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Projects of National Identities in Times of Crisis: The Case of Polish Diaspora Organizations in Great Britain[1]

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ABSTRACT: Did diaspora organizations in Great Britain (GB) change their projects of national identities after Brexit? This exploratory study answers this question through the analysis of the results of a qualitative fieldwork conducted in GB and the Republic of Ireland in 2023 which included interviewing 20 members of Polish diaspora organizations. This study shows that the impact of the polycrisis, with an emphasis on Brexit, resulted in diaspora organizations changing their national identity projects as they have been becoming much more involved in the participation in international community and engaged in international outreach within GB. The extent of this change differed, however, depends on the migration wave specific diaspora community is rooted in. This result of Brexit exacerbated by other crises does not only refer to members of Polish diaspora as other EU nationals in GB have been increasingly functioning according to the inner-logic of internationalization within GB.

KEYWORDS: crisis, diaspora, migration, national identity, Poland

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1. Introduction

The interconnection of multiple crises – climate change, post-2008 economic recession, as well as the consequences of Brexit and COVID-19 pandemic – resulted in a multifaceted instability within the European

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Union (EU) (Bieler and Maccarrone 2025). This polycrisis (Tooze 2022) impelled civil society actors, politicians and state institutions to reevaluate existing definitions of national belonging (Woods et al. 2020; Ariely 2024) as these notions delineate what is politically and ideationally possible (Brubaker 2005, 2011). Did this reevaluation result in these actors changing their definitions of national belonging or just applying the already existing ones in altered circumstances? I investigate this problem by focusing on the activities of diaspora organizations. Since immigrant and minority groups faced very important changes as a result of the above-mentioned crises, diaspora organizations provide an ideal site to observe said reevaluation. I base my conclusions on the results of a qualitative fieldwork conducted in Great Britain (GB)[2] and the Republic of Ireland (Ireland) in 2023. This fieldwork investigated how different types of Polish diaspora organizations reacted to the polycrisis with an emphasis on the potential changes in their modes and character of activities (Chong and Druckman 2007).

I focus on Polish diaspora organizations in GB, but use also material gathered during the fieldwork in Ireland to flesh out the effects of Brexit, which otherwise would be difficult to disentangle from other accompanying crises. I therefore treat other crises as accompanying processes. I study Polish diaspora organizations in GB and Ireland because shortly after Brexit had taken place in practice (January 31 2020) people of Polish nationality constituted the biggest migrant group on both these territories (Office for National Statistics 2021; Central Statistics Office 2022).[3] What is more, the size of Polish diaspora – estimated at over 20 000 000 members (Statistics Poland and Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025) – makes it a potentially relevant political and economic actor in host countries as well as Poland itself, where the diaspora's influence is felt through long-distance nationalism engagement of its members (Anderson 1992, 1998), return migration (Dzięglewski 2020) and participation in international social and political movements (Köngeter and Smith 2015).

The secondary context of my analysis is the post-Brexit reversal of the migration direction, i.e. the drop in the number of EU migrants in the UK in general and Polish migrants in particular (Fernández-Reino and Brindle 2025, 5-6) which put diaspora organizations in a new situation. The phenomenon of pre and post-Brexit return migration from the UK has been analyzed from the point of view of individual narratives (Dzięglewski 2020; Grabowska and Ryan 2024) and labor market mobility (Cusimano, Donegani and McKay 2025) leaving aside the way in which this process changed the role and characteristics of diaspora organizations. The present study is an exploratory analysis aiming to expand the literature in this novel direction.

Building on the main problem stated in the first paragraph of this section, I ask the question: *Did Brexit change the mode of activities of Polish diaspora organizations in Great Britain*? I follow the traditional literature on diaspora by foregrounding the legal framework and political context of the host country, as well as policies of the country of origin *vis-à-vis* its diaspora, as primary factors shaping diaspora activities (Nowosielski and Dzięglewski 2021). The second emerging current of studies I refer to emphasizes the international diaspora context in the host country as a primary source and direction of organizational change. In the case of Polish diaspora in the UK this international context is the EU diaspora community (Vathi and Trandafoiu 2022). Furthermore, I specify the heterogeneity of Polish diaspora in the UK as a qualifying factor as it is rooted in three different, although sometimes overlapping, organizational communities: independence emigration, post-EU-accession (May 1, 2004) migration, and Brexit migration (those who arrived shortly before and

[2] Since I did not conduct any research in the Northern Ireland, I use the term "Great Britain" in the title. In many places in the article I also refer to "the UK," especially when I write about policies and other research which usually relate to the United Kingdom as a whole.

[3] Three most numerous non-British nationalities in the UK according to the July 2020-June 2021 Annual Population Survey: Polish (696 000), Irish (370 000) and Indian (370 000) (Office for National Statistics 2021); three most numerous non-Irish populations "usually resident and present" in the Republic of Ireland by citizenship according to the Census 2022 Results: Polish (930 680), British (including Northern Ireland) (830 347) and Indian (450 449) (Central Statistics Office 2022).

after 2020) (Dunin-Wąsowicz 2020). I interviewed 20 Poles and people of Polish origin pertaining to organizations associated with these different communities: social and cultural organizations (first group), Polish Saturday schools and cultural organizations (second group) and student associations (third group). All interviewees played important roles in their respective organizations. The focus on prominent organizers was purposeful, as they experienced limitations and changes in the field of diaspora organizations and had to react to them.

