

# Public policy towards immigrants in poland's shrinking cities – The case study of the city of Lomza

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## Abstract

Some regions and cities in Poland face challenges due to an accelerating depopulation. Simultaneously, Poland is host to more than 2 million immigrants who mitigate the negative consequences of the population outflow and ageing. While bigger Polish cities adopted particular local strategies and measures addressed to migrants, the situation of smaller cities and towns, especially the shrinking ones, has not yet been explored. Therefore, we took a closer look at Lomza, a downscaled middle-sized city in the east of Poland where two phenomena occur: the accelerating depopulation caused mainly by the outflow of its residents and an inflow of foreign migrants, both asylum seekers predominantly coming from Russia (Chechnya) and economic migrants mainly from Ukraine. We explored the state of the public policy towards immigrants in Lomza in order to see what a shrinking city can offer its newcomers when it cannot count on national strategy in this regard.

## INTRODUCTION

In less than two decades after joining the European Union in 2004, Poland is following the path of the older EU Member States concerning both depopulation processes and immigration trends. The country's population decline directly results from two phenomena: outflow of population abroad and decreasing birth rates. The former is

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closely related to the emigration of Poles to other EU countries, predominantly the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and Ireland, which is a consequence of accession to the EU and freeing their labour markets for the citizens of the new member states. More than 2 million Polish citizens are estimated to reside either temporarily (for at least three months) or permanently in other EU countries (as of 2019) (Statistics Poland, 2020a). The vast majority of them left Poland after the accession in May 2004. Currently, among all EU member countries, Poland has the highest number of its citizens living abroad.

The second cause of the country's depopulation is the low rate of natural increase (-0.9 in 2019) which continues decreasing and, although after reaching a negative value in 2012 it has been alternating between negative and positive, since 2018 the situation has visibly started to deteriorate (Statistics Poland, 2021). A drop in fertility rate (1.44 in 2019) and an outflow of the primarily young population led to a decrease in the birth rate. Changes in the demographic structure of the society have contributed to the further ageing of the society. In 2019 there were 6.9 million persons aged 65 years or over, accounting for 18 per cent of the Polish population. That situates Poland among the thirty most rapidly ageing countries in the world (United Nations, 2020a). The Polish population started decreasing in 2011 and, according to the forecasts, will be further shrinking from 38.4 million in 2019 (Statistics Poland, 2020d) to 37.2 million in 2030 and 33.9 million in 2050 (12% decline, Statistics Poland, 2014a). These two combined causes of population decline are distinctive for the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe, which is considered the fastest depopulating region in the world (United Nations, 2020b).

Like other EU countries experiencing population decline, like Spain, Portugal or Italy, immigration mitigates the negative consequences of this process for the economy and development. In 2016, the number of immigrants surpassed the number of emigrants for the first time. Since then, Poland has become an immigration country, aside from being a country of emigration. In addition, since 2017, Poland has been granting most first residence permits for non-EU migrants in the entire European Union (Eurostat, 2020). Just before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak the number of foreigners living in Poland was estimated at 2,106,101 (as of 31 December 2019). Out of them 64 per cent were Ukrainians (Statistics Poland, 2020c), followed by Belarussians and citizens of other countries of the former Soviet Union (Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan). A vast share of immigrants coming from Russia accounts for Chechens, who were granted international protection status (mainly subsidiary protection). In addition, the immigration of Vietnamese citizens to Poland, commencing in the 1960s as part of strengthening political relations between the two socialist countries, continues. There is also an increasing inflow of migrants from China, India and Nepal, induced by the labour market demands.

The economic dependency on immigration of a country whose government is known for its anti-migration (particularly anti-refugee) rhetoric may surprise. In fact, Poland lacks a migration strategy on the national level.<sup>1</sup> The negative consequences of this vacuum are often mitigated by other actors, like local governments, NGOs, religious institutions, or the migrant networks that provide foreign migrants with assistance in various forms. The lack of a migration strategy, including an integration strategy, does not mean there is no policy concerning immigrants whatsoever. This void is filled by the various areas of public policy broadly understood as "a more or less structured set of measures and resources that are used to influence development in a specific area of social life and to solve problems as desired or planned way" (Bekkers et al., 2017). Poland's migration and integration policy is fragmented and dispersed among different institutions, legal acts, and levels of governance. Foreigners in Poland have access to the labour market, education, healthcare and welfare systems, although to varying extents depending on their legal status. Municipalities play an important role in welcoming and including migrants into the local tissue in such patchwork governance. Big cities like Warsaw, Cracow, Wroclaw, Lublin, or Gdansk are well-equipped with solutions addressed to foreign migrants. However, the situation changes concerning smaller cities and towns, especially those affected by depopulation.

Along with the absence of a migration strategy, no government-led program links the most depopulated regions with receiving or attracting migrants. Although immigrants arrive predominantly in the metropolises and the most prosperous regions of Poland, they also reach and settle in shrinking regions. Such a situation applies to the eastern border regions, namely Podlaskie, Lubelskie, and Podkarpackie Voivodeships<sup>2</sup>, which attract immigrants

from nearby Ukraine and Belarus. In addition, geographical dispersion of accommodation centres for asylum seekers (six out of ten centres are located in Lubelskie and Podlaskie Voivodeships) makes forced migrants stay in these regions, either temporarily for the duration of the asylum procedure or permanently, if they decide to settle down there. Although big cities like Białystok or Lublin are the preferable destinations in the mentioned voivodeships, some immigrants live in middle-sized urban areas, like Lomza, Zambrow, Suwałki (Podlaskie), Lukow, or Biała Podlaska (Lubelskie).

