation with the UK may be a nice aspiration for Poland, the episode shows what will happen if Warsaw does engage: the nature of current British thinking on Europe will push Poland into positions far out of line with its interests.

Better, then, for Warsaw to resolve the free-movement problem without the involvement of the UK, making full use of the opportunities given by the current treaties for common and domestic reform and avoiding Britain's thirst to revisit treaty agreements.

In so doing, Poland needs to give its western partners three core messages: First, all EU states struggle under the current system. Thus it is not a question of being for or against the status quo, but of all working towards a system that functions properly. Second, the goal is to boost "mobility" not "migration." Mobility means encouraging both inward and return flows, whereas efforts to regulate mobility as "migration" are likely to lead to permanent settlement. Third, that the mobile are not poor and helpless, but typically ambitious and wealthy. If they are treated as "benefit tourists," they will become marginalised and unproductive. Recognising their skills would be more beneficial.

Positioning itself in this way, not as the "voice of the East" but as just another European partner facing difficulties with free movement, will be the first step in Poland's efforts to break the coalition of states around the UK and place London in political quarantine. That coalition is already shaky. Berlin, although flattered to be the centre of British attention, is visibly nervous about the UK's expectations that it will deliver concessions. Meanwhile, countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden prefer to think of the UK as a partner to balance Germany, rather than as one that binds them more closely to Europe's largest state.

[1] See PISM bulletins: R. Parkes, A. Sobják: "Reforming the Free Movement of Labour: The Scope for British–Polish Cooperation," *Bulletin PISM*, no. 59 (512), 31 May 2013; and R. Parkes, M. Stormowska, "The UK Criminal Law Opt-out: A Challenging Opportunity for Poland," *Bulletin PISM*, no. 76 (529), 12 July 2013.