This study confirmed the separation of diaspora communities into three said groups. I show how this division informs the character and repertoire of activities of the respective organizations these communities belong to. It also determines if and to what extent the consequences of Brexit changed these organizations. I find that the changes in the British legal framework *vis-à-vis* immigrants from the EU and the multinational environment within the UK has been incentivizing Polish diaspora organizations, those whose members belong to the post-accession community and especially the post-Brexit group, to include activities that go beyond maintaining national identity and traditions (e.g. promoting the help for Ukraine after its full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation). Brexit, which effectively curbed a common EU basis of market access and integration, limited this scope of international integration and anchored the multiple national diasporas much more firmly in the UK. Hence diaspora organizations have to orient themselves much more according to the internal pressures within their host country as the possibility of being in-between through the EU no longer exists. At the same time, I find that Poland's diaspora-related policies did not determine the direction of these changes, as their influence is still limited.

In the following sections of this article I discuss concepts used in the analysis as well as the current state of research on diaspora and diaspora organizations in the UK and Ireland, with an emphasis on Polish organizations. I then present the data gathered during the fieldwork and elaborate on the methods applied in the research. The penultimate section is dedicated to the analysis of the gathered material in connection with the below theoretical section.

2. Theoretical Foundations and the State of Research

This section introduces primary concepts used in the article and contextualizes its main question ("Did Brexit change the mode of activities of Polish diaspora organizations in Great Britain?"). I provide in it a theoretical framework as well as a historical background on Polish diaspora in the UK and Ireland. I pose three sub-questions referring to organizational activity post-Brexit: 1) what is the role of Poland's diaspora policies in shaping the activities of Polish diaspora organizations in GB? 2) what is the role of the UK legal framework in shaping activities of Polish diaspora organizations in GB? and 3) what is the role of the EU diaspora community in GB in shaping the activities of Polish diaspora organizations? My primary assumption is that the role of diaspora organizations in the face of Brexit can be twofold: activities conducted by these organizations for years can acquire new meanings and functions, or there can be a change in the types or modes of activities in order for them to fit the new political and social context brought by the consequences of Brexit. The following subsections justify the research expectations with respect to the heterogeneity of Polish diaspora (2.1), influence of Poland on its diaspora (2.2), as well as the importance of the UK legal framework and emerging EU diaspora within it (2.3).

2.1 Traditional Definition of Diaspora and Contexts of Research on Polish Diaspora Organizations

The term "diaspora" is traditionally defined as a community characterized by: 1) dispersion beyond the borders of its country of origin, 2) interest in the homeland affairs and 3) certain separation from its host society (Brubaker 2005). In academic and lay discussions on its Polish realization, the term is often replaced by the term "Polonia." Diaspora studies traditionally pertain to three research fields: international relations, migration and nationalism (Gamlen 2014) which also includes works on long-distance nationalism (Anderson 1992, 1998, 2006; Walicki 1998; Gellner 1997). Studying diaspora, therefore, provides multiple perspectives on how a national identity project (Billig 1995; Edensor 2004) can be shaped and proposed in different, including organizational, contexts (Van Gorp and Smets 2015). The existence of multiple models of how to be a member of a particular nation can, therefore, be observed in the diverse activities and symbolic actions of diaspora organizations. These models, therefore, are situational and depend on a social context such as local identity (Kurczewska 2003) and types of organizations one pertains to (Billig 1995; Edensor 2004).

Apart from national identity dimension, the organizational sphere of diaspora community brings with itself also the context of economic development as defined by the European Commission, which recognizes diasporas within the EU as policy actors provided that they have organizational representation which then can be approached via e.g. grant schemes (Weinar 2010). The existing literature already provides potential areas of influence for diaspora organizations on the labor market where many Polish post-accession migrants to the UK and Ireland faced a number of challenges such as maintaining their occupational prestige (Voitchovsky 2014; Domański et al. 2018; Jarosz and Gugushvili 2020) from their origin country.

Diaspora organizations, therefore, provide through their various activities – e.g. organized events or prolonged actions – ways of belonging to both countries and nations of reference, as well as help shaping the state of being "in-between" (Pollard et al. 2008). I assume, however, that diaspora as such and the organizational field belonging to it is not homogenous. I, therefore, explicitly treat Polish diaspora in the UK as a diversified population whose constitutive groups are differently affected by national and global factors and, therefore, react to them differently. In this way my perspective resembles theoretical approaches present in political economy emphasizing that globalization-related labor market transformations affect social groups differently depending, e.g., on their education level and, often directly related, occupation (Rehm 2011). Such a division in the face of Brexit was very explicit in, e.g., the way in which academic community's interest was present in the public sphere – its members intervened in order to mitigate the consequences of severing ties between the UK and EU with respect to financing schemes (Cañizares et al. 2022) constituting in this way an organizational representation of an international community in the UK. This process of organizational engagement in the face of Brexit results in this article's assumption that if there is a political or legal change in the host country *vis-à-vis* immigrants or minority populations, diaspora organizations will be faced with a challenge to modify their activities to adjust to this new situation. These activities will inevitably have not just an economic, but also an identity dimension related to national belonging, even if organizational activities in question do not explicitly focus on identity. Brexit, therefore, had the potential to make diaspora organizations reevaluate their main goals which, when presented on a theoretical spectrum, range from the integration of its members with British society to helping them maintain a separate national identity within the UK.