This paper aims to explore how public policy towards immigration in a selected shrinking city, namely Lomza, looks like. We also pose additional research questions: who are immigrants who arrive and live in Lomza? How do the local government of Lomza and other institutional actors perceive immigrants in the context of urban development and the challenges posed by the shrinkage of the city? In order to outline the conceptual background, we start with the term "shrinking city" and ask how it has been constructed and reproduced in Poland. Concerning methodology, the following have been used: a content analysis of the policy documents and legal acts, a review of local newspapers, a literature review, and in-depth interviews. Nine online and face-to-face interviews were conducted between March and July 2021 in Lomza. The respondents were local government representatives (3 persons), civil society activists (3 persons), and migrants living in Lomza (2 women and 2 men). As such, the article presents the initial insights from the Horizon 2020 research project "Investing in 'Welcoming Spaces' in Europe: revitalizing shrinking areas by hosting non-EU migrants" (2020–2024).

## URBAN SHRINKAGE AND THE POTENTIALITIES OF MIGRATION

According to recent studies, almost 42 per cent of all large European cities are shrinking (Haase et al., 2016). Scholars have long noticed the interdependency between depopulation and migration processes. However, the main focus was initially put on depopulation due to emigration from a particular region or country (Lowenthal & Comitas, 1962). The linkage of depopulation and immigration, emphasizing the development of depopulated regions and cities due to new residents' arrival, has attracted attention during the last two decades (Perlik et al., 2019; Schech, 2014).

Concerning the urban areas, many studies equate the gradual decrease in a city's population with urban shrinkage. The initial definition of urban shrinkage pointed out two required conditions: a population of 10,000 or more and a period of depopulation lasting at least two years (Hollander et al., 2009; Hollander & Németh, 2011; Pallagst, 2008; Wiechmann, 2008). However, treating the two processes of depopulation and urban shrinkage as synonyms has been misleading. Scholars also argued that the term "shrinking city" should be exclusively reserved for a persistent urban crisis characterized by continuous depopulation and worsening economic conditions (Cieśla, 2009; Hoekveld, 2014; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). On the other hand, since the process of urban shrinkage has different causes, impacts, and dynamics depending on the specific economic, social, and political conditioning of a country or a region, it is hardly possible to adopt one universal model of a shrinking city (Haase et al., 2016).

Some scholars avoid the above term when referring to the city's depopulation or worsening economic situation. Instead, they use descriptive words, such as a disempowered city (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2011; Jaskulowski, 2020) or a downscale place (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2011) by which they give attention to "relative positioning of a city within emerging national, regional, and global hierarchical configurations of power" (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2011, p. 191).

An extensive study of the trajectories of cities by Turok and Mykhnenko (2007) proved that national and regional particularities such as economic conditions, settlement structures, or governance arrangements play a significant role in a city's growth or decline. Following others, the mentioned scholars (Champion & Fisher, 2004; Owen & Green, 1992; Salt & Clout, 1976; Storper & Manville, 2006) pointed to the interrelation between the availability of economic opportunities and migration (both people outflow and inflow to the city). They also observed the effects of the population structure's demographical change on the labour market since any shift in the age

of the population influences the demand for goods and services, including housing and schools. Therefore, concerning immigration, the composition of the new population seems to be an essential factor for a city's economic future (Turok & Mykhnenko, 2007).

As municipalities have in recent decades been trying to find the best responses to the negative consequences of shrinkage or decline, scholars have noticed a rare phenomenon in their research on the topic: migration trends. Some scholars claimed that due to the usually lower socio-economic statuses of immigrants, they do not contribute much to the well-being of their destination cities, so it is unlikely they can reverse the shrinkage path (Svajlenka & Wilson, 2014). At the same time, other studies are suggesting another perspective. For example, Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2011) argued that even downscaled cities experiencing population outflow could simultaneously be a destination for newcomers (especially foreign migrants) who can contribute to the city's (re)development. Other authors point out the opportunities created by the in-migration of retired people in shrinking cities (Nefs et al., 2013). Moreover, despite many scholars agreeing on the multiplicity of the factors driving urban regrowth, immigration can be considered one of the drivers in promoting development and overturning the process, as indicated by Haase et al. (2021) in their study about the regrowth of four European cities. The "adaptive capacity" of foreign migrants and their investments in terms of resources and energies can also make spaces more alive both physically and economically (Cancellieri, 2014). Hence, Simard and Jentsch (2009) pointed out that migrants often bring new assets to shrinking cities.

Poland has adopted different classifications of urban centres regarding challenges and development issues that they need to tackle. Under the Shrinking Cities International Research Network project, a shrinking city is defined as a city "that has, on the one hand, faced a population loss in large parts of it, and is, on the other hand, undergoing an economic transformation with some symptoms of a structural crisis." (Strykiewicz et al., 2014, pp. 11–12). Analyses spanning 1990–2010 show that, compared to other regions, southwest Poland stands out in terms of urban shrinkage dynamics (meaning an annual loss of over 0.15% over 20 years). The most significant shrinkage effect is reported in large (56%) and medium-sized (38%) cities. Out of the 245 analysed shrinking cities, 30 have experienced a permanent (long-term) shrinkage process (Jaroszevska & Strykiewicz, 2014). Although the term "shrinkage" is used to refer to cities with steady depopulation trends, the complexity of these processes, their broader context, and the multidimensional nature of their effects require a more comprehensive approach (Musiał-Malago, 2018).

In this context, one solution is to attract new residents, and one of the ways to make it happen is to have an adequate migration policy in place to encourage the settlement of foreigners. Nevertheless, the issue of migrants is not addressed sufficiently in Polish national strategy papers. The Strategy for Responsible Development (SRD), Poland's mid-term development strategy, states that "the opportunity of reducing the risks posed by demographic changes is afforded by the active family policy and targeted migration policy." The migration policy should be reduced to "ensuring balance on the labor market." (SRD, 2017, p. 12). The SRD points out that since 2014 the migration situation in Poland has been dominated by a massive influx of Ukrainian citizens; this trend is driven by the Ukrainian economic and political situation. However, this immigration is mainly circular, and the migrants find employment primarily in sectors and jobs that are less attractive to Polish citizens (SRD, 2017, pp. 151–152).

