

The expat / immigrant debate and double standards in Poland

Living in Poland as a foreigner is not an equal experience for all. There are crucial differences depending on origin, income, language abilities and so on. Some people are economic migrants, who come to work because the living standards in Poland are higher than in their own countries. Others are so-called 'expats', which we could define as high-income migrants or migrants with specialized jobs. There are foreigners who arrive to the country as refugees fleeing war, while others are diplomats representing high ranks of their States. Beyond the reasons to come to Poland, people also have different physical traits, skin color, accents, and ways of living. All these different features add up to create a 'profile', which can result in being treated quite differently by Polish society.

I constantly live this somewhat positive discrimination as a foreign Polish-speaker from a supposedly wealthier country. While being out with other foreign friends from Ukraine or Belarus, I encountered many times the situation in which a Polish person congratulates me for speaking Polish, while totally bypassing the fact that my friends can also speak Polish and are also foreigners. Whenever I remark this, I am usually told *"yes, but they are from Slavic countries, it's different"*. It may make a difference, but I observe a trend in determining the value of foreigners depending on how rich their country of origin is.

For a random Pole, an average Georgian working in Poland came here because he/she can have a better future, because there are more economic possibilities. Poland as a country is somewhat perceived to be 'making this person a favor', and the Georgian should try his/her best to integrate and be thankful. Expats, however, according to the Polish way of thinking, do not need to be here; they are in Poland because they want to. When discussing with my long-time Belarusian friend who lives in Poznan, it turns out that she seldomly gets asked why she chose to live here - the answer seems obvious. Me, I am asked "how come did you come to Poland?" or "why did you learn Polish?" regularly.

I get the feeling that, if I were living in Germany or the USA, I would be perceived differently, as then I would be coming from a poorer country. Catalonia is in the Euro zone, so it's on the 'economic bright side of the world', but still the wages are way lower than in other countries. In Germany, society would probably regard me as another worker from a poorer country who came for obvious reasons: higher salaries. Learning German would be thus something not that much celebrated but rather expected from me. This is probably why I feel that Poles treat me well – after all, my country has higher salaries and good weather, and I took the time and effort to come here and respect their culture, when I didn't need to and was not expected to do so.

In Poland, foreign residents from richer countries are somewhat tolerated even if they do not to integrate and do not to make any efforts to learn the language. The guilt is put on the Polish side *"oh, awful, you caught a taxi and the driver only spoke Polish? They should hire drivers who speak English too!"*. On the other hand, with low-income foreign residents the perception changes and they are supposed to integrate. A person from a rich country can live in Poland for even 10 years and not be able to say *"dzień dobry"* properly, and that is fully accepted: *"Polish is so difficult! But I know a word, Soplica :)"*. However, a person from a poorer country living in Poland for 10 years who did not try to integrate is frowned upon *"so long here and he/she cannot speak the language and hangs out only with fellow Turks!"*.

When studying at university in Wrocław, my professor did not remark specially that I spoke Polish fluently. Once I was in her office and we engaged in informal conversation; she thought that I had some Polish roots, or that my mother was Polish. When she discovered that it was not the case, she started ranting about her husband. She has been married for 10 years to a Scott, they have been living in Poland for 8 years and have a daughter who is 7 years old. Yet, her husband does not speak any Polish and does not make any efforts.

In the same period, I had a discussion with a fellow student. We went to a fast-food restaurant and were served by a foreigner. My colleague commented to me about the city "being already too full of immigrants", to which I answered that I was an immigrant too. He denied, saying that my case was different. And then I made a point. I was studying in Poland totally for free, and moreover receiving *stypendium rektora* (the Rector's scholarship) because of my academic performance. If it were not for me, both my slot at the master's degree and the scholarship would be received by a Polish student. And as an EU citizen, I did not even register that I was living in Poland as the Schengen area is borderless. At the same time, the *immigrant* working at the fast food was most likely a fully legal resident of Poland, paying taxes from his job, from which I was receiving my scholarship and my colleague was having also free education. If there shall be some hate towards a foreigner, I should receive it, and not the worker. My fellow student didn't argue further.

The solutions for the aforementioned problems of double standards in treating foreigners are not complex, but take some time, as the mentality of the whole society will not change overnight. However, some steps should be taken in order to foster the visibility of foreigners living in Poland. Outside of the biggest cities, the ethnic Polish population is more than 98% in the country, due to Second World War, to the newly drawn borders, and to the forced massive demographic changes in the region. Visualizing this % of foreigners and displaying them in mainstream media can lead to a wider acceptance and normalization among society.

More tools for local integration should also be granted for foreigners, and spaces for meetings between the local community and new arrivals should be created. In Rzeszów, for example, there is the project Open Café, in which each week locals and foreigners of any age come together to have a debate. This event is organized by a local NGO, in a space provided by the municipality, and allows people from Rzeszów and foreigners to meet. The event, however, is held in English.

On the other hand, Polish society shall not demand, but strongly encourage, a certain degree of integration to the local culture. When the foreigner comes from a high-income country, it is normal for them to work in English, hang out with English-speaking friends and try to live a life 100% in English in Poland, even when staying here for 5 years. Many Polish are ashamed of not being so proficient in English and would criticize a waiter for not understanding the order in English, while they will never turn to their foreign acquaintances and say "hey, maybe you should make the effort to learn how to communicate". However, if the waiter is from a low-income country and does not fully understand Polish, this is likely to be criticized. There should be an awareness of this double standard and the way to treat foreigners should not depend on which country are they coming from and how rich it is.