The composition of Polish diaspora is, however, different in the UK and Ireland. In contrast to Ireland, where there is one dominant post-EU accession migration wave from Poland, in the UK there were two major waves which pertain to three organizational communities. The first wave is often called, also by its participants, the "independence emigration" (Nowosielski and Dzięglewski 2021, p. 175). This group came to the UK during and shortly after the Second World War and established *inter alia* the Polish Union (*Zjednoczenie Polskie*) – an umbrella organization – and Polish POW and Veterans' Association (*Stowarzyszenie Polskich*

Kombatantów) (Stachura 1997; Dunin-Wąsowicz 2022). These and other organizations created by the independence emigration acted as a continuation of the traditions of Polish interwar state standing as a result in the opposition to the post-Second World War Soviet-dependent People's Poland and have been commemorating events and important figures from Polish history (Nowosielski and Dzięglewski 2021, 57-59). These post-Second World War organizations incorporated also many Poles that arrived in the UK until the dissolution of the People's Poland regime in 1989. Similarly to the Poles that came with the first mass migration, many of them also left Poland due to the political situation.

The lifting of visa requirements in 1992 resulted in an increase of economic migration from Poland but calling this period lasting until the accession to the EU a "wave" is questionable. Undeniable, however, is the existence of a second, post-accession wave whose participants have been functioning in a much more transnational space between Poland and the UK (Pollard et al. 2008; Garapich 2008). Following the underlying logic of rootedness in the UK as the basis for the division into three organizational communities, I divided this wave into two parts. This division is based on the rootedness of members of Polish diaspora in the UK: whereas most members of independence emigration have British citizenships, students who came around the time of Brexit have to follow strict British migration rules in order to stay in the UK after their graduation. I assume that the group that arrived after the accession and before Brexit is situated in-between with respect to their rootedness. I also assume that the implications of Brexit, exacerbated by the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic, made it more difficult to maintain the transnational position for the post-accession migration but especially for those who arrived after 2020 (Klimavičiūtė et al. 2020; Jancewicz et al. 2020). The 3.2 subsection investigates the validity of dividing Polish diaspora in the UK into these three organizational communities.

2.2 Poland's Diaspora Policies as an Organizational Context

The Polish state, through its diaspora policies, has been since 1989 actively engaging with Polonia in the East and West. The potential political benefits from this process were more explicitly acknowledged by Polish politicians only in the beginning of the 21st century. Since then, an increasing number of grant competitions and state policies have been aiming at establishing stable ties with Poles and people of Polish origin living abroad (Nowosielski and Dzięglewski 2021). The size of Polish diaspora is indeed significant and has grown in numbers in the 20th and 21st centuries as a result of border changes, deportations or emigration. For example, many citizens of the Second Republic of Poland which ceased to exist as an independent state in 1939, found themselves outside Polish borders often because borders themselves had changed (they found themselves mostly in Lithuania and Ukraine) or due to deportations taking place during the Second World War (usually to Kazakhstan). The diaspora in the East, however, is smaller from the one in the West, which grew by and large as a result of emigration from Poland: the biggest number of Poles and people of Polish origin reside in the US (around 10 000 000), Germany and Brazil (at least 1 500 000 in each country). I focus in this article on diasporas in the UK and Ireland which are mostly a result of post-EU accession migration.

One of the main goals of this article is to determine whether Poland's policies impact the direction of changes of organizational activities of Polish diaspora in the UK post-Brexit. From this point of view, the recent changes to state institutions in Poland, especially those responsible for culture, education and foreign affairs, are particularly important, as these ministries mold the symbolic repertoire available in the public sphere through e.g. grant competitions and media campaigns. They can also change the place and context the origin country occupies on the international scene – the shift from a liberal pro-EU political discourse to a sovereigntist one (Kotwas and Kubik 2022), which took place in Poland after 2015, could have changed the requirements for diaspora organizations that wanted to receive financing from Poland. Indeed, the PiS-led (Law and Justice) right-wing coalition (2015–2023) changed many underlying principles of Poland's diaspora

policies in comparison to the former centrist-liberal PO-PSL (Civic Platform – Polish Peoples' Party) government (2007–2015). The right-wing government, e.g., put an emphasis on supporting conservative organizations in host countries, as well as conservative non-governmental organizations based in Poland responsible for distributing state grants, as part of a wider change in the state policy toward civil society organizations in general (Ślarzyński 2022). While during the second term of PO-PSL government (2011-2015) the emphasis was put on how Polish diaspora in the West could benefit Poland, the PiS-led governments focused on diaspora policies that would support maintaining Polish culture, identity and language among Polonia members. In this way, the Polish diaspora was also supposed to help pursue Poland's politics of memory (Nowosielski and Dzięglewski 2021, 212-221). According to works dedicated to the role of Poland's diaspora-related policies, however, their influence is not significant as it is dependent on the limited geographical reach of Poland's cultural and diplomatic institutions (mostly Polish Embassy and the Polish Cultural Institute in London) (Dunin-Wąsowicz 2020, 68-69). This study in section 3.3 tests this claim by determining whether conservative policy direction shift of PiS government (2015-2023), during which all the interviews were conducted, interacted with the Brexit-related uncertainty resulting in a specific direction of organizational change toward engagement in conservative politics of memory.