The SRD approaches migration policy as a human resource management tool. It underlines that a new migration policy of the country is necessary because the existing one is facing specific barriers and potential threats (e.g. recurring abuses of the so-called simplified procedure of foreigners' access to the labour market, imperfections in the system of monitoring the employment of foreigners, the potential risk of lowering labour standards in connection with employing foreigners, exposing foreign nationals to the risk of fraud and exploitation at work by dishonest employers or intermediaries offering assistance in finding employment) (SRD, 2017, p. 152).

Some of the SRD's initiatives that should prospectively benefit migrants are:

- To prepare the concept of a responsible immigration policy focused on the real needs of the labour market and Polish employers,

- To create integration paths for selected categories of foreign nationals and their family members, including for employees with qualifications particularly in demand on the Polish labour market,
- To curb illegal immigration,
- To design integration instruments,
- To strengthen the development of the NGO sector, including immigrant organizations, offering aid to foreign citizens,
- To conduct outreach activities and education campaigns among the Polish society on the positive role of foreign nationals (SRD, 2017, pp. 170–171).

NSRD 2030 mentions only that the regional policy is expected to support the development of integration instruments to grow the labour market resources; these instruments will be intended for immigrants coming to Poland (e.g. the teaching of the Polish language, facilitated access to housing, support in handling bureaucratic matters) (Council of Ministers, 2019, p. 67). In contrast, National Urban Policy 2023 only notes that, given the existing problem of depopulation and the risk of lowering global demand in cities, different avenues should be explored to attract new customers and service recipients. With this end in view, analyses should be performed into the possibility of investing more effort into activities in the area of migration policy to attract more human capital by, for example, offering various types of incentives for foreigners to study at Polish universities and remain in Poland (MID, 2015, p. 69).

Covered in the following section of the study, the city of Lomza was diagnosed as:

- A shrinking city (Stryjakiewicz & Jaroszevska, 2016, p. 75),
- A city losing its socio-economic functions (Śleszyński, 2016, p. 11),
- A city with declining potential (Śleszyński, 2017, p. 584),
- A problem area (as a municipality in administrative terms) (Śleszyński, 2019, p. 6),
- A city losing its socio-economic functions with declining potential (an increasing development gap and a moderately poor socio-economic situation) according to NSRD 2030 (MFRP, 2020),
- An SIA as a medium-sized city losing its socio-economic functions (Council of Ministers, 2019, p. 39), a sub-regional growth pole, a part of the Białystok Functional Area, and a county city according to NSRD 2030 and Development Strategy for Podlaskie Voivodeship 2030 (Zarząd Województwa Podlaskiego, 2020, pp. 53–59).

Even though attracting immigrants, valorization of diversity, and preventing population decline have become among the strategic responses to the problem of urban decline (Rink et al., 2009; Stryjakiewicz & Jaroszevska, 2016), most policies lack an emphasis on the crucial role of foreign-born people in mediating inter-city inequality. Thus, as the case of the city of Lomza will show, strong policy responses that focus on the long-term integration and provision of specific services for these groups are needed (Bagchi-Sen et al., 2020).

## LOMZA AS A CITY ON A SHRINKING PATH

Lomza is the third city in terms of population size in Podlaskie Voivodeship (Figure 1). For more than twenty years (1975–1998), it was the capital of Lomzynskie Voivodeship. However, after an administrative reform reducing the number of voivodships in Poland, it lost this position and declined in administrative and economic importance. According to the municipal government, this downgrading caused an outflow of entrepreneurs and residents to the larger cities, which could have contributed to some of the city's social problems: a relatively high unemployment rate and outflow of young people (Supreme Audit Office, 2017, pp. 4–5). At the public administration level, the change consisted of liquidation of government administration institutions at the voivodeship level and a reduction in the scope of competences of local government administration from the voivodeship to the powiat



FIGURE 1 Lomza on the map of Poland

level; except for the hospital, which remained the Voivodeship Hospital. The change of the scope of institutions' competences from the voivodeship to the poviats level resulted in layoffs among the public employees (Potocki & Babczuk, 2015; Sadowski, 2001).

The total number of inhabitants of Lomza in 2020 was 62,573, with a slight downward trend in population for the previous several years. From 1995 until 2020 population decreased by 1.2 per cent. Lomza is among the cities with the highest outflow of people, including temporary and circular migrations, in Podlaskie Voivodeship. In recent years, the negative migratory balance concerning internal and external migration has been increasing to a rate of  $-4.6$  per 1000 people in 2019 (Statistics Poland, 2020b). Also, a demographic forecast is not optimistic for Lomza. Until 2050 it is predicted that the negative balance of internal and foreign migrations will continue (Lomza City Council, 2016a, p. 11). According to the population projections, there will be 57,197 inhabitants in 2030 and 46,082 in 2050, which would mean decreases of 9.13 per cent and 26.79 per cent, respectively (Statistics Poland, 2014b) (Figure 2).

Another negative trend is the ageing of the population, illustrated by the numbers: in 1995, 8.3 per cent of Lomza's inhabitants were of post-working age,<sup>3</sup> but by 2020, the percentage had risen to 22.2 per cent. At the same time, the share of the population at pre-working age fell from 33.7 per cent in 1995 to 17.9 per cent (Figure 3).

