A known but uncertain path: The role of foreign labour in Polish agriculture

Agata Górny*, Paweł Kaczmarczyk

University of Warsaw, Poland

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ABSTRACT

We assess the role of foreign labour in Polish agriculture in the short run, and reflect on the sustainability of the supply of foreign labour in the long run. We thus examine an example of a new immigrant destination that is characteristic for a large share of agriculture production in the total product and oversupply of domestic labour in a farm sector as a heritage of the post-communist past. Drawing on registry data, on a survey of farmers conducted in 2016, and on a survey of Ukrainian migrants (the largest group of labour migrants in Poland) conducted in 2015, we document the high reliance of the farm sector on foreign workers in several regions of Poland, especially in the Mazowieckie region which is where the rate of employment of foreign labour is the highest in Poland. Because low-paid and arduous farm work is not too attractive to migrants, they tend to seek employment in other sectors, especially women and first-timers. Consequently, a significant increase in the supply of Ukrainian workers to Polish farms is rather unlikely in the near future. This assessment implies that Polish farms should not only rely on a cheap foreign labour, but need to invest in labour-substituting technologies. Our observations add to the literature on the links between labour migration and agricultural development: processes observed in the farm sectors of developed countries resurface in the little explored context of post-communist, new immigrant destinations.

1. Introduction

Studies on mobility in the context of rural areas address two general themes. The first relates to the consequences of the outflow from agriculture, which in extreme cases might lead to depopulation of certain migrant-sending areas (Fielding, 1989; Saville, 2013; Stockdale, 2002; Stockdale et al., 2000). The second area of the research, developing more recently, concerns so-called counterurbanisation and the role of inflow of human capital as a prerequisite for sustainable endogenous development of rural areas (Varthainen, 1989; Mitchell, 2004; Bijker and Haartsen, 2012; Halliday and Coombes, 1995; Terluin, 2003; Stockdale, 2006).

Our article addresses the second perspective by presenting developments in the agriculture sector in Poland in a context of studies on the New Immigrant Destinations (NIDs). NIDs became a subject of interest in the contemporary migration research for a number of reasons. First, scale and dynamics of inflow to these areas has been exceptional in last few decades (see e.g. Corrado et al., 2017 on Southern Europe; Hoggart and Mendoza, 1999; Collantes et al., 2014 on Spain; Fonseca, 2008 on Portugal; Kasimis, 2010 on Greece; Scott, 2105 on the UK; McAreevey, 2012, 2017 on Northern Ireland, or Rye and Andrzejewska, 2010 on Norway). Second, many of those areas share the feature of being ethnically homogeneous and little experienced in terms of presence of foreigners. Third, they generally lack proper infrastructure, including public services and that – together with the second feature listed above – makes integration of immigrants a particularly challenging endeavour (Winders, 2014; McAreevey, 2017).

The Polish case is a clear example of a NID although Poland is still a net-emigration country, with a short history of immigration and a stock of permanent migrants barely exceeding 1% of the total population (Okoński, 2012; Górny et al., 2010). Fragmented data suggest that employment of seasonal foreign labour in the farm sector has already become a visible phenomenon in some locations in Poland, including rural areas (Górny et al., 2016). High demand for foreign labour in the farm sector, and consequently its reliance on foreign workers, are tendencies observed in many ‘older’ immigration countries (Ruh and Martin, 2008; Findlay and McCollum, 2013). However, the dynamics of these processes deserve attention, given relatively high share of agricultural production in the total product and the existing oversupply of the domestic labour force in Polish agriculture (Wiśniewski and Rudnicki, 2016; Lewandowski and Magda, 2014).

Against this background, we aim to determine whether reliance on foreign labour can constitute an avenue for development of Polish agriculture, as has been observed in other immigration countries. In attending to this topic we seek to answer two general questions. What is the role of foreign labour in the Polish farm sector already, and what are the predictions that presence of foreign workers in this sector will become a permanent phenomenon in the context of the long-term development path of Polish agriculture? As yet, the role of foreign labour...
in the development of the agriculture sectors of NIDs in Central and Eastern Europe has not been analysed in depth. In this article, we thus contribute to the literature on the mobility/rural development nexus by examining the unexplored context and by demonstrating to what extent the processes observed in the farm sectors of developed countries are replicable in the post-communist context of the NIDs.

In the analyses conducted in this article, we focus on Ukrainian migrants, who constitute the vast majority of foreign farm workers in Poland (Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy data). We examine three sources of data: registry data and two surveys – on Ukrainian migrants and on farmers – conducted in 2015 and 2016 in Mazowieckie voivodeship – the region with the highest inflow of foreign workers to Poland. In the context that quantitative analyses of foreign labour in Polish agriculture are virtually lacking, triangulation of these three sources is necessary for providing a comprehensive picture of the studied processes. The registry data allow us to determine the scale and geographical distribution of foreign farm workers in Poland, in particular the role of Mazowieckie voivodeship in this regard. The survey on farmers serves for examination of the role of foreign workers in Polish agriculture on the example of Mazowieckie voivodeship. Finally, the survey on Ukrainian migrants makes it possible to determine the degree of permanency of employment of foreigners in the agriculture from the perspective of migrants.

