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Defying the recession? Polish migrants in Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland

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Introduction

The world economy has been hit by a global recession, the first of its kind since the 1970s and possibly the worst since the late 1920s. Not only has the international trade of capital, goods and services slowed down, but also the international movement of people. In countries such as the UK and Ireland, the most important form of labour migration in recent years has been East-West migration, particularly since EU enlargement in 2004. How has this intra-European mobility been affected by the current economic downturn? Do migrants from the new member states (NMS) respond differently to an economic downturn than previous generations of 'guestworkers'? To explore this, we will focus on Ireland's recent migration experience. Ireland appears to be well suited to study the impact of the recession on intra-European migration. The country has not only experienced large-scale inward migration from the new EU Member States (NMS) in recent years, but has also been severely hit by a recession. In the context of an economic downturn, some media outlets increasingly promote the view that NMS migrants are on their way out, fostered by headlines such as 'Up to 1,300 Poles leaving Ireland every week' (Irish Independent 8 December 2008) and '3,000 Poles leave Ireland every month' (Sunday Tribune 18 January 2009).

In this paper we take a different view. By drawing on an ongoing Qualitative Panel Study on the experience of Polish migrants in the Irish labour market, we argue that the decision to 'stay or go' is more complex than any simplistic assumptions about 'Poles going home' allow for. For a start, a significant majority of NMS migrants remain in employment, in spite of the downturn, and the situation in the home countries may be even worse. Furthermore, even if migrants should lose their job in Ireland, welfare arrangements offer some protection against unemployment. Moreover, the longer migrants stay in the host country, the more non-economic factors such as social networks and quality of life take on a greater importance.

When evaluated in historical perspective, contemporary East-West migration appears to be more transient than previous population movements. Contemporary migrants from the NMS tend to be more mobile in the light of new travel opportunities, communication technologies and a free movement regime that enables temporary and circular migration even in times of recession. As 'free movers' (Favell 2008), Polish and other NMS have more opportunities to respond to the current economic crisis than previous generations of European immigrants. At the same time, just because NMS migrants are more mobile than previous generations of European immigrants, does not mean that they necessarily leave the country in greater numbers because of a downturn. This would be in accordance with

historical experience. Although migration inflows slow down in times of a downturn, migration outflows are relatively insensitive to rapidly changing labour market conditions. In other words, whereas fewer migrants arrive in times of a crisis, those already in the country do not necessarily leave in greater numbers.

Migration and recession in historical perspective

The experience with previous recessions suggest that immigration slows down in times of a downturn, partly because population movements are responsive to market conditions but also because governments are more inclined to pursue restrictive immigration policies. This became most visible in the 1970s when in the context of the oil crisis and an ensuing recession labour recruitment programmes were terminated across Western Europe. In countries such as Britain and France that had relied on post-colonial immigration, and effectively operated a free movement regime, admission became more restrictive at around the same time (Castles/Miller 2003). As a result, the inflow of migrant workers declined significantly across Europe.¹ However, after an initial surge in outflows, no significant return migration occurred (Dobson et al. 2009), in spite of a growing unease about the presence of a significant share of 'non-nationals', many of whom became now dependent on social welfare transfers.

While during the economic depression of the 1930s and the Asian crisis of the 1990s some countries expelled migrants (Castles 2009), this was less of an option for Western democracies in the context of the 'rights revolution' (Hollifield 1992) that occurred in the aftermath of World War Two. While some countries tried to incentivise migrants to return to their countries of origin, such initiatives only had limited success (Slater 1979). Although many migrants lost their jobs, they became integrated into the various welfare states of Western Europe, in spite of political pressure towards 'closure' of the welfare system (Bommes/Geddes 2000). Although the active recruitment of migrant labour ceased in the aftermath of the oil crisis, most Western European countries continued experiencing net immigration, mainly in the form of family re-unification. As a result, Europe was transformed into a continent of immigration (Castles/Miller 2003).