Another reason why Lomza is losing its inhabitants is the unemployment rate – between 2004 and 2020, it was always several percentage points higher than average in Poland. In 2020, the registered unemployment rate in Lomza was 8.4 per cent, while it was 6.3 per cent in Poland. Thus, in Lomza in 2004, 2008, and 2011, the registered unemployment rates were, respectively: 21.2 per cent, 11.1 per cent, and 17 per cent, while the averages in Poland were: 19 per cent, 9.5 per cent, and 13.4 per cent (Figure 4).<sup>4</sup>

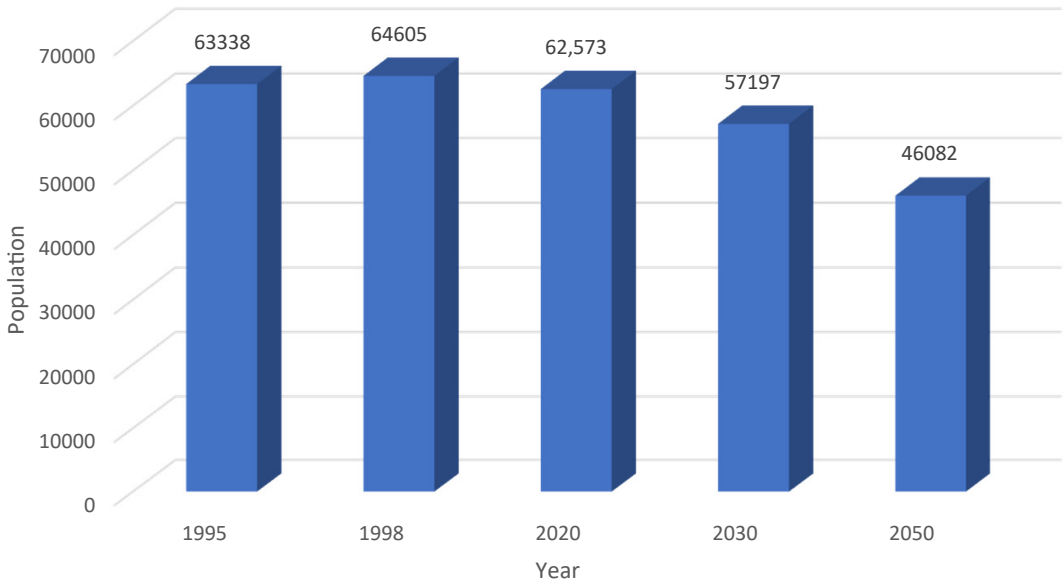


FIGURE 2 Population of the city of Lomza. Source: GUS - Bank Danych Lokalnych (stat.gov.pl) (28. 12. 2021); Statistics Poland (2020b)

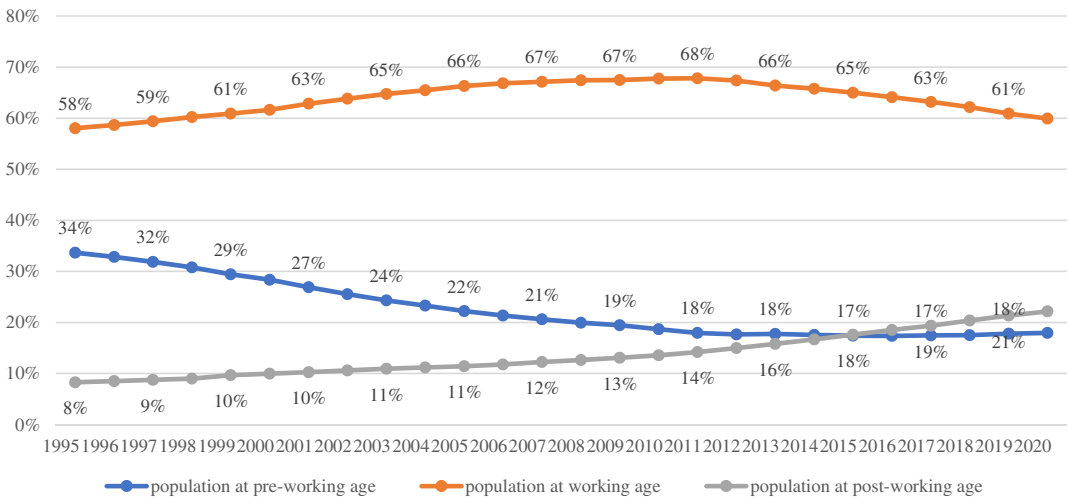


FIGURE 3 Age structure of the population of Lomza. Source: GUS - Bank Danych Lokalnych (stat.gov.pl) (28. 12. 2021)

In Lomza, unemployment mainly affects people aged 50+, caregivers of dependents (women), and people with disabilities. A severe problem is an unemployment among people under 30. In 2019, this group constituted 24.3 per cent of the total number of unemployed in Lomza (Lomza City Council, 2016a, p. 14). Another serious issue is high long-term unemployment rates (47.7% as of 2019) (Powiat Labour Office, 2020, p. 17). Despite the reduction in unemployment in 2019, a high structural mismatch between labour supply and demand remains a problem. For several years employers have mostly sought employees with primary vocational and secondary vocational

