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Liquid Migration Revisited: Two Decades after the EU Enlargements of 2004 and 2007

Erik Snel*, Godfried Engbersen*

The fall of the Iron Curtain in the late 20th century and the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 triggered significant migration from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to the 'old' EU member states, giving rise to what many consider to be a distinct form of migration. We coined the concept of 'liquid migration' to describe this new, more temporary, flexible and unpredictable East–West migration in Europe. Now, two decades after the EU enlargements of 2004, we explore whether circular, temporary and repeated migration patterns are prevalent in intra-EU mobility or if there is a shift towards settlement. As an empirical basis, we use a large collection of migration studies which refer to the concept of liquid migration. We found three different migration patterns. The first is permanent or long-term settlement. The other two are more transient but for different reasons. The second pattern is temporariness by choice: some CEE migrants opt for open-ended, flexible lifestyles and work careers. Other CEE migrants seem to be trapped in liquid migration, the third pattern. Even if they prefer to settle in a destination country, they appear to be unable to acquire the resources necessary for settlement.

Keywords: intra-EU migration, temporary migration, liquid migration, settlement

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Introduction

The fall of the Iron Curtain in the late 20th century and the enlargements of the European Union in 2004 and 2007 triggered significant migration from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to the 'old' EU member states, giving rise to what is often considered as a distinct form of migration. Favell (2008: 701) claimed that this migration after the EU enlargement process resulted in 'the emergence of a new migration system in Europe' where traditional migration theories no longer apply. While 'old migration' typically involved the long-term relocation and permanent settlement of migrants and their families, 'new migration' is characterised by temporariness, flexibility, open-endedness and individualisation. Short distances, cheap transport and the removal of borders within Europe resulted in new migration patterns: 'East European migrants are in fact regional "free movers" not immigrants and, with the borders open, they are more likely to engage in temporary circular and transnational mobility ...' (Favell 2008: 703). Wallace (2002: 604) similarly foresaw '...short-term, circulatory movements backwards and forwards across borders' as typical of new migration in the enlarged EU.

Other scholars used terms such as 'incomplete migration' referring to migratory movements without settlement that were typical of post-communist migration within Central and Eastern Europe (Okólski 2001), 'lasting temporariness' (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2005), 'intentional unpredictability' (Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich 2006) and 'undeliberate determinacy' (McGhee, Moreh and Vlachantoni 2017) to characterise the new migration in Europe. In this period, we introduced the concept of 'liquid migration' (Engbersen 2012; 2018; Engbersen and Snel 2013; Engbersen, Snel and de Boom 2010; Engbersen *et al.* 2013). Liquid migration is characterised by a lack of permanent settlement. Migrants move between their home country and receiving countries or among multiple destination countries. The defining aspect of liquid migration is its temporary, flexible and unpredictable character, with migrants working in different European labour markets before deciding on settling, moving home or moving elsewhere. Liquid migration is emblematic of European post-accession labour migration, driven by institutional changes such as open borders in the European Union, flexible labour markets, looser family ties and affordable means of travel and communication (Engbersen 2018).

Now, two decades after the EU enlargements of 2004, we must ask whether circular, temporary and repeated migration patterns are still prevalent in intra-EU mobility or if there is a shift towards settlement, as some critics suggest. How has contemporary migration within the EU evolved in terms of temporariness and flexibility? Additionally, how can we explain these migratory behaviours – whether flexible, temporary movements or a trend toward settlement – given the opportunity structures available to different types of migrants? These are the guiding research questions which we aim to address in this literature review.

Over the past 15 years, we have been fortunate that fellow researchers have referred to our work and to the concept of liquid migration. In this article, we draw upon their insights and research findings to address the research questions outlined above. Our central thesis posits that intra-EU migration is, to a significant extent, genuinely temporary. A substantial number of labour migrants from Central and Eastern European (hereafter CEE) countries either settle or intend to settle more permanently in the 'old' EU countries. However, this trend towards settlement co-exists with open-ended, flexible and temporary migration patterns. In our analysis, we distinguish two different patterns of liquid migration. For certain CEE migrants, temporariness is a deliberate choice: they opt for open-ended, flexible lifestyles and work careers. For others, temporary or circular migration is a necessity. As Bygnes and Erdal (2017: 105) noted, these migrants appear to be 'trapped' in 'liquid migration', unable to acquire the resources necessary to settle.