Although no large-scale return migration occurred during the time of the oil crisis in the 1970s, some migrant groups responded differently to an economic crisis than others. Broadly speaking, migrants from countries with a higher GDP such as Italy, Spain and Greece were more likely to return than migrants from countries with a lower GDP such as Turkey, Yugoslavia and Portugal (Dobson et al. 2009: 7-8). This suggests that the situation in the

home country is of some importance in influencing the decision to return. This becomes also apparent when considering the situation in the UK in the 1970s. Whereas Irish immigrants returned in greater numbers to the home country, such tendencies were not visible among New Commonwealth immigrants. Besides greater geographical proximity, another important factor has been the relatively stable Irish economy at that time which induced return migration (Kirwin/Nairn 1983). In spite of a greater propensity of some migrant groups to return than others, the historical experience suggests that although migrant inflows decline during a recession, the migration stock in the host country remains relatively stable and may even increase as other forms of migration, in particular family reunion, acquire greater importance in the context of a downturn.

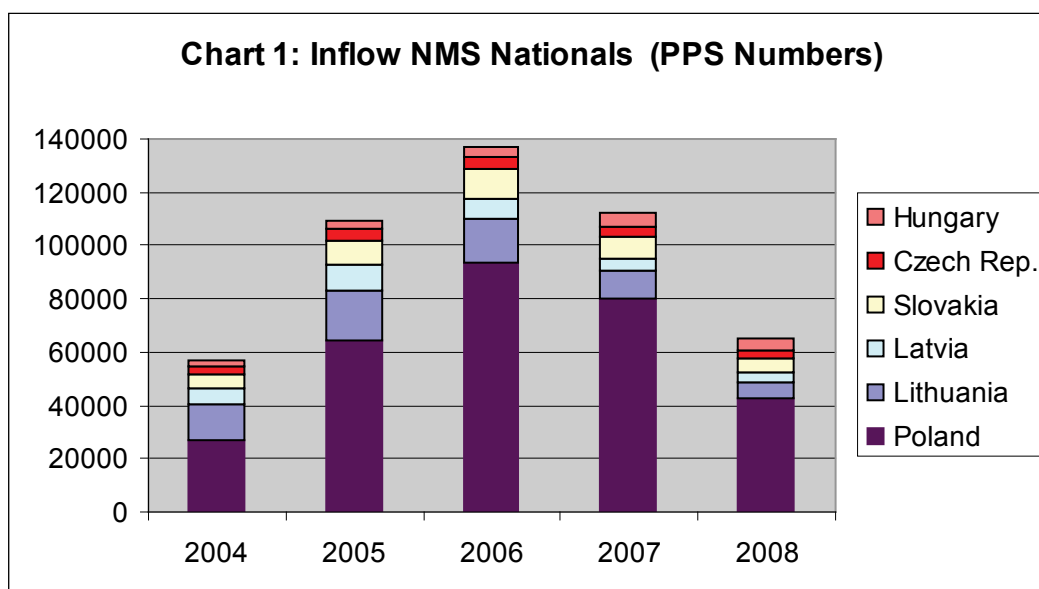
As with previous recessions, the current economic crisis is most severe in those sectors that have a high share of migrants, including construction, manufacturing (particularly internal migrants in China) and hotels and restaurants. Migrants in low-skilled positions (e.g. construction labourer) are likely to be especially hit by the downturn. At the same time, the impact of the crisis is not confined to low-paid positions but is also likely to affect migrants in more skilled positions (e.g. financial specialists, civil engineers and architects) (Martin 2009; OECD 2009; Papademetriou et al. 2009). What is distinctive about the current economic crisis is its global dimension. Unlike previous downturns, one region is not benefiting economically at the expense of another as during the oil crisis in 1973. Although Europe was closing its door at that time, new migration opportunities developed elsewhere, particularly in the Gulf States. Presently, there are few signs of similar developments as immigration has slowed down globally. This applies not only to East-West migration but also, for instance, to undocumented migration into the USA which tends to be particularly sensitive to market developments. Even the oil rich countries of the Middle East have less of a demand for additional labour from abroad in the light of a decline in construction activities (Castles 2009; Martin 2009). In Europe, Ireland has been among those countries that have been particularly badly hit by the downturn.

Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland and immigration

After almost two decades of unprecedented growth during the Celtic Tiger years, Ireland has been severely hit by a recession. A dramatic decline in the housing market in conjunction with the global financial crisis dramatically altered the economic fortunes of the country. The Irish economy is expected to shrink by 14 per cent in the period from 2008-2010, the sharpest fall in economic growth of any industrialised country since the Great Depression of

the 1930s. The unemployment rate, once among the lowest in the EU, is likely to rise to over 15 per cent by 2010 (Barrett et al. 2009). What are the implications of the economic downturn for Ireland's increasingly diverse workforce?