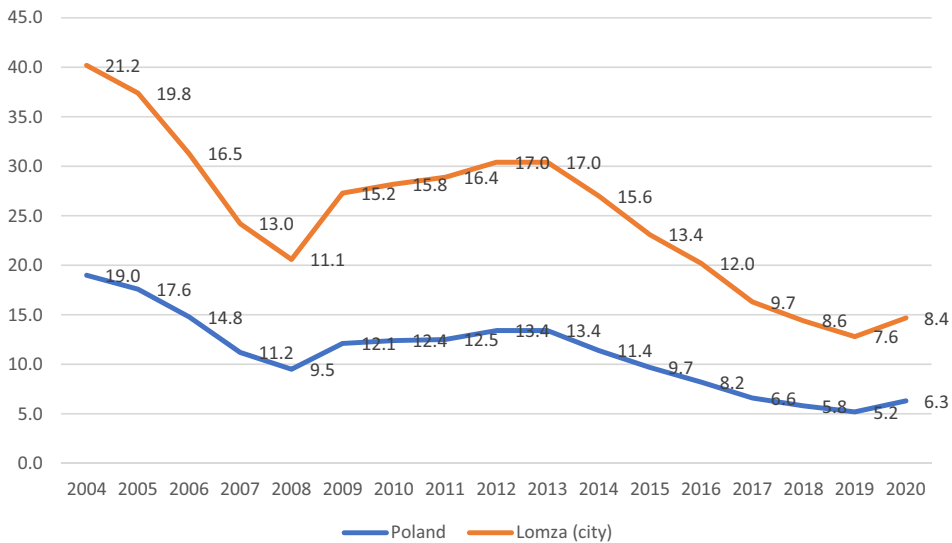


FIGURE 4 The unemployment rate in Lomza and Poland [%]. Source: GUS - Bank Danych Lokalnych (stat.gov.pl) (28. 12. 2021)

education, and most job offers have appeared in the same industries and professions. On the other hand, industries and professions with high unemployment for several years still generate an inflow of unemployed. In the latest analysis of the Poviát Labor Office in Lomza, it was pointed out that employers not only have a problem with finding professionals but simply any hands to work (Poviát Labour Office, 2020, p. 9). The lowering of the retirement age and the "Rodzina 500 plus" program<sup>5</sup> are also factors that could have contributed to reducing the supply of employees.

Lomza is located in the so-called Green Lungs of Poland<sup>6</sup>, which favours the development of ecologically harmless industries. On the other hand, it is the location that is treated by some as a threat to the city's development, as it limits the development of the economy based on the manufacturing industry and also hinders investments in the area of infrastructure (Lomza City Council, 2016a, p. 29). The leading industry in the city is the broadly understood agri-food processing industry (15.22% of all companies in Lomza) (Lomza City Council, 2016a, p. 11). SMEs account for 99.95 per cent of all enterprises in the city.<sup>7</sup> In 2019, income per capita in Lomza was EUR 1563, whereas that of Poland was EUR 1732.

## IMMIGRANTS IN THE COMMUNITY OF LOMZA

Similarly to on the country level, the outflow of the population in Lomza is mitigated by foreign immigrants, whose number in 2019 was estimated between 218<sup>8</sup> and 2500<sup>9</sup> people. Such a disparity in numbers results from the dispersed way of collecting data. Different institutions collect it separately, and it is not aggregated afterwards. As a result, there is no thorough information and knowledge about foreigners in Lomza and other Poland's municipalities.

Lomza started to be a destination for foreigners, at the beginning mainly asylum seekers, around 2005 when a centre for asylum seekers was established in the city. Then, the majority of the foreigners were Chechen families who fled Russia during the second Chechen war (1999–2009). From 1992, when the first asylum seekers came to Poland after the country signed the 1951 Refugee Convention in 1991, until the break-out of an armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2014, Chechens were the largest group who applied for asylum in Poland. Similar to other forced migrants arriving in Poland, they predominantly settled in Warsaw and other big cities, while their



living in such a small city like Lomza was rather exceptional and linked with the presence of the centre for asylum seekers there. In the 1990s, the Polish society's attitude towards Chechens was pretty positive, but after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 in the US, and then the attack on Dubrovka Theater in Moscow perpetrated by Chechen terrorists in 2002, it started deteriorating and has been gradually replaced by the growing islamophobia (Bockowski, 2020). Opening the centre for asylum seekers in Lomza, which is considered a homogenous and conservative community, uniform in terms of nationality and religion (PL\_NGO\_01; PL\_LGOV\_00), in such a particular time, affected the number of incidents against Chechens and eventually led to the centre's closure in 2010. Some of the centre's inhabitants, whose total number right before the closure was about 200 people<sup>10</sup>, ineffectively tried to move further to other EU countries (mainly Germany or Austria). However, most of them were deported and consequently returned to Lomza. In 2021 Lomza was inhabited by, according to the various respondents' accounts, from 45 Chechen refugee families (PL\_NGO\_03) to about 60–70, each with three to six children (PL\_NGO\_01).

The different culture and religion of Chechens, including the distinctive clothing of women, clearly distinguished this ethnic group from Poles. Also, some Chechen behaviours, such as evening meetings of large groups of men in public spaces, loud conversations, participation in gambling, and occasional drug problems, aroused resentment in residents and associations with the Chechen mafia, and as a result, a feeling of being endangered (PL\_NGO\_01, PL\_NGO\_03).

The closure of the centre for asylum seekers was, among other things, the result of the activity of right-wing politician Lech Kořakowski. He initiated a collection of signatures under a petition to the Office for Foreigners to close the centre for asylum seekers. The politician justified his activity by listening to the requests of residents to take such action. Some accused him of exploiting prejudice against foreigners to gain public support for his candidacy in elections for president of Lomza. He was also accused of inducing xenophobic attitudes. About 770 people (which constituted 1.2% of all Lomza's inhabitants) signed a petition to close the centre for asylum seekers<sup>11</sup>.

The second substantial group of foreigners in Lomza are Ukrainians. They began coming to the city after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Initially, they came seeking international protection but quickly found out that such a form of residence would disadvantage them, rendering them unable to employment. Thus they initiated migration based on work permits. Most Ukrainians come for this purpose without families, treating their stay in Lomza as temporary and not a place of permanent settlement. They usually receive accommodation and food in the workplace, and the money earned is sent to their family members still living in Ukraine. The stable economic situation in Poland and the long-term economic stagnation in Ukraine simultaneously cause significant earnings disparities in Poland's favour. Therefore, working even at the lowest rates on the Polish labour market is profitable for Ukrainians. They also do not differ from Poles in terms of external appearance and culture, so for the Lomza community, it is easier to accept their presence than the presence of Chechens. Ukrainians are also more likely to be employed by Polish companies (PL\_NGO\_01; PL\_LGOV\_02).