Before delving into the empirical data, we first elaborate on the concept of liquid migration. While we occasionally refer to the broader notion of intra-EU mobility, our focus in this paper is on migration flows from CEE countries to Western member states. Although, the concept of liquid migration has sometimes been used in studies on South–North mobility in the EU (Fernández-Suárez, Lama and Silva 2024) and to non-EU contexts (Azeredo 2023), such cases lie beyond the scope of our analysis.

The concept of liquid migration

The concept of liquid migration draws directly from Zygmunt Bauman's work (Bauman 2000; 2005) on liquid modernity. Central to the concept of liquidity is the transformation of once 'solid' institutions – such as class, family, labour, community, neighbourhood, welfare state and nation state – into more flexible and fluid forms of social organisation. These institutions, once pivotal in shaping the interplay between individual choices and collective projects, have become less solid and less predictable and lose their compelling and self-evident character in the melting pot of modern society. As Bauman (2005: 1) notes: ''Liquid modern' is a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines. Liquidity of life and that of society feed and reinvigorate each other. Liquid life, just like liquid modern society, cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long'.

The rise of more temporary and flexible migration patterns in Europe, especially among CEE migrants, reflects these structural institutional changes in both origin and destination countries. These changes include political transitions, border regulations, mobility regimes, labour markets, communication technologies and evolving family structures. The transition from communism to liberal democracies, for instance, gave CEE citizens more freedom to migrate (Black *et al*. 2010; Fihel and Kaczmarczyk 2023; Kaczmarczyk, Aldaz-Carroll and Hołda 2020). The EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, along with the removal of internal borders, further facilitated movement within the EU. Technological changes, especially the rise of social media, offered new ways to explore migration opportunities and destinations. Simultaneously, the increase of temporary work, part-time work and self-employment in various European countries created a demand for CEE migrant workers. The individualisation of family relations also provided more autonomy and freedom to individual family members, particularly the younger generations. Finally, large workforce surpluses in CEE countries and significant wage disparities between older and new member states, made migration an attractive option for many CEE citizens (ILO 2024; Kaczmarczyk *et al.* 2020). In earlier publications, we identified six characteristics of intra-EU liquid migration (Engbersen 2012, 2018; Engbersen and Snel 2013):

- *Temporality of stay*. Migrants do not settle but move back and forth from their origin country to receiving countries (circular migration), operate in in-between situations that are neither wholly temporary nor wholly permanent – or move to multiple destination countries. This temporary nature makes them less visible in official population records, as they often do not register. Some reside in informal or temporary accommodation like hostels or pensions, further contributing to their invisibility.
- *Labour migration*. Intra-European migration consists predominantly of first-generation labour migrants and, partially, student migration.
- *Regular migration*. Liquid migration involves migrants with legal status. EU citizens generally have, to a certain degree, the same rights and obligations as native citizens in the destination

country. However, during transitional periods, some EU migrant workers needed work permits to access labour markets.

- *No predestined destination country*. Intra-European liquid migration is increasingly unpredictable. Some migrants move to traditional destinations like Germany, while others go to newer ones like the UK, Ireland, Sweden, Belgium, Norway and the Netherlands. They respond to shifting local labour market conditions, leading to more 'unexpected' migration flows to new destination countries.
- *Individualised family strategies*. Contrasting with previous forms of labour migration that relied on the solidarity between generations and extended family to facilitate mobility (e.g., parents migrate to earn money while the grandparents care for the children), new patterns of intra-European migration are more individualised. Many contemporary migrants have looser family ties and limited family obligations.
- *Intentional unpredictability*. Liquid migration entails a migratory habitus of deliberate changeability. Migrants go to new destinations without clear plans or aspirations concerning their goals and future. They are less bounded by family obligations, borders and labour markets than previous generations. They keep their options open and may change their aspirations and goals during their journeys. This is especially true for young, single and highly educated migrants.

This literature review focuses on the issue of temporality, particularly because most empirical studies referring to the concept of liquid migration highlight this aspect. We also consider other institutional factors, especially the position of labour migrants in the labour market, insofar as this is addressed in the literature. Our focus is on intra-EU East–West migration, although the concept of liquid migration has been applied to other migration flows.