As in other countries, immigration into Ireland has noticeably slowed down in recent months. This particularly applies to migration flows from the NMS. Whereas for instance in 2006 almost 94,000 Personal Public Service (PPS) numbers were issued to Polish nationals who make up the largest migrant group in the Irish workforce, this has declined to just over 42,000 in 2008 (Chart 1). This appears to be linked to the fact that many young Poles, who are the most mobile section of society, have already left Poland. However, it is also likely to reflect declining economic opportunities in Ireland.



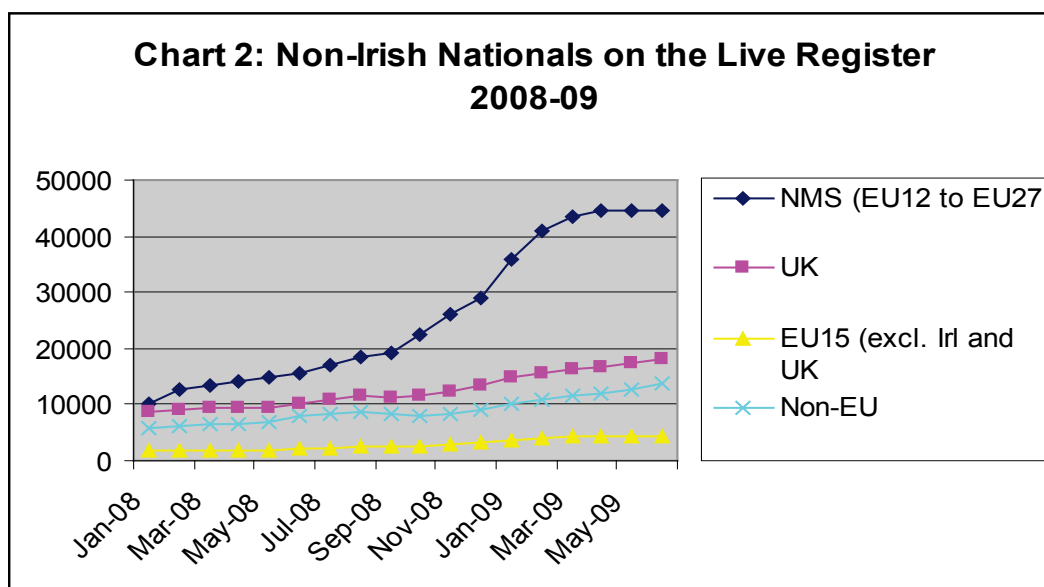
Source: Department of Social and Family Affairs 2009

At the same time, and in accordance with historical experience, there is only limited evidence to suggest that those migrants who already are in the country leave in greater numbers because of the recession. Whereas 483,000 non-Irish nationals were living in Ireland at the beginning of 2008, this number only marginally declined to 462,000 at the beginning of 2009, in spite of the quite dramatic reversal of the economic fortunes of the country (QNHS 2009). This relatively small reduction is largely accounted for by NMS migrants whose numbers declined from 209,000 to 185,000.

The most visible indicator of the current downturn has been a significant increase in unemployment. Between the first quarter of 2008 and 2009, almost 160,000 jobs have been shed, with unemployment rising to over 10 percent. If broken down by nationality, the data shows that the unemployment rate among Irish nationals increased from 4.6 per cent to 9.4

per cent, whereas among non-Irish nationals it rose from 6.4 to 14.7 per cent. An increase in unemployment was particularly noticeable among NMS migrants where it almost trebled from 6.4 per cent to 17.7 per cent (QNHS 2009). This is in part due to the fact that the latter were over-represented in the construction sector that has seen by far the worst job losses of all sectors. Thus, although both Irish and non-Irish workers are affected by the crisis, the latter have experienced a sharper increase in unemployment in recent months.