2.3 The UK as a Primary Context? The Host Society and the Internationalization of National Diasporas

Ireland does not have an overarching legal scheme that would constitute a framework for immigration policies. The country, however, maintains a multicultural society with an emphasis on the integration of immigrants and their civic participation. For this reason, Ireland has a thorough anti-discrimination legal framework. The implementation of these anti-discriminatory policies usually falls on local governments, however, which often results in closer ties between them and diaspora organizations (Dzięglewski 2019; Lopez Rodriguez 2022).

Similarly to Ireland, the UK does not have a consequent immigration policy. Newcomers, in the same manner as British citizens, are covered by anti-discriminatory and integration policies supplemented by laissez-faire policies aiming at maintaining a non-discriminatory access to the labor market. The obligation to observe these laws is delegated to the local level of administration. The resulting "informal system" is an outcome of the imperial past and the division into, currently, four constituent countries: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Dunin-Wąsowicz 2020). Indeed, the separation between the first Polish migration group and two post-accession ones results not only from the differentiation within the diaspora itself (along class, wealth and generation), but also from the characteristics of the decentralized system of migrant integration combined with the availability of funds within the UK. The influence of this decentralized system of anti-discriminatory and integration policies of the UK on the character of Polish diaspora organizations is regarded as decisive and is visible in their fragmentation and local character of their social engagement (Dunin-Wąsowicz 2020, 71).

A counter to this traditional perspective, which weighs the influence of host and origin countries on diaspora, questions the need for traditionally conceived elements of a diaspora, such as the reference to the homeland as a factor that imposes the limits delineating what is politically and ideationally possible (Brubaker 2005). The implication of such perspective is a stronger emphasis on the host country, its political and social contexts, as sources of the projects of belonging within diaspora. This perspective is especially visible in recent works on Brexit and its consequences for EU nationals residing in the UK: the common experience of instability and uncertainty revealed political mobilization within EU diaspora based on a common "European-wide consciousness" (Vathi and Trandafoiu 2022). This political engagement of EU diaspora constituency resulted, e.g., in establishing the3million, an advocacy group, officially representing the rights of EU citizens residing in the

UK (the3million). This organizational initiative was a reaction to the "unsettling" (Pustulka et al. 2025) consequences of Brexit which include, apart from the change in British legal framework, an economic slowdown (Bloom et al. 2025) which together resulted in a rapid change on the British labor market for many migrant communities. This change affected especially EU citizens whose population started to decrease after post-Brexit immigration system had been introduced (Fernández-Reino and Brindle 2025).

While the studies on the multinational potential of diasporas have been developing in the broader literature, the traditional perspective has been dominant with respect to the studies of Polish diaspora in the UK. One of the main goals of this article is to explore the extent to which Polish diaspora is functioning in the European international context within the UK. The section 3.3 focuses on the problem investigating if the local character of organizational engagement of Polish diaspora organizations resulting from the host country characteristics changed as a result of Brexit. That section also focuses on the phenomenon of internationalization of diasporas in the UK as this problem is closely connected with the legal changes *vis-à-vis* immigration.

3. Analysis and Interpretation of the Data

3.1 Data and Methods

This article is based on a fieldwork conducted in England, Scotland and Ireland in 2023. These three countries are, on the one hand, historically very close, while on the other have been diverging in significant ways. Most important from the perspective of migration and minority policies is the fact that the UK exited the EU whereas Ireland is still its member. Similarities between their migration-related legal frameworks have already been discussed in this article. They also include the experience and consequences of COVID-19 pandemic and the 2008 economic crisis, as well as the response to the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on February 24 2022 which resulted in the arrival of 242 000 of Ukrainian refugees in the UK and 107 000 in Ireland (Cuibus et al. 2024, 13).

My analysis is mostly based on interview material gathered during the fieldwork. I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with Poles and people of Polish origin involved in the activities of different Polish diaspora organizations. All interviews were conducted in Polish. All excerpts of the interviews used in this article were translated into English by its author. Interviewees were selected on the basis of organizations they are or were active in. The perspective of participants in these organizations and activities was, therefore, twofold: they were active organizers and participants.

I conducted seven interviews with Polish students active in Polish student associations (in England and Scotland), five people active in Polish Saturday schools (in England, Scotland and Ireland) and eight in different types of social organizations (Polish cultural organizations and aid organizations). Due to the fact that interviewees were involved in many activities, not all interviews were conducted in person: six had to be scheduled online. Interviews in many ways resembled expert interviews as most respondents have been active in many organizations and the interviews focused more on their opinions about the ways in which Polish diaspora organizations conduct their activities and the reasons for these organizational choices, than interviewees' biographies. The respondents, however, were inevitably connecting activities and characteristics of organizations they were active in with their own experiences. This interview design was purposefully applied in order to achieve a full appreciation of the institutional arrangement of the organizational field of Polish diaspora organizations, a knowledge that would be difficult to gain through, e.g., surveys.