The concept of liquid migration met several criticisms (Azeredo 2023; Engbersen 2018; King 2018). First, some authors claim that the concept of liquid migration overestimates the temporariness and unpredictability of contemporary intra-EU migration. They argue that intra-EU labour migrants often settle or at least prefer to settle in destination countries and to have secure and stable 'grounded lives' (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Ryan 2018; 2019). Some suggest that temporary migration is a first stage in upcoming migration flows which will ultimately result in more permanent settlement (Friberg 2012). Pszczółkowska (2024) notes that, although young Polish migrants in England and Ireland initially saw their migration as temporary, over the years this orientation is gradually replaced by settlement-oriented strategies, as they seek to lead a more 'solid life'. These findings, along with others, are discussed more thoroughly in a next section. For now, we acknowledge that settlement migration is a reality for some intra-EU labour migrants. They settle permanently or for prolonged periods of time, searching for 'grounded lives' (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Engbersen *et al*. 2013). However, this review also presents significant examples of the temporary migration of intra-EU migrants, either driven by a preference for temporariness or because they lack the resources to settle.

A second criticism concerns the types of migrant involved. Okólski and Salt (2014: 32) argue that concepts such as liquid migration and intentional unpredictability imply that intra-EU migrants are predominantly the '...young and adventurous "vagabond" acting with no clear strategy…'. This portrayal overlooks the reality that many CEE migrants moving to the 'old' EU countries are still engaged in more traditional forms of (partly seasonal) labour migration, primarily in secondary labour markets (Fihel and Kaczmarczyk 2023). However, this aspect has always been part of the liquid migration concept. We have consistently argued that liquid migration also applies to lower-skilled, circular CEE labour

migrants, primarily because they lack the resources for permanent settlement. Related to this criticism is the selective nature of destination choices: after the EU enlargements, young and skilled Poles, Lithuanians and Slovaks largely migrated to the UK or Ireland, while most of those without degrees chose to migrate to continental Europe (Pszczółkowska 2024).

A third critic of the liquid migration concept is its tendency to overestimate migrants' agency while overlooking the negative structural realities of intra-EU migration (Azeredo 2023; King 2018). For numerous CEE migrant workers '…migratory life in the "West" is often about pure survival, living on low wages, and doing tough jobs in degrading conditions...' (King 2018: 2). Similarly, Fihel and Grabowska-Lusińska (2014) argue that the temporary patterns of Polish mobility to Western Europe were shaped by institutional barriers imposed by the receiving countries. Thus, the prevalence of temporary or liquid migration is not always due to the voluntary choices of migrants but is strongly influenced by the economic and institutional constraints which they face. Even when they wish to establish 'more-grounded lives', they are not able to do so due to insufficient incomes, precarious jobs and inadequate housing. In this review, we aim to address these criticisms more explicitly.

Methodology

This study draws on a literature review of works that referenced the articles and book chapters in which we introduced and discussed the concept of liquid migration. Since 2010, a significant number of studies on intra-EU mobility have engaged with our work. Through Google Scholar, we identified over 900 citations of our publications on this subject (Engbersen 2012, 2018; Engbersen and Snel 2013; Engbersen *et al*. 2010, 2013). These articles, book chapters and reports constitute the core corpus of literature for our review.

We began our review process in mid-February 2024 and completed it in November 2024. After receiving the reviews, we were also able to incorporate several recent articles and publications from 2025. Not all studies citing the concept of liquid migration were relevant to our analysis. Firstly, we included only those presenting empirical research directly engaging with liquid migration. Some studies referenced the concept only in passing – for instance, Vertovec (2019) mentioned it merely to contrast it with his own concept of 'superdiversity'. Secondly, we selected studies addressing intra-EU East–West migration, primarily labour migration but also including student migration. Thirdly, we strategically selected studies with divergent findings on temporality, including those indicating permanent settlement patterns among EU labour migrants.

These empirical studies will help to address two central research questions: firstly, are temporary and circular migration patterns (still) the dominant forms of intra-EU mobility, and to what extent is there evidence of a trend towards settlement? Secondly, can these migration patterns – whether temporary or orientated toward settlement – be explained by the institutional opportunity structures of migrants?