This is also reflected in a significant increase in people signing on the Live Register. Most recently there has been a sharp increase in the number of non-Irish nationals applying for either jobseeker's benefit or jobseeker's allowance. Since the beginning of 2008, the number of migrants signing on increased threefold from 26,488 to 80,945. During the same period the number of Irish nationals signing on more than doubled from 154,961 to 337,647. NMS migrants, who previously had the highest employment rate of all migrant groups, have seen by far the highest increase of people signing on, with numbers rising by over 300 per cent from 10,064 to 44,566 (Chart 2). In addition to deteriorating economic circumstances, the fact that many NMS nationals now fulfil the Habitual Residence condition which requires people to be resident in Ireland for at least two years to qualify for welfare payment, is likely to have contributed to the huge increase as well. As can be seen from Chart 2, the increase of NMS migrants on the Live Register has recently levelled off, likely to reflect some outward migration that has occurred in recent months (QNHS 2009).



Source: Central Statistics Office 2009

Thus, the preliminary evidence that is beginning to emerge suggests that migrants are somewhat more affected by the crisis than Irish workers. This would be in accordance with historical experience during the 1970s when migrants in less-skilled positions in industrial manufacturing and construction were laid off (Castles/Miller 2003; Slater, 1979). However, the parallels to the 'guestworker' era should not be overstated. Compared to previous generations of European immigrants, NMS migrants have higher educational attainments and include a greater share of female migrants.² Although NMS migrants are over-represented in less-skilled occupations, they are not confined to the latter but are found in occupations across the skills spectrum. Moreover, they tend to be more mobile than previous generations of European immigrants in the light of new travel opportunities, new communication technologies and a free movement regime (Favell 2008). Does this make them respond differently to a recession than previous 'guestworkers' and post-colonial immigrants?

Migrants in a recession: will they stay or will they go?

To explore migrant responses to the recession, we now draw on an ongoing Qualitative Panel Study (QPS) on the experience of Polish migrants in the Irish labour market. Our sample includes twenty-two migrants, ten women and twelve men, aged between 22 and 38 years who almost all arrived in Ireland post-enlargement 2004. They are found in a variety of occupations ranging from general operatives and less-skilled service sector positions to managerial and professional positions in four employment sectors, construction, hospitality, software and financial services. Our interviewees are interviewed every four months over a period of two years. As we assume that some participants may leave Ireland during this time, the study is designed to interview migrants at their new destination, either face-to-face or on the telephone. In fact the first interviews with two return migrants from our panel have already been carried in Poland. While such a methodology necessarily involves only a relatively small number of interviewees and does not claim to be representative of Polish migrants in Ireland, it enables researchers to map changes (or lack of them) at the individual level over time (Farall 2006). This is of particular relevance for the analysis of how migrants adjust to changing economic circumstances during a downturn.

So far our participants have been interviewed three times since spring 2008. In particular in the last interview wave we also asked questions in relation to the current downturn. Predictably, Polish migrants, as the rest of the population, are becoming more concerned about their jobs. At the same time, however, we only found limited evidence to

suggest that migrants are about to leave the country in greater numbers because of the economic crisis. This is, as we argue, because of a number of factors, including continuous employment opportunities, social welfare arrangements and the role of non-economic factors such as social networks.

Although many jobs are currently lost in Ireland, it is worth bearing in mind that a clear majority (76 per cent) of all NMS migrants over the age of 15 remain in employment (QNHS 2009). Furthermore, even if migrants should lose their job, this may not necessarily lead to their departure as social welfare arrangements offer some protection against unemployment. As already mentioned, most NMS migrants who arrived post-enlargement are now eligible for welfare benefits and they are increasingly aware of this: 'You can always get...I wouldn't want to...but you can get the benefit here, the one for the unemployed. So it gives you some survival' (male, 30). Moreover, as this recession has a global dimension, returning to the home country may be less of an option (Castles 2009). As one interviewee who works in financial services put it: 'Back in July (2008) I thought that in the first quarter of this year I'd be returning to Poland but, well, in Poland it's not great either' (male, 32).