All interviews were transcribed, anonymized and archived (Ślarzyński 2023). All respondents signed consent forms agreeing to recording, processing and archiving anonymized transcriptions of their interviews. Interviews were supplemented with various documents and information made available by Polish diaspora

organizations on their websites. In order to keep the highest degree of anonymity, I do not use any names or specific locations of organizations in this article. I, however, use terms referring to their types ("Polish Saturday schools," "student organizations" etc.) and countries they were active in. Citations at the end of each excerpt (e.g. "*Anglia_1_ORG_ST*") correspond to the names these interviews have in the archived collection.

3.2 The Character of Separation between Three Polish Diaspora Communities in GB

The literature on Polish diaspora is very explicit about the separation of organizations associating pre- and post-accession migrants (Dunin-Wąsowicz 2020). This claim was confirmed in the interviews conducted for this article with a caveat that we can single out the third group, i.e. the post-Brexit migrants. One of the main contexts of this differentiation between the three communities is the perspective of staying in the UK. The following quote comes from an interview with a member of student organizations who also had the experience of working in organizations pertaining to the independence emigration community:

> It seems to me that there are different types of organizations. (...) I think there's a Polish diaspora here, living here, and it's more around the [Polish] Hearth or POSK (…) I work in a group called Political_Organization#1, which is more focused on Poles who have already settled in the UK. Besides that, I'm also involved in Polish_Student_Organization_in_GB#1, Polish_Student_Organization_in_GB#2, and a conference called Polish_Foundation_in_GB#1. And these are typical student conferences, and I think these aren't necessarily people who are typical Polish diaspora members who have settled here, but rather people who are thinking about returning to Poland, so I would call them a "student group who have moved abroad." But there's also a group of a typical Polish diaspora who have lived here for a while. When I worked for a newspaper that covered issues for the Polish diaspora settled in the UK for a long time, the topics were a bit different from those we cover at these conferences, because I think there's an idea there that people are at least thinking about returning to Poland. So there are two groups: one who has already settled here, the permanent Polish diaspora, and the other, a group of students who have emigrated. *Anglia_1_ORG_ST*

The criterion of the willingness to come back to Poland is, therefore, used as a basic way of dividing diaspora into groups or, as the interviewee explains it, dividing migrants into groups that can be called "diaspora" and those that should be regarded as "migrants."

If we look through the eyes of a member of the independence emigration, the division into groups is similar although the criterion of the readiness to come back to Poland is implicit. The following quote comes from a Pole who came to the UK in 1981 and has the experience of taking part in independence emigration organizations:

> Generational change. 1981, because back then, people came here just before the martial law and stayed. It was a wave, but not a huge one. But they were educated people, mostly young, just graduated, students, or people who were politically inconvenient in Poland, so it was a rather dynamic group of people. And they tried to get involved; it was one wave. And then there was a second wave, I think. They came there in the 1990s, they kept coming. It was much smaller, but the biggest wave was in 2004, after joining the European Union. But those Poles who came weren't particularly interested in life here. So they didn't get involved, there were some minor exceptions, but those who did arrive in 1981, yes, they were interested, they got involved. Because it was largely a patriotic emigration. Not everyone, but... So there were some changes back then, but this was due, on the one hand, to a generational shift among those who arrived, were born, and so they passed on the baton. (...) *Anglia_10_ORG_SPOŁ*

In this quote the difference between the independence emigration and the post-accession wave consists in the lack of "interest" in life in the UK which resulted in the lack of the latter's involvement in the associational life. This difference is politically rooted as the pre-1989 Polish migration to the UK had underlying political character as many of its participants were in the Polish army during the Second World War or had been in anti-communist organizations throughout the 1970s or 1980s. This interviewee also confirms that the practice of counting the two migration groups that came until 1989 together is valid from the point of view of organizational continuity ("so they passed on the baton").

There is, however, also a separation between the post-accession and post-Brexit group. It is often legally determined. The students are the group for whom Brexit was the most impactful event. This statement refers to both actual and prospective students. For most students from the latter category, studying in the UK became too expensive. In 2020/2021 fees for students arriving from the EU risen to the range between £11,400-£38,000 while before Brexit the annual tuitions varied from £0 in Scotland to £9,250 in England. In addition, prospective EU students without at least a pre-settled status were not legally allowed to access student loans. This resulted in the number of EU students falling by over 50% in comparison to the pre-Brexit period (Guardian 2023). Many students who planned to stay in the UK after graduating had to, therefore, reconsider their situation. It did not necessarily mean a return migration but the continuation of studies in a different Western European country (*Anglia_1_ORG_ST*; *Anglia_12_ORG_ST*).

Connected to this uncertain rootedness in the UK is the character of events that Polish student organizations take part in. All students and former students I interviewed during the fieldwork were born in Poland and came to the UK in order to study. None of them had family roots in the UK. Their goal was to come to the UK for a few years and then either come back to Poland, try to find a job in the UK, most desirably in London or try to find a job or further studies in another European country. Due to the fact that studying is time consuming, they usually did not take part in other organizations.

