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## **Multicultural Families Association – a Non-Governmental Organisation representing the interests of persons with different cultures**

Keywords: multicultural families, non-governmental organization (NGO), association, cultural diversity, Multicultural Families Association

Abstract: The article attempts to show that in the era of post-modernity, ethnically, racially, religiously, culturally or nationally mixed marriages are an increasingly frequent phenomenon, leading to the emergence of new types of cultural identity. The degree of cultural difference determines the number of problems that occur between partners. National, religious, linguistic and cultural differences can affect both positively and negatively the functioning of multicultural families.

The main context of this article is the activity of the Multicultural Families Association, which was founded following a research involving multicultural families living in Krakow. The Association responds to the needs of those families.

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### **Foreword**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ethnically, racially, religiously, culturally or nationally mixed marriages, which lead to the emergence of new types of cultural identity, are characteristic not only of typical multicultural societies, such as those of the USA, UK, Germany, the Netherlands or France. Also in Poland, international marriages are not isolated cases, but are becoming a statistically frequent phenomenon.

The phenomenon of multicultural families and intercultural marriages is associated with amalgamation, which means the development of a multiple identity “beyond divisions”, be it ethnical or national.

In contemporary times, thanks to the Internet and increasingly easy communication between various countries, we witness so-called “shrinking” of the world and, consequently, a growing number of persons from different countries who meet, start a relationship and then create a family. Accordingly, multicultural families are increasingly often the subject of academic research.

Marriages between persons of different cultural background are a kind of an indicator of the openness of a society to other cultures and countries, and they also provide indirect information on the scale of long-term emigration or immigration that may possibly lead to the creation of a lasting and intimate bond between the citizens of two states. When people from different nations enter into marriage, some very important phenomena and processes take place. From amalgamation emerges a new cultural order.

## Persons with different cultures in Poland

The multicultural Poland is made up of national and ethnic minorities who have lived in Poland for ages as well as immigrants who come to Poland for a number of reasons, the same as the reasons for migrating to other countries (work, family, studies).

There are nine national minorities living in Poland: Belarusians, Czechs, Lithuanians, Germans, Armenians, Russians, Slovaks, Ukrainians and Jews, and four ethnic minorities: the Crimean Karaites, Lemkos, Romani and Tatars. Also, in the Pomeranian region live the Kashubs, a community that speaks its regional language – Kashubian. During the *National population and housing census*<sup>1</sup> in 2011, 144,238 of Polish citizens declared to be of German nationality, 38,797 – of Ukrainian nationality, 8,796 – of Russian nationality, 7,374 of Lithuanian nationality, 7,353 – of Jewish nationality, 2,833 of Czech nationality, 2,740 – of Slovak nationality and 1,684 – of Armenian nationality. 16,725 of Polish citizens declared to belong to the Romani minority, 9,641 – to the Lemko minority, 1,828 to the Tatar minority and 313 – to the Crimean Karaite minority.

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<sup>1</sup> *Raport z wyników. Narodowy spis powszechny ludności i mieszkań z 2011 roku*, GUS, Warszawa 2012, wersja internetowa raportu: [http://stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/lud\\_raport\\_z\\_wynikow\\_NSP2011.pdf](http://stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/lud_raport_z_wynikow_NSP2011.pdf) (accessed on: 20.05.2016).

Although traditionally, Poland was a country of emigration, in recent years it has transformed from a typically emigrant country to a mixed emigrant and immigrant one, mainly as a result of EU accession. In recent years, immigrants have played an important role on the Polish labour market, which poses an additional challenge for the institutional structure.

In general terms, five groups of immigrants may be identified in Poland. These are foreign citizens from, respectively: the European Economic Area and Switzerland, the OECD Member States (except the European Economic Area and Switzerland), West European states neighbouring Poland (mainly Belarus, Ukraine and Russia) and the Far East (mainly Vietnam and China), and other regions.

We get information on the number of immigrants in Poland from an organisation called Hafelekar. In association with the “Leonardo da Vinci” and “Job-in-a-Job” Foundations, Hafelekar published the *Report about immigrants in Poland*<sup>2</sup>, according to which the countries from which most immigrants come to Poland are former USSR republics (Ukraine, Belarus, Russia). Another relatively large group of immigrants in Poland are citizens of developed countries (the USA, Germany, France and Vietnam). Every third foreigner residing in Poland comes from one of the neighbouring states. The most immigrants come to Poland from Ukraine (26.6% of all immigrants). Quite a large number of persons come from Belarus (9.2%) and China (4.2%). The immigrants in Poland share two main features. First, they are usually very well educated (36% are university graduates) and most of them are of working age (80% are aged between 20 and 59 years) and employed in Poland. This means that immigrants who come to Poland are professionally active and mostly male, rather than entire immigrant families. Foreigners from different parts of the world do not settle down in the same regions of Poland. West European and American citizens reside mainly in Warsaw and Cracow or in the vicinity of those two cities. Foreigners from the former USSR republics live mainly in Eastern provinces. The most immigrants reside in the Mazovia region (30%). In the ranking, it is followed by the Lesser Poland, Lower Silesia and Lodz regions. Approximately 83% of immigrants live in cities.