2. Conceptual background and contextual facts

2.1. Agricultural labour market and migration

Migration scholars commonly point to the importance of foreign labour for well-developed economies, and particularly to their structural dependence on immigrant labour in certain labour market segments (Piore, 1979; Constant and Massey, 2005). Agriculture presents an interesting and extreme case in this regard. As pointed out by several authors (Martin, 1985; Timmer, 1988; Taylor, 2010), this sector is unique for a number of reasons. First, as agricultural production relies on inputs from nature, it is strongly seasonal, and timely access to labour is a key to market success (labour supply risks). Second, it is shaped by a high degree of risk related both to states of nature (production risks) and markets for agricultural products (total product and specific amenities). This sort of adjustment of farm businesses.

According to the conceptual model proposed by Taylor (2010), the agriculture sector is not only small and decreasing in terms of employment (absolute and relative to other sectors). It can also be assumed that due to the weak competitive position of the farm sector in terms of the labour market, the domestic labour supply is elastic in the long term (and to a large extent also in the short run). This means that, along with the expansion of off-farm activities, farm wages need to rise in order to attract native workers. This effect should be even stronger if we assume that non-farm activities bear some positive externalities (e.g. easier access to public goods or urban specific amenities). This sort of adjustment would apparently question the profitability of farm businesses. Instead, farmers can rely on a foreign labour supply that, considering the severe wage gap between well- and less-developed countries, is often highly elastic at relatively low wage levels. Under such circumstances, the long-term solution will be a gradual decline in domestic labour accompanied by a significant insertion of foreign workers that, in turn, will satisfy the seasonal demand for labour and have a relatively low reservation wage. Importantly in this context, exogenous shocks will primarily affect the quantity of labour demanded (largely foreign), and not the wage level. As a consequence, Taylor (2010) proposes two main avenues for development of rural production: growing reliance on foreign labour, with a necessity to employ active

migration policies stimulating a sustainable inflow of migrants, government development of labour-conserving technologies, including robotics.

These considerations point to a critical role of migrant workers in structural transformation and sustainable development of the farming sector, with the USA as an exemplary case. Taylor (2010) claims, however, that other farm labour markets generally mirror this case with regard to the declining elasticity of domestic workers, increasing role of foreign workers and efforts made to increase the accessibility of immigrants (including lobbying certain migration policy options). In fact, historically both internal and international labour migration were central to the transformation of rural areas (Castles, 2006). Shrinking numbers of native farm workers, growing productivity of agriculture and increased demand for hired workers, alongside replacement of the subsistence mode of production by commercial production, are processes that have already been observed in many countries.

This is the reason why most Western European countries at certain stages of development started to seek foreign farm workers. Prominent examples include the Bracero programme in the USA (Martin, 2002; Reichert and Massey, 1982), seasonal schemes in the UK (Findlay and McCollum, 2013; Scott, 2015), the so-called second wave of guest-worker schemes applied in Germany in the 1990s and 2000s (Castles, 1986, 2006; Ruhs and Martin, 2008) and particularly Southern European countries presented often as a typical case of large-scale employment of foreign rural workers (Hoggart and Mendoza, 1999; Corrado et al., 2017). What Southern, Central and Eastern European NIDs have in common are: a relatively large share of agriculture in the total product and specific modes of economic development with an important role of underground economy (Reynier, 2010). Specificity of Central and Eastern European countries derives from at least two facts. First, during the communist period most of them recorded an increase and not a decline in farm employment. Second, due to a number of reasons including economic backwardness, low attractiveness and political isolation, these countries started to transform into net receiving areas only in the 1990s, and a few of them, including Poland, are still to complete this ‘migration transition’ (Arango, 2012; Okolski, 2012).

However, growing reliance on foreign labour as the solution for rural development poses obvious drawbacks, as it assumes steady access to the supply of foreign workers not only able to come to a given country but also willing to work in the agricultural sector. The available empirical evidence shows that it is increasingly difficult to meet these assumptions. Studies on the US farm market document increasing changes in the penetration of the Mexican labour market (and growing reliance of Mexican agriculture on foreign workers) (Boucher et al., 2007; Taylor, 2010). European farming has made extensive use of cheap labour from Central and Eastern Europe, especially in the first phase of post-communist transition in the 1990s and later on after two rounds of EU enlargement (2004 and 2007). However, there are growing concerns about the sustainability of these solutions (Honekopp, 1997; Dietz, 2004; Castles, 2006; Hess, 2006). The issue of securing inflow of immigrant labour is of critical importance for NIDs, including Southern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe (Jentsch, 2007; Jentsch and Simard, 2009; Kasimis et al., 2003; Corrado et al., 2017). These are not that attractive, in terms of the level of incomes, as their Western European counterparts and, at the same time, lacking public institutions important in the process of socio-economic integration of newcomers (Corrado et al., 2017; McAreeavey, 2017).

2.2. Polish agriculture

Both consequences of outflow from (Stasiak, 1992; Gawryszewski and Potrykowski, 1988) and inflow to (Léon, 2005; Szymańska and Chodkowska-Miszczuk, 2011) rural areas are vital topics in the context of Polish agriculture. In addition, structural mismatches and the heritage of the past – the partition period and the socialist mode of development – constitute an important contextual background for the developmental processes underway in the Polish rural sector. In the late 1980s, on the eve of Poland's
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