Student associations are organizations established by specific universities, some of them many decades ago (e.g. Oxford University Polish Society was first established in 1955). Students take part in the activities of student associations for different reasons. Their goal can be to have a "Small Poland" in the place where they are at the moment: these associations make it e.g. possible to celebrate different national holidays together with other Polish people. These associations also have ties to international consulting companies which organize events and invite students especially from prestigious universities or faculties (*Anglia_2_ORG_ST*). These student associations in this way play the role of networking organizations. These networks do not reach only London, but also Poland, especially Warsaw where many international consulting firms have their branches. In this way, Polish student associations help Polish students advance their career goals without a specified country direction. They, therefore, help to maintain the state of being in-between by providing "Small Poland" abroad but also facilitating return migration, as well as finding a job in the UK or other European country:

> When I think about returning to Poland, I think in the perspective of 15-20 years. If I start my career, e.g. in an international institution, and then, through some of my network, I manage to get a job offer of a sufficiently high level, e.g. in a ministry, I may consider returning and bring experience and try to work in Poland. I feel a bond with Poland, it is not that I am indifferent. Everything else being equal, *ceteris paribus*, as we say as economists, I would prefer to be in Poland. *Anglia_2_ORG_ST*

In comparison to students, the post-accession group did not face fundamental decisions as a result of Brexit although some complications, also due to the COVID-19 restrictions, made Polish associational life more difficult:

> Yes, both Brexit and COVID all overlapped. There were actually some movements there somewhere. And even our teachers came to Poland. And you could feel that the returns were huge. It stopped. We have not felt this way at all for a year now, but within two years we could feel it. The pandemic reduced our school load and there was a question mark as to whether we would survive. We are quite a young school. However, somewhere out there I think that we exist in the Polish community here, in City_in_Scotland#1 and that we are heard. There are also changes in the activities of schools and school-related associations. (…) absolutely, it is worse after Brexit (...). In the sense that, for example, there are problems (…) when it comes to shipments, yes, about various types of materials. Apart from the costs, such as customs duties and so on, you simply have to wait for weeks for shipments. *Szkocja_1_ORG_SZKPL*

The problems with shipments were also listed by Saturday school directors in England (*Anglia_4_ORG_SZKPL*).

While for students, participating in the organizational activities, as well as events under the auspices of student organizations can expand networks and career perspectives, i.e. facilitate upward mobility, other organizations can make it possible for migrants to maintain their occupational prestige (Domański et al. 2018) from Poland. The problem of the lowering of occupational status was very widespread after 2004 when mass migration from Poland to the UK (Jarosz and Gugushvili 2020) and Ireland (Voitchovsky 2014) started taking place. There were many immigrants with higher education who had to get jobs below their qualifications because of either lack of a similar occupation or the lack of specific credentials. Even working below one's qualifications usually brought salary increase in comparison to Poland, however.

An example of organizations that can help maintain one's job are Polish Saturday (or weekend) schools in UK and Ireland which can provide those who worked as teachers back in Poland with an opportunity to use their skills learned and practiced in their country of origin. In this way, even though teaching in Saturday school is usually not a main source of income, it helps to maintain the status of a teacher and the ability to use a higher education diploma abroad, an opportunity that would have been difficult to take advantage of without said organizations.

Other types of organizations providing opportunities to transfer and develop skills acquired in Poland were various help-organizations pertaining to Polish diaspora. In Ireland, due to the fact the character of such organizations much more often involves not only Poles but also Irish and other nationalities, working in them can serve as the first foreign experience which can then be used on the job market in the host country:

> (…) That is, in the case of Polonia_Organization_in_Ireland#3, due to its largely aid character, the permanent volunteers who ran this organization were often people who had received specialized education in Poland, i.e. they were either psychologists, social workers, or teachers and found themselves in Ireland and performed jobs often, not always, but often below their qualifications and who wanted to return to the professional labor market in Ireland. And one, I am not saying the only one, but one of the motivations was charity work, which would give me some skills, some experience, some contacts in professional work, which could then become a stepping stone to a gainful employment. Anyway, what happened was that as Polonia_Organization_in_Ireland#3 developed as an organization and we started to obtain grants, we were also in a position to employ people. (…) at the beginning, when I started working there, it was strictly voluntary. However, over time, it also started hiring employees. So it was interesting for many Poles because it allowed them to earn some very modest money, but still doing things of a more professional nature. So it would be like one path. People who wanted to return or enter the Irish labor market, professional and aid, treated volunteering at Polonia_Agency_in_Ireland#3 as a way to do so. *Irlandia_4_ORG_SPOŁ*

This division into three organizational communities which can provide different opportunities and contextualizes the experience of Brexit, will be used as a qualification in the following two sections which focus on the importance of Poland and the UK.

3.3 The Limited Reach of Poland's Diaspora Policies

My interviews confirmed the results of recent studies: the influence of policies of the Polish state *vis-à-vis* Polish diaspora is marginal and does not significantly impact the functioning of its organizational life in the UK. Brexit-related crisis did not change this state. Visible, however, is a difference between three diaspora communities mentioned above. For the post-accession migration whose organizations often focus on practical issues like teaching Polish language and culture in the UK, the main expectation from the Polish state is occasional assistance with organizational matters. The Polish state, however, appears uninterested in meeting such needs, possibly due to the lack of capacity in the face of the big number of Polish diaspora organizations in the UK:

> (…) it looks like they only want to get involved right before elections, rather than all year round. To give an example: through my dealings with the Ministry of National Defence, we have often asked for just one or two simple tents for the Polish scouts—we have a scout troop here in our local area. Yet, it proved impossible to secure two scout tents. When you consider this—regardless of anyone's political views—and look at where money is spent, the fact that they cannot allocate, say, 3000 or 5000 zlotys for tents for a Polish community in the UK... well, it doesn't sit well with those of us living here. *Anglia_3_ORG_SZKPL*

