

# Institutional Limits of Immigrant Integration in Traditionally Non-Immigration Countries: A Comparative Analysis of Poland and Japan

by Chiharu Namba

## Introduction

Poland and Japan have historically been regarded as "non-immigration countries." Poland has long functioned primarily as an emigration state, while Japan maintained a restrictive immigration framework based on the principle of limiting the admission of so-called unskilled foreign workers. Recently, however, both countries have rapidly expanded their foreign labor forces to mitigate severe domestic labor shortages. Consequently, Japan's foreign resident population has approached 4 million, while Poland hosts more than 2 million foreign nationals. These changes were triggered by specific turning points. In Poland, labor migration from Ukraine surged following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, an influx decisively accelerated by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. In Japan, the 2018 amendment of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act and the subsequent establishment of the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) program marked a major shift toward the large-scale recruitment of foreign workers. Thus, while both states are undergoing a transformation into immigration societies.

Despite the rapid quantitative expansion of foreign labor, both countries suffer from a severe institutional vacuum regarding integration policies (defined here as post-entry social incorporation, distinct from border control or immigration management). Notably, both countries receive low scores on the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, 2020), which measures government policies designed to promote the integration of migrants. While economic incorporation into the labor market has accelerated, comprehensive integration policies, such as education, political participation, anti-discrimination protections, and long-term settlement, remain underdeveloped.

The paper addresses the following research question: What informal mechanisms have enabled Poland and Japan to expand migrant incorporation despite relatively weak integration institutions, and what are the limitations of these mechanisms?

The paper aims to comparatively analyze the "informal compensatory systems" that Poland and Japan have relied on to mitigate their institutional deficiencies. It demonstrates that these makeshift systems are currently reaching their structural limits, arguing that the realization of sustainable, cohesive societies necessitates state-led institutionalization of comprehensive integration policies. The paper proceeds as follows. First, it examines the Polish and Japanese

cases separately. It then compares the two cases and concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening long-term integration outcomes.

## **1. Immigrant Integration in Poland: Reliance on Cultural Proximity**

### **1.1 Expansion of Foreign Labor**

Following the 2015 European migration crisis, Poland adopted a highly selective approach, demonstrating reluctance toward asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa, while prioritizing immigration from neighboring Eastern European nations, notably Ukraine and Belarus, citing demographic and economic needs. Following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the implementation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive allowed an unprecedented volume of displaced Ukrainians to access the Polish labor market immediately. Consequently, Poland achieved economic incorporation of foreign nationals within a short period.

### **1.2 Informal Integration Through Cultural Proximity**

However, this rapid economic integration does not reflect strong state-led social integration. Initial structural adaptation succeeded primarily because migrants possessed significant informal capital: linguistic, cultural, and geographical proximity. Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Polish belong to the Slavic language family, reducing linguistic barriers. Historical ties, geographic proximity, and the presence of established migrant networks have further eased adaptation. In this sense, Poland's experience can be understood as a model of "integration through proximity", in which migrants' own cultural and linguistic resources compensate for limited institutional support. Nevertheless, high employment rates do not necessarily indicate successful long-term incorporation. Limited recognition of foreign qualifications and insufficient career mobility mechanisms may prevent migrants from fully utilizing their skills and professional expertise. Economic participation therefore does not automatically translate into broader social inclusion.

### **1.3 Limits of Cultural-Proximity-Based Integration**

The sustainability of this model is increasingly being questioned. Recent years have witnessed growing migration from Asia and South America, such as India, the Philippines, Nepal, and Colombia. As migrant populations become more diverse, the advantages associated with linguistic and cultural proximity become less relevant. At the same time, Poland's new Migration Strategy ("Regain Control. Ensure Security. A Comprehensive and Responsible Migration Strategy for Poland for 2025–2030") places increasing emphasis on border control, security, and migration management. There is criticism that this strategy imposes "assimilation" rather than true "integration". While migration management remains a legitimate state function, the absence of corresponding investments in long-term integration policies may contribute to social fragmentation and exclusion. The Polish case therefore illustrates the limitations of relying primarily on cultural proximity as a substitute for institutional integration.