What is sometimes neglected in the debate about whether migrants will 'stay or go' is that the decision to migrate and, consequently, to stay or move on, is not reached on the basis of economic considerations alone. Certainly economic 'push' and 'pull' factors are a necessary condition to trigger migratory movements. In other words, if there had not been significant wage differentials between Poland and Ireland, with high unemployment in the former and significant labour and skills shortages in the latter, large-scale migration between the two countries had not occurred. However, in the later stages of the migration process, push and pull factors become less important and networks take on a greater importance (Massey et al. 1993; Waldinger/Lichter 2003). The longer migrants stay abroad, the more they become immersed in the various social networks in the host country: 'I practically don't have any of my friends over there (in Poland). And here, you know, I have loads of friends; my whole life is centred around here' (female, 28). New found social relations can influence the decision to stay in the host country: 'For the moment I'll be here...at the beginning it was tougher, but now I'm somehow becoming more and more acclimatised when it comes to friends, some acquaintances and stuff like that' (female, 24). Thus, migrant networks help to sustain the migration process relatively independently from short-term economic change, including an economic downturn (Portes 1995).

Another factor that goes beyond just economic considerations is the search for a better quality of life. Most research on intra-European mobility usually finds that there exists an 'East-West' divide as to why people move abroad. Whereas for NMS nationals a higher household income is the single most important reason to move to another country, for

nationals from the 'old' Member States 'quality of life' issues are at least equally important (EU Commission 2008; Recchi 2008). Certainly for most of our participants the search for a job and a higher income were initially the single most important reason to move to Ireland: 'In general we came here for earnings. Not to live here nice and beautifully' (male, 30). Nevertheless, our interviews also suggest that the longer NMS nationals stay in Ireland, the more issues like quality of life become important and may influence their decision to stay. As one interviewee put it: 'I care about people who I work with, I like living in this country, you know, I like the lifestyle' (male, 27). This may also apply to the work experience. While it is true that some interviewees reported exploitative working conditions particularly when they initially entered the labour market, others contrast their work experience quite favourably with their previous employment history in Poland. Such a rather positive view of the workplace culture in Dublin also emerged in other research on the experience of Scottish migrants in the Irish Capital (Boyle 2006). As reported by an architect:

When I came here, and you know, my boss trusted me from the very beginning, he said: 'listen, you will do this and that' and really, I am very happy about it. Because he really trusted me and he let me do the project on my own regardless of the fact that I had almost no experience back then. In Poland you still work on the basis that 'I am your boss and you are my employee and I am better than you and you are worse' (female, 28).

What our research found is that many of our participants were quite uncertain about their future long-term plans which appears to be compounded by the downturn: 'So I'm a bit kind of without a plan. And, I don't know, for the moment I'm awaiting what will happen at my bank' (male, 32). Thus, many NMS migrants adopt a 'wait and see' approach and try to keep their options open. This 'intentional unpredictability' (Eade et al. 2006) makes it quite difficult to forecast how they will respond to changing economic circumstances. This is all the more so the case as future job prospects appears to be beyond the control of individuals in the current economic circumstances:

If somebody is asking me when I will go back to Poland then I always say that I don't know. Because it can be like that I lose my job, I don't find another one and I could be back in a month time (male, 30).

Although it is too premature to draw any definite conclusions at this stage, our preliminary findings suggest that those migrants who primarily view their employment in Ireland as a temporary job to earn some money may be more inclined to return home or move on elsewhere. It is a reasonable assumption that among recent outflows from Ireland less-skilled construction labourers who have lost their jobs were over-represented. For these migrants

there would only be a limited prospect of finding new employment, particularly if they lack English language skills. At the same time, however, there is little doubt that many other NMS migrants, particularly those who have acquired sufficient English language proficiency and relevant work experience, are less in a hurry to leave the country. For these migrants there may be continuous employment opportunities even in a downturn as they do not face any labour market restrictions and can move between different employment sectors.

What headlines about 'Poles leaving Ireland' do not capture is that East-West migration has adopted a more transient and circular character, facilitated by new travel opportunities and a free movement regime (Favell 2008).³ Although the *outflow* of Eastern Europeans migrants is likely to have increased recently, there is continuous *inflow* of NMS nationals into Ireland, albeit at a lower rate than in previous years.⁴ Those NMS nationals who have left Ireland may not necessarily go back home 'for good' but may consider returning to Ireland at a latter stage or moving on elsewhere. As reported by one of our interviewees:

(I see) Poland as a place where I can return for a while, in order to find something else, in order to search for opportunities, alternatively for a short period, to earn (some money) in order to go somewhere else (female, 25).