This situation looks differently for the independence migration who are associated in established organizations with a long history of relationship with the Polish state. As a result, for members of this group the financial support of the Polish state institutions is more visible, although it does not constitute a basis for diaspora organizational activity:

> Well, in recent years, the embassy has become much more active; it provides support—or events and commemorations are held under its patronage—so they are certainly trying to get a bit more involved. *Anglia_10_ORG_SPOŁ*

One cannot, however, say that Brexit precipitated this increased involvement of the Polish state – it is rather the result of changing diaspora policies in Poland. While, however, the institutional influence of Poland's diaspora policies is not directly palpable in the UK, the closing gap between Poland and the UK *vis-à-vis* life quality has become an important criterion impacting not only the decision to return to Poland but to leave Poland at all:

> Yes, people have changed a lot. This is very visible in Poland. I have a sister who is 13 years younger than me. (…) my younger sister grew up in a completely different family. She has rich parents, we had poor parents. She grew up in the West, we grew up in Poland, which had barely emerged from communism, etc. So there is this big difference and the generation born around 2000 and after – they are much more knowledgeable. This is also a cool scene: I was riding on a bus here, I am sitting on the bus at the bus stop, some people are at the bus stop, some English teenagers come in and are planning what they will do after graduation. Maybe they will take a gap year here, this one will take these studies, this one will go here, there are cheap apartments here. And very much, I do not want to say materialistically, but she was very down to earth, planning her future, and I went to study in City_in_Poland#1 because that is where my classmates went. Besides, City_in_Poland#1 is nice. If you talk to my

> generation, we largely were not able to rationally think about what we wanted to do, it was just much more… Just like those children who are now sent to better schools and kindergartens, our parents, they sent me to a better primary school in the housing estate, because there were two primary schools in the Gierek housing estate. But it is not about taking your children somewhere by car, it is about the generation difference. My younger sister is much more of a child of prosperity, a child of the West. She is not impressed by the West itself because she was raised in the West. *Anglia_8_ORG_SPOŁ*

In this way the Poland's economic success can overshadow any policy changes introduced by consecutive incumbents.

3.4 Internationalization as an Emerging Direction of Polish Diaspora in the UK

In the interviews conducted during the fieldwork, there were clear indications that Polish diaspora organizations have been focusing more on activities involving people from other national communities, taking part in events introducing their members to a wider international community, as well as focusing on actions that would make Polish diaspora more visible in the UK through its participation in globally relevant actions. In this way, these findings support the claim on the emergence of international diaspora in the UK already discussed in this article. There are, however, two caveats. On the one hand, the heterogeneity of Polish diaspora impacts the abovementioned change: whereas the organizations associating post-accession migrants, with an emphasis in the post-Brexit group, go beyond the sole focus on celebrating Polish national identity, the independence emigration organizations tend to stay within their traditional modes of activities. On the other hand, as it will be presented in this section, the localized character of British legal system results in Polish diaspora organizations involving groups living in a specific town or other local unit, no matter whether they originate from the EU or not.

The process of internationalization of Polish diaspora can, therefore, function at the intersection of local community organizing and Brexit-related return migration. The following quote illustrates this point. It comes from a chairman of a social organization who talks about the fact that the falling number of Polish students attending a university placed in their town resulted in their organization involving people belonging to other national communities living in the area:

> - It's bound to shrink drastically year by year. I don't know the exact figures for this year yet—there were around 250 Polish students a year or two ago—but let's face it, that number is going to drop to maybe 20, 30, or 40 people at most; we certainly shouldn't expect 250 Polish students anymore, right?
> - (interviewer) Yeah, exactly. So, the events will likely become even more international in nature.
> - I certainly hope we'll finally get started. *Anglia_13_ORG_SPOŁ*

The fact that the population of Poles in the town the interviewee lives in is falling, results in the inclusion of other nationals in the activities of the Polish diaspora organization. In the situation in question this group is not only limited to EU citizens as people living in the area are also, e.g., from Asian countries (*Anglia_13_ORG_SPOŁ*).

Student organizations' focus on networking has already been mentioned in this article. The networks acquired through participation in Polish student associations are in this situation of uncertainty very helpful as they make it possible for their members to be open to other opportunities as wider contacts can open new employment possibilities and not necessarily in the UK. Some of the student interviewees were fully aware of it, especially in the face of visa limitations post-Brexit (*Anglia_1_ORG_ST*, *Anglia_2_ORG_ST*). This mode of activity of student organizations is not novel but it attains new meaning and importance after Brexit which

made it much more difficult to stay in the UK after studies. Thanks to the internationalized character of a part of these diaspora organizations, students can minimize their labor market-related risk after graduating.

