

## **The migrations and depopulation in Opole Silesia**

### Extended abstract

The aim of this paper is to explain the phenomenon of migrations abroad from the area of Opole Silesia, the scale of which is the most intensive in Poland, as well as to discuss its consequences for the current demographic situation, including prospects of the further socioeconomic development of this region.

In the paper, there are data presented which relate to Opole Province, whose administrative borders encompass lands lying between Upper Silesia and Lower Silesia. The area itself is a part of the historical-geographical region of Silesia, which is characterized by an interesting series of transformations that have exerted a strong influence on shaping the ethnic-national relations in the region. In the past, politically, Silesia used to be related to the state organizations of Poland, Czech, Austria and Germany. Again, after the 600-year period of Silesia's being separated and remaining under other states' rule, it found itself incorporated into the territory of the Polish state at the end of the Second World War. The change of the borders of the Republic of Poland, as a result of the decision taken by the Allied Forces, led to large-scale transfers of the population. The Polish were leaving the Eastern Lands of Poland, which were allotted to the Soviet Union, the German – in turn – were forced to leave the areas allotted to Poland. Those displacements, mostly enforced ones, which affected the region after the War, shaped the social composition of Opole Province which was formally established in 1950. Thus, Opole Silesia became a meeting point for groups of population of different regional backgrounds: the autochthonous one – the group which had been settled in there for generations and whose members, being citizens of the German state, were allowed to remain in their households on condition they passed the verification process positively, and the

immigratory one – the displaced from the Eastern Lands of the Second Republic of Poland and other parts of Poland's lands, whose inhabitants were leaving mostly overpopulated rural areas to look for new opportunities for themselves in the territories allotted to Poland. For this reason, the inhabitants of Opole Province make a peculiar 'socio-demographic laboratory' to study a post-migratory community (shaped on the basis of transfers after the War), and – at the same time – a migratory one – since it has continuously been experiencing a peculiar 'exodus' of the native inhabitants to Germany since the end of the War. At the moment of its establishment, Opole Province distinguished itself against the other lands incorporated into Poland with the largest concentration of autochthonous population that was deposited in the central and eastern parts of the region and made over a half (54.4%) of the overall number of the region's population. It is until today that there have been visible clear differences in the demographic situation in the territorial cross-section of Opole Province, corresponding to the concentration of both the autochthonous and immigratory communities. The emigration to Germany, which has been in progress incessantly in the postwar period, frequently exceeding the height of the natural increase in the native population of Opole Silesia, has effectively hampered the rate of the population increase expressed in numbers and makes for about 30% of the total population today. The extensive emigration has thus been a vital element of the demographic processes in Opole Silesia, being responsible for shortening of the time of the population increase in the postwar period and lowering the size of the increase in the total population, and – at last – leading to depopulation which was the earliest to begin here and on the most serious scale as regards Poland. With the high level of migration outflow, the depopulation in Opole Province largely preceded the negative natural increase. The negative natural increase, which has been continuing for many years now, the negative net migration (both internal and external), as well as wage-earning migration of a considerable size, which entails, indeed, temporary, yet very often long-lasting staying outside the country, pose a dramatically serious challenge to the socioeconomic development of Opole Silesia. It needs to be remembered that it is most often young people (we do say about the so-called mobile age) who are the

quickest to migrate. The population loss due to migration does not only refer to people who have left a given area, but concerns a lost natural increase. For this reason the local government is working on launching a Special Demographic Zone on the territory of Opole Province with the aim to stop the depopulation tendency.

Using the opportunity of taking a closer look at the long-term demographic situation in Opole Silesia, which – as it was mentioned earlier – is a region characterized by an intensive migration-related outflow, it has been found out that there are considerable disparities between the officially published data on the population and the actual state of things. This is an effect of many-year definitive emigrations, a large part of which had been developing under the guise of tourist movement during the era of the communist regime and, consequently, was not officially registered. In the then political conditions, the real motives for leaving homes were – for obvious reasons – not revealed. In consequence, people staying outside Poland for many years used to be invariably counted into the total number of the country's population. In the new sociopolitical situation which followed after 1989, again, a considerable portion of inhabitants going abroad, this time on the temporary basis, have not been registered in the current evidence, since the system is set on registering definitive migrations functioning on the basis of official registration of residence/registering out in the place of permanent abode.

Summing up, in the paper there are presented not only results of the author's many-year studies on the demographic effects of long-term and intensive migrations in Opole Silesia, but practical questions are raised as well, related to the possibility of determining the unregistered migration and making corrections of the number of the population in the area of migration-related outflow.