From the point of view of the municipal authorities, the Ukrainian presence in Lomza does not pose a significant challenge. However, most of them come only to work, without families. Their presence, therefore, reduces the problem of a lack of workers but in the long term does not solve the depopulation problem. The jobs they are offered are attractive only under the assumption that they come for a while, without families. If their families arrived, their wages would be too low to sustain them. Ukrainians' low-wage work also creates dissatisfaction among residents, including Chechens, as it puts downward pressure on wages in specific sectors of the economy (PL\_NGO\_01).

## PUBLIC POLICY OF THE LOMZA AUTHORITIES TOWARDS MIGRATION

At the local level, public policy concerns the local government's intentions in the exercise of power which are expressed by two kinds of documents: firstly, strategies, programs, and action plans, and secondly, normative acts and non-legislative activities aiming at the implementation of the mentioned strategies (Szarfenberg, 2016).

Analysis of Lomza's strategic documents has shown that the authorities were aware of the problems of the city's shrinkage and emigration from the city (either to other cities in Poland or abroad), but at the same time have paid almost no attention to the needs of foreigners (Table 1).

The outflow of the inhabitants is mentioned as one of the main city's weaknesses in all of Lomza's strategic documents,<sup>12</sup> whether it is simply termed as an outflow of young, educated people (Lomza City Council & The President of the City of Lomza, 2007, p. 27; Lomza City Council, 2019, p. 66) or as a drain of the "youth potential" (President of the City of Lomza, 2015, p. 19). In the city development program, the low birth rate is indicated as a different aspect of shrinkage, and it is associated with population decline and the ageing of the population. It is also mentioned that Lomza has a negative migration balance (President of the City of Lomza, 2015) without any further explanation or in-depth analysis. The aspect of international migrants is mentioned once in all the analysed documents: in the Strategy of Sustainable Development of the City of Lomza until 2020, where "lack of housing for refugees with status and tolerated stay staying in the city" is mentioned as one of the city's weaknesses (Lomza City Council, 2016b).

Summarizing the approach to migration and foreigners in the Lomza's documents, it needs to be highlighted that despite the documents are dated from 2007 to 2019, the migration seems to be treated similarly: mainly as a process of losing young inhabitants, who leave the city due to study or (and) work. The inflow of foreigners or the developmental aspect of migration is rarely mentioned.

Interviewees explained the little attention paid to migrants in official documents. One of the respondents, a city hall representative, claimed that the group of foreigners is so small that there is no need to take them under special consideration when planning strategies for urban development (PL\_LGOV\_03). Another representative of the local authorities claimed that the presence of foreigners is politically "sensitive", which is why the subject does not exist in the city's strategic documents (PL\_LGOV\_00). Other respondents put attention to the fact that Lomza's authorities deal with issues "politically safe" like sport or youth and do not want to take political risk by engaging in strongly politicized topics like immigration which could reduce their electoral support (PL\_OLRESI\_02). One of the respondents highlighted that foreigners experiencing problems are treated equally as other groups socially and economically excluded (PL\_LGOV\_02). Those who need social assistance can benefit from the Regional and Municipal Social Assistance Centre and the Municipal Integration Centre. A representative of the local authorities underlined that the activities dedicated exclusively to migrants are led by a local NGO<sup>13</sup> (PL\_LGOV\_03). Also, schools were mentioned as essential entities taking action towards foreigners (survey).

The absence of foreigners in official urban documents (including the local revitalization program) is astonishing. Most of the refugees live in degraded historic houses located in the downtown area planned to be revitalized (PL\_NGO\_01). According to the Ministerial Guidelines on Revitalization (Ministry of Development, 2016) and the Revitalization Act itself ('Ustawa o Rewitalizacji', 2015), excluded groups' integration and activation should be considered one of the main objectives of urban regeneration.

## THE ROLE OF NGOS IN PUBLIC POLICY TOWARDS IMMIGRANTS

The role of NGOs should be supplementary for the authorities in developing public policies towards foreigners. However, in Lomza, as it is throughout Poland, they play a crucial role in assistance and integration activities for this group of residents (Kancelaria Senatu, 2017, p. 28; Pawlak, 2018, p. 297).

In Lomza, the majority of beneficiaries of NGO's activities are Chechens. A separate group of activities was to help foreign children to learn Polish, do their homework, and integrate with Polish children. All the interlocutors agreed that the children are the bridge between the worlds of refugees and Poles, as they create situations in which adults have the opportunity to get to know each other, such as in schools or parks. One NGO played a crucial role in fostering relations between the host community and a refugee group. Cultural events and educational workshops were held to bring the refugee culture closer to the host community to break stereotypes