The third way in which Polish diaspora organizations are changing their modes of activities consists in participation in globally relevant actions. The most important issue pointed to by the interviewees was the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on February 24 2022 and the following grassroots organizing aiming at helping Ukraine:

> It seems to me that the common denominator recently was the war in Ukraine. This aid for Ukraine. I guess everyone, both students and the old Polish community, as well as the economic migration, if I may say so, got involved and all worked together. Also parishes etc. (…) For example, now, interestingly, they are interested in Poles because most Poles did these charity events for Ukraine. And suddenly Polish diasporas became important. *Anglia_7_ORG_ST*

The activities of Polish diaspora organizations after February 24th – gathering money, as well as food and clothing for Ukrainians – established them as actors with inside knowledge about a very current event. It also helped in putting Ukraine on the map through the association with Poland. The respondents also claimed that this event can be a basis for building a closer cooperation between the UK and Poland. The issue of Ukraine issue also brought organizations from different groups together:

> Now we are very focused on the Ukrainian aspect and we should focus on it, so we can build a lot on it when it comes to Polish-British cooperation, because Polish people who live here, or of Polish origin, I do not know how exactly to call them, such British Poles and Polonia were very active in supporting Ukraine, they also did various types of collections. And they activated not only Poles, but also the British, and this is something on which we can continue to build our relationship, or assimilation and build a common culture and bond with the British. Politically, this is also one of the most important aspects of our cooperation. I do not know whether politicians think about it more from the perspective of geopolitics and security or from a cultural perspective, but when it comes to society, we can build cultural branches in connection with Ukraine and see how it will develop further. And business relationships are also very important. Now, after Brexit, Great Britain is wondering whether to invest in the Central Eastern Europe region or the *Intermarium*, because it is a very developing market, and Poland has a relatively fast-growing GDP, so this may also be something interesting. There are more and more events where British companies meet Polish companies, either in Poland or in Great Britain. The aspect of energy and sustainable development is talked about quite often at these meetings. *Anglia_1_ORG_ST*

By taking part in this kind of actions, Polish diaspora organizations create bridges not only between each other but also become more visible in their local areas (*Anglia_4_ORG_SZKPL*). In this way they expand their modes of activities but, and it refers also to the first two types of activities discussed in this section, they do not abandon their main focus related to maintaining the Polish national identity. Even though the overarching organizational engagement of Polish diaspora was provoked by an external crisis, the need to build on it in the context of visibility in the UK is connected with the pursuit of finding a new place in the post-Brexit context. The internationalization of Polish diaspora consists, as of now, in acquiring certain elements that bind it with the multinational community in the UK. It remains to been seen if this process concludes with a phenomenon we can call a "A post-national EU diaspora" (Vathi and Trandafoiu 2022).

The role of Brexit in shaping projects of national identity becomes more pronounced when we compare Polish diaspora in the UK and Ireland. All interviewees from Ireland had a strong local identity and did not plan to return to Poland. Diametrically different were the feelings about Brexit in Ireland where interviewees did not talk about changes occurring in their organizations due to crises. Poles living in Ireland interviewed in

the study in general had very bad opinion about the Brexit decision while in the same time were not able to hide their *Schadenfreude*:

> No, it was a shock, of course, but the Irish, in fact, they will not say it out loud, but Britain's problems have been to Ireland's benefit for 800 years so if my business, capital is moving from London to Ireland, we are silently rubbing our hands. (…) The English have shot themselves in the foot (…), right? Ireland, however, is absolutely here to raise capital from this. Absolutely. We are currently the only English-speaking country in the European Union. And we are closest to the United States. And close to Poland, right? And we will go past the English now. In a moment, Poland will be richer than the English, right? It is said and it is true. I am an economist, I see it. This is happening before our eyes. However, from the point of view of the Polish community, Brexit is not a problem for us. There was COVID and there was the crisis of 2008. And now there is the housing crisis. There is. And war, and of course inflation. (…) So this is how it looks like. No, Brexit was not a big problem for us, on the contrary, Brexit is a huge opportunity for Ireland. *Irlandia_3_ORG_SPOŁ*

Their perception of Brexit was, therefore, strongly tied with the Irish perspective. In the same time the experience of Brexit in the UK was much more often discussed by the respondents, especially those from post-accession and post-Brexit groups, from the perspective of an outsider who has to find new ways of belonging in the host country.

4. Conclusion

The topic of forging new competing projects of national identity in the face of a crisis, real or manufactured, has been widely discussed with respect to nation-states: the vast literature on populism and illiberalism focusing on political ideologies defining who to include and who to exclude from the national community is only one example of research currents focusing on this issue (Laruelle 2022). This focus is much less present in diaspora studies however: migrant groups are often perceived in the context of their countries of origin or as functioning in the framework of minority groups of their host countries and, therefore, not capable of establishing projects on their own. The role of diaspora organizations is, however, crucial in this process as they are placed at the intersection of policies and cultural contexts of host country and the country of origin. The projects of national identity are not unidirectional, they can facilitate different positions: from creating a permanent Small Poland for those who want to stay, maintaining contact with Poland for those who want to return, as well as make it more feasible for those who want to be, at least temporarily, in-between. Elements used to build these identities differ depending on the migration wave responsible for directing specific organizations.

I focused on the projects of Polish national identity proposed by Polish diaspora organizations in GB in the face of the polycrisis with an emphasis on Brexit. There are some obvious challenges to this study. The first is a small sample of interviews. The second consists in the identification to what extent the described changes in the modes of activities of Polish diaspora organizations in fact result from Brexit. My solution was to rely on the interviewees' narratives and connect them with the information on the order of legal changes in the UK and Poland. Future research should focus on the scale of the changes in the modes of activities of diaspora organizations and not only Polish ones. The existence of such changes could help us learn more about political and social transformation brought by Brexit, as well as the interaction between different crises with reference to national identity.

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