Both national and ethnic minorities, and immigrants residing in Poland represent cultures different from the dominant culture, i.e. Polish national culture. This means that for them:

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<sup>2</sup> Hafelekar: *Report about immigrants in Poland*. [http://hafelekar.at/CD\\_III/pdf/pdf\\_pol/raport\\_projektowy\\_na\\_temat\\_sytuacji\\_imigrantow\\_w\\_polsce.pdf](http://hafelekar.at/CD_III/pdf/pdf_pol/raport_projektowy_na_temat_sytuacji_imigrantow_w_polsce.pdf) (accessed on 03.06.2016).

- Polish national culture is not their own but rather a foreign culture; or
- Polish national culture is one of many own cultures (individual multicultural identity); or
- Polish national culture is a part of individual transcultural identity, i.e. identity composed of elements of various cultures, where it is impossible to determine which elements come from which culture, because they have mixed to create a completely new cultural value that cannot be linked with any national culture.

Why is it worth studying persons with different cultures in a given society, even if it seems to be (like the Polish society) relatively homogenous in terms of culture? There are two main reasons, as discussed by Janusz Mucha in his book *Kultura dominująca jako kultura obca (Dominant Culture as a Foreign Culture)*. First, we may learn something important about those communities, and secondly, we may better understand a broader group in which those communities function, i.e., in our case, the Polish culturally dominant community (cf. Mucha, 1999).

## Multicultural families

The category of persons with different cultures that interests me is multicultural families understood as families that represent and cultivate various cultures (national, ethnic). Very often, two cultures are involved (husband's and wife's), but if a couple do not live in the country of origin of either of the partners, the third culture is also involved – that, in which the family lives and functions. Sometimes, one of the partners comes from a multicultural family background and represents a multicultural or transcultural identity. The extent to which cultural patterns, values and norms of the respective cultures are assimilated and cultivated is a subject for further research that goes beyond the scope of this article.

Thus, the multiculturalism of families may be understood as the coexistence and interactions of various cultural patterns in the area of family activity, namely “coexistence within primeval groups, where personal contacts and intercourses predominate” (Komorowski, 1975: 260). Leszek Korporowicz believes that we are and will be more and more frequently confronted with the phenomenon of “(...) the multiculturalism of families and multilingualism of socialisation, various forms of cultural stress as well as a search for new forms of cultural and personal identity of individuals in a situation of borderline, multiplicity and often also disparity of identification” (Korporowicz, 1997: 45). It is the first of the problems potentially facing members of multicultural families, in particular

children, who may find it difficult to define themselves and answer the question: Who am I?

In multicultural families, there are often different religions. Then, a family is not only multicultural but also multireligious. On the one hand, intercultural couples with different religions are open to other denominations, curious to learn about them and tolerant to them. Partners may develop spiritually and broaden their knowledge of their own religion by comparing each other's religions (cf. Romano, 2008). On the other hand, different religions mean different approaches to and philosophies of life, and in particular, it is often difficult to reach a compromise as to the religion of children. Problems grow in number, if the behaviour of one partner does not conform to the religious standards of the other.

According to surveys conducted among families with different cultures, "the degree of cultural differences determines the number of problems arising between partners. Different nationalities, religions, languages and cultures may have both a negative and a positive impact on a partnership or marriage. The result depends, among other things, on similarities between partners, degree of language barrier, acceptance of the partner's different culture and religion, and his or her different views (Sowa-Behtane, 2015: 27). The problematic factors in mixed couples include, for example: differences between national cultures, interlocutor's assumption of similarities, language differences, wrong interpretation of non-verbal signals, stereotypes and prejudices, different value systems, anxieties and tensions, ethnocentrism, cultural shock, different religions, and even the cultural models of satisfying hunger. Apart from problems arising within families, there are also external challenges, such as: non-acceptance by relatives or broader social circles, intolerance towards members of such families, problems with finding employment, problems with acceptance of children from multicultural families in schools. Another category of problems concerns integration of a person representing a different culture in the host society.

We will make a distinction between two main types of multicultural families: those in which one of the members represents Polish nationality and culture, and foreign families or national or ethnic minority families, for whom Polish culture is secondary. Both types of families may encounter certain problems, thus it seems reasonable to provide multicultural families with various kinds of assistance and support.

## **Institutions that cooperate with persons with different cultures**

Institutions that cooperate with persons with different cultures may be classified on the basis of the legal status of those persons or groups. Accordingly, there are

institutions that focus on, respectively, national and ethnic minorities, repatriates and foreigners covered by international protection, and immigrants not classified under either of the two groups.

