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*Speech Given at Launch of Research Report 'Za Chlebem': The Impact of the Economic Downturn on the Polish Community in Northern Ireland at NICEM AGM*

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Mr Chairman thank you for the invitation to speak today at your Annual General Meeting and to give you a response on the survey entitled, "The Impact of the Economic Downturn on the Polish Community in N Ireland".

I would first of all like to congratulate and thank the authors of this extensive report. Both in the range of its content and its structure, it is a very important and timely document on the position of migrant communities, notably the Polish community here in Northern Ireland.

It is honest and frank and gives a very clear picture of the problems facing the Polish community here as they face new circumstances in the changing economic climate and face ongoing social and cultural problems. At the same time, it is a very challenging report. It is only when we are presented with a very clear picture of the facts of the situation, as this report gives, that our responsibilities become clearer. We must remember that all instances of immigration down the ages in whatever countries we care to mention bring serious challenges with it, when people must re evaluate their mind sets in the slow and difficult process of adjustment and integration. This presents serious challenges for both the native community and the immigrant community, and a quick glance through history shows that this process has never been easy. Some of the contents could have been written in so many places at so many times down history "economic insecurity, family ties, racism and general political instability are contributing to the desire of many to return home".

It speaks of "difficulty in adjusting to life in a foreign country, highlighted for some by a totally different culture and mentality." The ongoing responsibility that confronts me as Honorary Consul is to ensure the rights of the Immigrant community are upheld and to smooth the pathway toward their life here. Page six of the

report strongly points out that the contribution that migrant workers have made to Northern Ireland is an argument for the protection of their rights.

But a stronger argument is contained in the draft paper which links sovereignty “with the duty to protect and uphold voluntarily assumed obligations including the duty to respect, protect and promote human rights”. The Report highlights the need for such consistent vigilance and action, particularly on the employment front.

This report demonstrates that they have been received by the local population with very mixed feelings, from:

They are very good hardworking people who do a first class job, to

They have come to take our jobs and now that the Downturn in the Economy has arrived they should be the first to be made redundant and should leave and go back to Poland.

A Councillor in fact expressed exactly that view very recently in a local Factory Redundancy situation, saying that the Polish workers made no contribution to our economy or community and send their money back to Poland. No mention of the property they rent, the taxes they pay the food and other goods they buy. What is wrong with sending their hard earned money back to Poland, didn't we Irish do exactly that for generations and we had every right to do so.

So what for me were the important findings in this Report? Employment issues is naturally the most important item in this Report, because that is why the vast majority of Poles came to N Ireland in the first place. Why would they uproot themselves and their families from their native country and come to another land with a different language and cultural if not for a very good reason.

So what brought 30000 Poles to N Ireland, now the largest immigrant community living and working here. We have always been a country of emigration for generations and suddenly we became a country of immigration mainly from the new Eastern block countries of the European Union. This was an enormous change for this country. So what brought so many Polish immigrant workers to Northern Ireland just about 5 years ago?

After the fall of Communism in 1989 it took 15 years for Poland to join the EU in 2004. Borders opened for countries like Poland and new and exciting opportunities were presented for Polish citizens to earn more money abroad and make a better life for themselves and their families. This was no different to what we did in this country for generations, but judging from this report that fact seems to have been forgotten by many who saw them as taking their jobs and lowering the wage levels.

Both Men and Women in particular from the younger generations, many with a very good education and knowledge of English decided to leave because of lack Employment and opportunities in Poland and very poor wage levels. In 2004 Over 50% of Poles earned less than PLN 2130 gross/month (in 2004 = app GBP 340.00). Better paid jobs (a Polish journalist, who worked in a pub in London back in 2006, was paid the equivalent of two average Polish salaries per month for 6-hours a day shifts).

So the incentive to come here was very strong and with the rapid growth in our economy we needed new workers with the skills to fill those jobs and to fill jobs that the local Irish population did not want to do anymore.

The service, catering/hospitality and food sectors were particular examples of that.

In 2004, Poland became part of the enlarged EU; only Britain, Ireland and Sweden immediately adopted an open-door policy extending the right of Polish nationals to work there.