TABLE 1 Migration in the public policy documents of the city of Lomza

Name of the document	References to migration in the content
'Strategy for the sustainable development of the city of Lomza until 2020' ( <i>Strategia zrównoważonego rozwoju miasta Lomza do 2020 roku</i> )	<p>In part "Conditions for the development": "Economic migration of young, educated people from Lomza.", "Emigration of the most talented sports youth and coaching staff to larger centers (academic) and renowned sports clubs.", "Lomza residents leaving for work to the European Union countries." and "Lack of housing for refugees with a status and tolerated stay staying in the city." are mentioned as some of the city's Weaknesses. Three of the above-mentioned concern on outflow (both internal and external) while only the fourth one concerns inflow and refugees.</p> <p>None of the strategic goals is related directly to the foreign migrants, although the one "Constant improvement of the living environment of the inhabitants as well as organizing and supporting activities for the integration of the Lomza community and the creation of local identity" could be attributed to the integration aspects. However, only two measures ("number of newly built council flats, including social flats (pcs.)" and "number of renovated council houses and flats (pcs.)") of the 21 planned ones to monitor the goal implementation could be partly attributed to the support of migrants integration.</p> <p>One of the strategic programs planned to help gain development goals is "Lomza - a safe and friendly city to live - care for the good condition of cultural heritage resources, further development of housing and social services." A reference to the outflow can be seen in one of the operational goals "Integration of environments of Lomza ex-residents, living in Poland or abroad, around the initiatives of the authorities for the development of Lomza"; it was even planned to establish an administrative unit responsible for maintaining and handling contacts with the Lomza emigration.</p>
'Lomza City Development Program until 2020' ( <i>Program Rozwoju Miasta Lomza do roku 2020</i> )	<p>One of the basic assumptions of this document is that the development possibilities of Lomza are determined mainly by external factors. The Program refers to the document defining the shape of the cohesion policy: "Europe 2020", which sets the priorities of the cohesion policy. One of Lomza's main weaknesses is "Further decrease in population due to low birth level and negative migration balance." As for the other Weaknesses, none is directly connected to the migration, but there is a problem of exclusion linked to unemployment and poverty: "The phenomenon of social exclusion most often affects the long-term unemployed, people far from the labor market with low social competences and professional qualifications, people living in unfavorable economic conditions, suffering from disabilities, addictions, and homelessness. The main barriers that prevent full participation in society are unemployment and poverty."</p> <p>It is interesting that "Migration of educated and young people (drain of the "youth potential")" and "Deepening the ageing of the population" are seen by the Program as Threats, not Weaknesses.</p>
'Lomza City Local Revitalization Program for 2017-2023' ( <i>Lokalny Program Rewitalizacji Miasta Lomza na lata 2017-2023</i> )	<p>In the "In-depth diagnosis of the revitalization area," the meetings' participants pointed to the problems and "Emigration of young, educated people" was mentioned as one of the main problems.</p>

and allay fears. The NGO has educated Chechens about their rights and principles in everyday life in Poland, making them aware of what behaviours are not accepted and why (PL\_NGO\_01, PL\_NGO\_03). The organization has proved to be a key mediator in conflict situations in the city between native residents and newcomers from Chechnya. Without mitigation measures, both the NGO and the Chechen elders, isolated incidents could lead to

street riots, an escalation of mutual hostility, and a prolonged disturbance of the stabilization of everyday life in Lomza (PL\_NGO\_01).

All interviewees also agreed that the many years of the Chechen presence in Lomza and the activities undertaken by the NGO have increased the acceptance among inhabitants of Lomza for the culturally different community. The perception of foreigners has become much more positive than before, with no further violence or aggression (PL\_LGOV\_03, PL\_LGOV\_02, PL\_LGOV\_00, PL\_NGO\_01). The representatives of the NGO, in turn, emphasized that this balance, resulting from many years of educational and integration work, is very fragile and would be easy to destroy – media reports and statements by politicians directly influence the perception of migrants among the inhabitants of Lomza. Each anti-migrant statement may result in the return of mutual suspicion and hostility (PL\_NGO\_01).

Ukrainians used the help of the local NGO to a much lesser extent than the Chechens (PL\_NGO\_01), which four reasons can explain. Firstly, the cultural similarity between this group of migrants and Poles facilitated their harmonious functioning in the host community. Secondly, Ukrainians who arrive in the city as economic migrants could integrate with the local labour market much faster due to their legal status enabling them to work, unlike asylum seekers who can get work permission six months after starting an asylum procedure. Notably, the vast majority of Ukrainians came to Poland without their families, slept in quarters arranged by employers, employers quite quickly learned to handle the formalities related to their employment. What's more, Ukrainians are a well-organized group; people already living in Poland help new arrivals. As a result, the help of the NGO towards this group of migrants was sporadic, sometimes limited to help with enrolling children in schools, helping them deal with homework, and learning Polish (Ukrainians usually learn Polish quickly because of the similarity between Polish and Ukrainian) (PL\_NGO\_01).

## CONCLUSION

The above analysis revealed that Lomza's authorities, despite the presence of immigrants in the city, have neither formulated any strategy towards this group nor adopted unique solutions facilitating their integration. There are three possible explanations for such an approach. Firstly, as the Lomza local government representatives argued, the number of foreigners is insignificant, and there is no need for a particular strategy or instruments addressed at them. Secondly, as reflected in the interviews, immigration is an intensely politicized issue, and taking supportive actions towards immigrants is not politically safe, especially in a city with a predominantly conservative community. Thirdly, the lack of financial resources of Lomza as a downscaled city can hamper their allocation according to the needs of every particular group.

Immigrants, if noticed at all by the municipal government, are not treated as a separate group by the local public policy in a sense there are no specific instruments addressed towards them. Not only are there no incentives for newcomers, including foreign migrants, but also the already settled immigrants, namely refugees, often rely on social welfare or the assistance provided by NGOs. It is unlikely that immigrants will mitigate the negative consequences of the city depopulation and the ageing of the Lomza community. The city's local government can be hardly blamed for this since the response to both phenomena, city shrinkage and immigration is mainly the responsibility of the national government. The latter is very reluctant to adopt a coherent migration policy or strategy due to the ruling Law and Justice party's preference to keep the topic of migration politicized and securitized (Sobczak-Szelc et al., 2022). In fact, until August 2021, only authorities of few bigger cities in Poland, like Warsaw, Cracow, Gdansk, Wroclaw, Lublin or, recently, Lodz, contradicted the anti-refugee narrative of the national government and implemented solutions aiming at welcoming immigrants (Sobczak-Szelc et al., 2020). Since summer 2021, the situation has gotten even more politicized due to the crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border (Pędzwiatr et al., 2021).