Thus, for the moment there is little evidence to suggest that the current recession will trigger large-scale outward migration from Ireland. What remains to be seen is to what extent the situation in the Eastern European source countries will impact upon to the decision to 'stay or go'. The experience with previous downturns has shown that improved economic conditions in the home country have led to more return migration. In relation to this, the economic performance of the new EU Member States has recently shown signs of divergence. Whereas for instance Poland has weathered the economic storm relatively well, Latvia and Lithuania have been badly affected by the global 'credit crunch' with soaring unemployment as a result (Rogers et al. 2009: 43-45).

Conclusion: the contemporary crisis in historical perspective

Ireland has entered the post-Celtic Tiger era as it has been severely hit by a recession. In this paper we explored the impact of the economic crisis on Polish migrants in the Irish labour market and tried to evaluate it in historical perspective. In accordance with the international experience, inward migration into Ireland has slowed down recently. At the same time, however, there is only limited evidence to suggest that those migrants who

already are in the country leave in greater numbers because of the downturn. By drawing on a Qualitative Panel Study on the experience of Polish migrants in the Irish labour market, we argued that the decision to 'stay or go' is more complex than any simplistic assumptions about 'Poles going home' allow for. It is worth emphasising that a clear majority of NMS migrants remain in employment, in spite of the downturn. Furthermore, even if migrants should lose their job in Ireland, new employment opportunities may come up in the future and welfare arrangements offer some temporary protection against destitution. Moreover, the longer migrants stay in the host country, the more non-economic factors such as social networks and quality of life take on a greater importance. What remains to be seen is to what extent the economic situation in the home country will induce possible return migration in the future.

How does the contemporary experience of migration and recession compare in historical perspective? As many NMS migrants have relatively high educational attainments and do not face any labour market restrictions in countries such as Ireland and the UK, they have more opportunities to respond to an economic downturn than previous generations of European immigrants. This includes the possibility of moving on elsewhere as there is some evidence to suggest that East-West migration has become more transient than previous population movements. This is facilitated by new travel opportunities, new communication technologies and a free movement regime that enables temporary and circular migration even in times of recession. Indeed, one of the reasons why immigrants during the economic crisis in the 1970s did not return home was that they feared they would not have been able to return again to work in their respective host countries (Martin et al. 2006: 19).

At the same time, just because NMS migrants are more mobile than previous generations of European immigrants, does not mean that they necessarily leave the country in greater numbers because of a downturn.⁵ This would be in accordance with historical experience. Although migration inflows slow down in times of a downturn, migration outflows are relatively insensitive to rapidly changing labour market conditions. In other words, whereas fewer migrants arrive in times of a crisis, those already in the country do not necessarily leave in greater numbers. As with previous recessions, this poses some particular challenges to policy-makers, the social partners and other stakeholders. Is there enough political goodwill to defend the employment and welfare rights of migrants even, or perhaps especially, during a downturn? Will migrants who have lost their job be afforded the same opportunities for retraining and upskilling as indigenous workers? Or is there a tacit assumption that migrants will return home 'when times are getting tough'? As it has been argued in this paper, the latter is likely to prove a fallacy.

Endnotes

1 For instance, whereas in 1973 118,000 Turks were recruited in Germany, this number declined to 6,000 in the following year (Dobson et al. 2009: 7).

2 In Ireland, two-thirds of all EU10 migrants either have upper-secondary or third-level education. As for the gender composition, women account for one-third of all recent arrivals (Barrett et al. 2008: 19).

3 It is worth bearing in mind that temporary and circular migration is not a new phenomenon. Although there was relatively little return migration as a result of the oil crisis in 1973, the majority of foreign workers returned to their home countries as envisaged in the 'guestworker' programmes. For instance, of those 18.5 million migrants who arrived in Germany between 1960 and 1973, 'only' 4.7 million settled down (Höhnekopp 1997). Moreover, some forms of temporary and seasonal migration were already observed in the second half of the nineteenth century when the first modern large-scale population movements occurred (Hobsbawn 1997: 237).

4 Since the beginning of 2009, an average of 1,500 Polish nationals continues to arriving each month (DSFA 2009).

5 Interestingly, these findings are corroborated by recent research on the impact of the recession on NMS migrants in England. Glossop and Shaheen (2009) found that in spite of the downturn there is little evidence to suggest that migrants are about to leave the country in greater numbers.

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