Sir Reg Empey, Minister for Employment and Learning, said on 6<sup>th</sup> Feb 2008: "Migrant workers play an important part in shaping our local communities and in contributing to a more robust Northern Ireland economy, helping to overcome labour shortages."

Now that we have this downturn in the economy we are faced with a very new situation as revealed in this report. As unemployment rises greater pressure is coming on the immigrant communities. This research indicates that Polish people are 3 times more likely to be unemployed and are the first to be selected in redundancy situations, infringing in many cases their rights under employment law. This is of real concern for many Poles who did not register

with the Home Office when they came here because in many cases they did not know to do so. This has resulted in no entitlement to benefits even though they have been working for over 12 months. This has led to increased vulnerability and poverty.

Since my appointment as Honorary Consul of Poland just over 12 months ago I have had to deal with a very wide and varied set of issues affecting the Polish community.

Discrimination in the work place and unfair dismissal from their jobs. There seems to be a certain attitude among some employers that we can do what we like with them, ignore their rights under employment law, make demands on them that we would never consider with our own Irish population and expect to be able to get away with it.

They know they are frightened and vulnerable and lack the communication skills in terms of language to challenge these employers and the fear of losing their job should they do so. This report confirms all of this and I have experienced many examples over the past 12 months. The lesson of all this is that Employers must be challenged if we are going to stop it happening and too often this is not happening because of fear and the difficulty of getting the necessary support from your fellow workers in particular Polish, they don't want to lose their jobs.

Poles decision to work abroad cannot be understood in employment terms alone. It is clear from their narratives that they want to be part of a new, modern, cosmopolitan Europe. They want to be socially mobile and independent. This is an opportunity to speak English and live abroad and, while their work is not well paid, they can earn more than they would at home.

This report shows that despite all the problems and issues such as low pay, Poles are unlikely to leave in large numbers in the near future. They may express the desire to go back to Poland but research shows that only about 13% have actually left. The majority are Married or with Partners and have families who are settled and been educated in our schools, and doing very well.

Another issue raised in this report is the lack of recognition of qualifications gained in Poland. It is estimated that one in four

Polish workers in the U K and I expect here also has a Masters degree, yet 85% are working in manual un-skilled or semi-skilled jobs. I could quote many examples of young Polish people with excellent qualifications but which are not recognized here by our awarding or regularity authorities. These very valuable and highly educated people are lost to our society here and could be making such valuable contribution.

The report also highlighted the Racist issues that are very much there. No sooner had we put behind us the troubles of the past 35 years than we found a new group of people to target and attack, who were different from ourselves. Much of this is born out of ignorance and some of it by sinister forces who are never far away when it comes to using young and vulnerable people for their own ends.

Before the last European elections I picked up a sinister leaflet that was widely circulated in certain areas that suggested that Polish Roman Catholic migrants were applying to join the PSNI in vast numbers and that their large numbers here would ultimately affect the balance of power.

This has been a bad year for racist attacks with 90 homes been attacked in the aftermath of the Poland – N Ireland Football match. As a result of this a “Unite against Hate Campaign” strategy was put in place. This has been supported by a number of organizations in particular the PSNI, OFMDFM, Community Relations and others. We must continue to work hard to eliminate this cancer in our society.

Could I end by leaving you with these thoughts?

There is a tendency here in Northern Ireland to speak about difference. I want to speak about sameness. No matter where we go in the world, to Poland or wherever, the great lesson we learn is that people everywhere are looking for the exact same things in life.

People everywhere of all age’s especially young people have the same wish to be respected and to be understood. Whether from Eastern Europe or Africa or America, whether from the Falls Road or the Shankill Road, they all want the same basic rights and opportunities of life, just as you do. They want to follow their

football team, play their music, and dance to their favourite tunes just as you do. They want to watch their films, enjoy their holidays, visit their friends, play their games with the same interest and passion as you do.

When you meet or see a group of people from whatever part of the world, you are looking at a mirror image of yourself. These are people with the exact same longing for self worth, the same sense of happiness, the same willingness to accept responsibility, to be creative, to contribute to society.

You are not seeing difference. You are seeing sameness.

Thank you once again for this most important piece work, you are making a vital contribution to this changed society we now live in and we must continue to be vigilant and to highlight these issues until we have either reduced them or eliminate them all together.

Let us continue to work together on them.