Institutions supporting the functioning of national and ethnic minorities include: the Department for National and Ethnic Minorities at the Ministry of Home Affairs and Administration, and Regional Representatives for National and Ethnic Minorities.

Since Poland's accession to the European Union, the national government has been accommodating its migration policy to the EU standards. According to the instrument entitled *The Polish migration policy – current status vs. future actions*, developed by the Interdepartmental Committee for Migration in July 2011, Polish governmental institutions are obliged to provide specific support and services to repatriates and foreigners with international protection. However, governmental institutions are not obliged to support other categories of citizens (e.g. from third countries). This task is left to NGOs, which rely on external funding for their activities.

In Poland, there are many non-profit organisations whose mission is to develop an open and diversified society by promoting intercultural dialogue and social integration, fighting against discrimination, disseminating knowledge and developing tools for social integration and equality of immigrants. The purpose of Polish NGOs is to develop a society whose every member may feel free and safe, and may develop and participate in social life, according to his needs and ambitions, no matter who he is and where he comes from, and one that respects, appreciates and fosters social diversity. One of such NGOs is the Multicultural Families Association.

### **Multicultural Families Association<sup>3</sup>**

The Multicultural Families Association was registered in the National Court Register on 24 April 2015. The idea to create the Association arose from a diagnosis of the needs of multicultural families conducted in 2013-2015 in Cracow. The focus areas of the Association are: education, counselling, therapy, integration and activity of foreigners, culture, education and leisure activities, promoting multiculturalism and learning.

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<sup>3</sup> Website of the Multicultural Families Association: <http://rodzinawielokulturowa.pl> (accessed on: 14.10.2016).

The Association works for the multicultural society, focusing in particular on members of multicultural families. It initiates, promotes and supports projects of comprehensive assistance to foreigners in the territory of Poland as well as protects members of multicultural families against social exclusion. Moreover, it helps refugees, persons with supplementary protection or tolerated residence status and persons applying for refugee status or trying to legalise their stay in Poland by other means. The Association also organises activities for the integration of foreign nationals with the receiving Polish society as well as for the prevention of discrimination based on nationality, culture and religion.

The Association also engages in comprehensive distribution of information, methods and techniques within the field of anti-racist and anti-discriminatory activities and raising awareness in the Polish society of the growing number of foreigners in Poland. It undertakes activities for the benefit of national and ethnic minorities. Also, it disseminates knowledge about multicultural issues as well as the different cultures and religions of foreigners residing in Poland and Poland's relations with other States. Last but not least, it propagates intercultural understanding, promotes and supports intercultural dialogue and provides knowledge about the countries of origin of refugees and immigrants, and on ethnic and national minorities.

The goal of the Association is to build a “bridge of understanding” between societies representing different cultural, religious and philosophical traditions, e.g. by coordinating projects that are supposed to make Polish nationals and foreigners residing in Poland get to know each other better. Also, the Association supports the development of local groups and communities and engages in professional and social integration and reintegration of members of multicultural families. Finally, it maintains and propagates the national traditions and languages of various cultures of members of mixed families and promotes equal rights of men and women in multicultural couples.

The above tasks are performed through the following means:

- a) Workshops, trainings, conferences, lectures, speeches, courses, classes;
- b) Cultural events, exhibitions;
- c) Diagnosing (psychological and pedagogical), counselling (pedagogical, social, legal, professional, psychological), mediation and therapy;
- d) Cooperating with public institutions, culture centres, churches and religious organisations, ethnic, national and cultural organisations, associations and groups in Poland and abroad;
- e) Developing international cooperation, especially through exchange of experience, joint programmes, conferences and seminars, and other activities;

- f) Cooperating with the media and other independent organisations or institutions, e.g. educational;
- g) Monitoring ongoing projects;
- h) Mass meetings, assemblies and happenings;
- i) Research, publications, journalism;
- j) Submitting requests and enquiries to competent national and international authorities.

The Multicultural Families Association is the first Polish non-governmental organisation engaged in assisting multicultural families.

## Conclusion

Like any other family, a multicultural family faces numerous threats and problems. Some of those challenges may be solved by a family's own means, but if the problem-solving strategies of its members are not successful, a multicultural family needs external assistance. Such assistance is offered by the Multicultural Families Association. Assistance should be integral, i.e. it should be coherent: from diagnosis to preventive measures. In order to undertake the right actions, a comprehensive diagnosis of a family is required, including such elements as: the cultural and linguistic background of its members and the situation of cultural change. The Association provides multicultural families with specialist counselling, in particular legal, psychological and family counselling as well as mediation and family therapy. However, the functioning of multicultural families also depends on the society to which they belong.

Accordingly, the multicultural educational activities of the Association addressed to the entire society are of vital importance, as they are supposed to prepare children and youth, regardless of their origin and culture, to live together and cooperate on equal terms between cultures, instead of dominating one over the other. Undoubtedly, the Association seeks to represent the interests of persons with different cultures.

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