The Poles’ adaptive strategies in Iceland during the 2008-2010 financial crisis

Until October 2008, the news from Iceland that could be found in the Polish press were quite few and far between. They appeared in the context of the ‘economic miracle’, which had occurred in recent years on this island. After 2006, they were also related to the opening of the Icelandic labour market to Poles, which resulted in the settlement of more than ten thousand Polish expatriates. Until Autumn 2008, Iceland was described as a paradise on Earth, a prosperous country with a very high standard of living. The situation changed in October 2008. Since then, there has been much more news from Iceland in the global media and it has been dominated by the Icelandic economic crisis. Information as to how the Poles cope on the ever more difficult Icelandic labour market have also appeared in Poland.

The article addresses the sources and stages of the Icelandic crisis, and, on the basis of sociological research, describes the adaptive strategies of the Polish expatriates at that time. These strategies are different and depend on the cultural and linguistic competences of the immigrants, their vocational background, and, primarily, on the motivation to emigrate and their plans for the future. In general, despite the fact that the rate of unemployment is higher among them than among the Icelanders, the Poles in Iceland cope quite well. Paradoxically, many of them have been less affected by the economic collapse than the native population, mainly because of their very traditional economic behaviour.

Adaptive strategies during an economic crisis in the receiving country may serve as an indicator as to what degree an immigrant gets to grips with a strange social environment and a strange labour market. The crisis causes almost everyone to cope less well; it is, however, the immigrants whom it hits most painfully, resulting in strong competition for work, the reduction of various state subsidies, including immigrant assistance programmes, and in the majority of the host population, who had accepted them earlier, beginning to adopt a visibly less friendly attitude. What do the immigrants in such a situation? Do they return to their mother country? Move elsewhere? Do they attempt to survive on benefits or on welfare? Do they cope, but with difficulty? Or do they, perhaps, manage quite well? Do they share the same problems as the majority, or are immigrants’ problems in a crisis quite different and specific to the expatriate community only? The article describes the Icelandic crisis and presents an analysis of the adaptive strategies of the Polish immigrants during the financial collapse on the island.