Another significant challenge faced by Lomza was locating the centre for asylum seekers in the city without consulting this decision with the local community and without preparation of the local community through an educational campaign concerning the culture and customs of the future residents of the centre. Although not including the opinions of the interested ones has been common practice in choosing the location of asylum seekers' centres (Chrzanowska et al., 2011), be it a secluded military base in a forest, town, or a city, this decision appeared to be especially misguided for a city dealing with social and economic problems. The location of centres in cities that are losing their functions creates a challenge for the inclusion of immigrants – lack of work is a problem not only for migrants but also for residents (Chrzanowska et al., 2011). At the same time, cities with limited budget incomes do not have the financial resources and employees to carry out integration and assistance activities for foreigners. The lack of educational activities related to immigration and cultural diversity conducted by the state addressed to the host community causes additional problems with accepting culturally different groups of newcomers.

An opportunity for Lomza and other shrinking cities is Poland's slowly emerging civil society. Apart from NGOs' obvious auxiliary role in receiving and including foreign immigrants, they also, directly or indirectly, carry out educational activities that often result in increased public awareness. Undoubtedly, the activities of the NGO in Lomza are effective and highly needed. However, the basis of this success is fragile – the institutional framework of NGOs' activities is unstable, as most of them are based on volunteer involvement and social capital. NGOs have insufficient funding sources, and the public authority does not support their activities. The COVID-19 pandemic only confirmed the need to introduce systemic solutions focused on providing assistance to migrants by NGOs and recognizing the latter actor as indispensable for the development of local communities.

To conclude, adopting a migration strategy by the national government as an outcome of broad consultations with all stakeholders involved in the reception and integration of immigrants, including both local governments and NGOs, should be one of the steps in responding to shrinkage processes. Without the mentioned strategy, shrinking cities and towns in Poland will have to deal with the challenge of integrating all groups of inhabitants, including migrants, on their own by using their own scarce resources. In such a situation the risk of exclusion of some groups, in particular non-citizens, is quite high.

Lastly, it needs to be emphasized that the article presents the outcomes of the analysis of just one selected case study and the latter cannot be taken as a pattern of public policy towards migrants in all shrinking cities in Poland. However, it can be a good starting point to extend the research to other shrinking small cities and towns in Poland and to examine how they deal with migrants in the absence of national strategy on this issue. Especially, considering the fact that the new circumstances, namely the war in Ukraine started by Russia in February 2022 and the unprecedented social mobilization in Poland to help refugees fleeing Ukraine, may trigger an emergence of the public policy towards migrants in many shrinking localities.

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## PEER REVIEW

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors elect to not share empirical data (recordings and transcripts of the in-depth interviews) for the sake of ensuring the anonymity of respondents.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Currently (as of February 2022), the Migration Strategy is under preparation. Although it passed the consultation phase (only selected civil society and academia actors were included), the final text has not been disclosed yet. The previous Migration Strategy, adopted in 2012, was cancelled in 2016 by the Law and Justice government.
2. A voivodeship is the highest-level administrative division of Poland, corresponding to a "province" in many other countries.
3. Post-working age in Poland is 60 years and more for women and 65 years and more for men.
4. Bank danych lokalnych GUS, <https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/BDL/start> (Accessed 01.05.2021)
5. Rodzina 500 plus (*Family 500 plus*) – a social policy program implemented in Poland since 1 April 2016, under which parents or guardians receive a monthly allowance for each child of PLN 500.
6. Green Lungs of Poland – The functional area is located in the north-eastern part of the country, and its area is 63,234 km<sup>2</sup>, which is 20.2 per cent of the territory of Poland. About 4 million people live in this area, about 10% of the country's population. The basis for delimiting the area was one of the most valuable ecological systems in the country and Europe.
7. <https://biznes.um.lomza.pl/invest-in-lomza/dlaczego-lomza/gospodarka> (Accessed 01.05.2021).
8. Lomza Municipal Office, survey 2021.
9. In 2019, the number of declarations on entrusting work issued by the Powiat Labour Office in Lomza was 2,505. Source: <https://wupbialystok.praca.gov.pl/documents/102984/10969470/Cudzoziemcy%20na%20podlaskim%20rynku%20pracy/7862d0a7-b12b-4c42-a7ba-3b5d4283bdc0?t=1576581274924> (accessed 1 May 2021).
10. Ośrodek dla uchodźców pozostanie w Łomży, „Portal Samorządowy”, <https://www.portalsamorzadowy.pl/polityka-i-spoleczenstwo/osrodek-dla-uchodzcow-pozostanie-w-lomzy,11626.html> (Accessed 30.04.2021)
11. Klimowicz J., Kosmici odleca z Łomży, "Gazeta Wyborcza", 2 April 2010, [https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/1,35241,7731038,Kosmici\\_odleca\\_z\\_Lomzy.htm](https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/1,35241,7731038,Kosmici_odleca_z_Lomzy.htm) (Accessed 30.04.2021).
12. The set of analysed strategic documents consisted of: "Strategia zrównoważonego rozwoju miasta Lomza do 2020 roku", "Program Rozwoju Miasta Lomza", "Program Rozwoju Miasta Lomza do roku 2020 plus", „Lokalny Program Rewitalizacji Miasta Lomza na lata 2017–2023”, „Strategia Rozwiązywania Problemów Społecznych miasta Lomza na lata 2016–2021”, „Program Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości w Mieście Lomza na lata 2020 plus. Przedsiębiorcza Lomza - otwarta na biznes”
13. The authors decided not to disclose the name of the NGO referred to in the article for the sake of ensuring the anonymity of the interlocutors.

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