## **2. Immigrant Integration in Japan: Reliance on Grassroots-Dependent Support**

### **2.1 Expansion of Foreign Labor**

Faced with unprecedented demographic decline, Japan effectively bypassed its long-standing prohibition on so-called unskilled foreign labor through the 2018 Immigration Control Act reform. Foreign workers, primarily from Southeast and South Asia, have become indispensable in the labor market.

## **2.2 Informal Integration Through Grassroots Support**

Unlike Poland, Japan has generally recruited migrants from countries with limited linguistic and cultural proximity. Under such circumstances, successful integration would ordinarily require substantial institutional support. However, Japan has historically lacked a comprehensive national integration framework. Instead, many integration-related functions have been delegated to local actors. Municipal governments, NPOs, and volunteers have played central roles in providing Japanese-language education, administrative support, social counseling, and educational assistance. Consequently, Japan's approach can be characterized as a form of "grassroots-based integration", in which local actors compensate for weaknesses in national-level integration policies.

## **2.3 Limits of Grassroots-Based Integration**

As the foreign population continues to increase, this model faces mounting pressures. First, substantial disparities exist among municipalities in terms of fiscal capacity and administrative resources. Local governments hosting large migrant populations often bear disproportionate integration costs. Second, many NPOs and volunteer organizations report increasing difficulties in sustaining their activities due to financial and human-resource constraints. This institutional neglect has become visible particularly in the educational sphere. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) indicated that over 9000 school-age foreign children were potentially out of school or disconnected from the formal education system in 2025. These developments suggest that local initiatives alone may be insufficient to support long-term integration in an increasingly diverse society. While foreign labor has become economically indispensable, institutional support for migrants as long-term residents remains limited.

## **3. Comparative analysis**

The comparison of Poland and Japan reveals a common structural pattern. In both countries, economic demand has driven the expansion of foreign labor, while political actors have remained reluctant to formally embrace an immigration-country identity. As a result, labor market incorporation has progressed more rapidly than the institutionalization of social integration. To address this gap, both countries have relied on informal compensatory systems while the nature of these systems differs significantly. In Poland, integration has been facilitated primarily by migrants' own resources, particularly linguistic and cultural proximity. In Japan, integration has depended more heavily on the efforts of local governments and civil society organizations. Despite these differences, both approaches share a common limitation: they rely on resources that exist outside formal state institutions. As migrant populations grow in size and diversity, these informal mechanisms become increasingly difficult to sustain. The comparison therefore suggests that both countries have achieved substantial quantitative integration, reflected in labor market

participation, while making more limited progress toward qualitative integration, including educational inclusion, equal opportunities, anti-discrimination protections, and long-term social incorporation.

#### **4. Policy Implications**

The findings of this study point to the need for a transition from migration policies focused primarily on admission numbers toward policies that prioritize integration outcomes. First, responsibility for integration should be more clearly institutionalized at the national level rather than being delegated to migrants themselves or to local communities. Second, central governments should provide more systematic fiscal support to municipalities that bear significant integration responsibilities. Third, governments should develop measurable indicators of integration outcomes, including language acquisition, school enrollment, labor market mobility, qualification recognition, and long-term settlement trajectories. Such indicators would enable policymakers to evaluate integration policies more systematically and allocate resources more effectively. In other words, states should move from relying on informal compensatory systems toward building formal integration institutions. Rather than treating integration as an informal social responsibility, governments should recognize it as a core public policy function necessary for maintaining social cohesion and economic sustainability.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This paper has examined the institutional limits of immigrant integration in Poland and Japan, two countries traditionally regarded as non-immigration states. Despite a relatively weak state-led integration approach, both countries have expanded migrant incorporation by relying on informal compensatory systems. Thus both countries have made more limited progress in broader social integration. To address this gap, governments must move beyond informal and temporary arrangements and establish comprehensive integration frameworks. Long-term social cohesion and economic sustainability will depend not only on the recruitment of foreign workers but also on their incorporation as full members of society.

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