This study contributes to the existing body of literature on CEE labour migration in two ways. Firstly, it adopts a broader comparative perspective. Unlike studies that contain the results of qualitative research, targeting a specific 'type of migrant' (low- or high-skilled workers, international students, etc.) from specific countries (often Poland or the Baltic states but also Bulgaria or Romania) to one specific receiving country (several studies about the UK, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Spain or the Netherlands), our approach takes a more holistic view. There is relatively little systematic comparative research about intra-EU migration. This study seeks to address this gap by synthesising findings from

diverse studies on different migrant groups moving from various origin countries to a range of receiving countries.

Secondly, we include both qualitative and quantitative research findings in our analysis. There are relatively few quantitative studies on the topic of temporary intra-EU migration versus settlement. However, it is important to highlight the limitations of such studies when it comes to assessing migration duration. As Kaczmarczyk and Massey (2019: 25) point out, the issue of non-registration is a significant challenge. Population registers are often unreliable sources from which to assess the number of CEE migrants in destination countries and the length of their residence. This is because CEE migrants often fail to register upon arrival or departure (see also Grabowska-Lusińska 2013). For instance, in our own survey among Polish, Romanian and Bulgarian migrant workers in the Netherlands (n=654), about one third of our interviewees had not formally registered with the municipality where they live (Engbersen *et al*. 2013). Similarly, Strockmeijer, de Beer and Dagevos (2019), who analysed formal employment registration data to access the migration duration of CEE workers' stay in the Netherlands, found that at least half of the CEE migrants who were formally employed in the Netherlands had not registered in the municipality where they lived. In the Netherlands, registration is only mandatory for foreign individuals who stay (or intend to stay) in the country for at least for four months. Yet, many of the non-registered CEE migrants in both studies resided in the Netherlands much longer than four months. Kaczmarczyk and Massey (2019) thus argue that ethnosurveys may provide a more reliable understanding of the settlement practices of migrants compared to population register data.

Another limitation of using administrative data to access migration duration is selectivity. Population registers tend to overestimate the share of long-term residents when used to estimate the residence duration of migrants at a certain point in time. Many short-term migrants may have already left by the time of measurement, while long-term migrants remain, leading to their over-representation in the outcomes. Qualitative studies may also be subject to bias, particularly when based on small selective samples. For instance, Ryan (2018, 2019) interviewed Polish migrants who had lived in the UK for 10 years or more and found a clear preference for long-term settlement – probably because those with shorter-term residence intentions had left already. A potential solution to this 'point-in-time' approach is cohort studies, which track a cohort of migrants during a certain period. We identified only three studies, all in the Netherlands, that used this cohort approach to estimate the duration of residence of CEE and EU-migrants in the Netherlands (including the previously cited study of Strockmeijer *et al.* 2019; see also Loomans 2023; Manting, Kleinepier and Lennartz 2022). To conclude, both quantitative and qualitative studies face selectivity bias: focusing on migrants present in a country (or city) at a specific point in time will inevitably yield more evidence of longer-term residence than short-term stays.

After selecting the relevant qualitative and quantitative articles, we undertook a two-stage analysis approach. Initially, we systematically examined the chosen studies along a continuum spanning from temporariness to settlement, elucidating three migration patterns. Subsequently, in the second phase, we conducted an in-depth analysis of these three patterns, with a focus on the characteristics and motives of the labour migrants involved and the institutional factors influencing and fostering these patterns. This analysis led to the further conceptual grounding and clarification of three archetypical patterns: settlement, migration by choice and trapped in liquid migration. Due to space constraints, we cannot discuss every relevant article in relation to the three patterns. Instead, we selectively highlight studies whose findings reflect core insights shared across multiple investigations. The studies were selected based on their thematic relevance, empirical strength and contribution to understanding variation within and between the identified patterns.

CEE migration: settlement or lasting temporariness?

This section presents an overview of empirical studies on the migratory behaviour of CEE migrants, revealing different outcomes. We distinguish three different migration patterns. Some studies suggest that 'lasting temporariness' is a temporary phase that will eventually result in permanent settlement. However, other studies highlight enduring temporary migration patterns, either as a choice for flexibility or because migrants are trapped in temporary migration because of the lack of resources necessary for permanent settlement.

Settlement migration

Various qualitative studies highlight that CEE labour migrants in the 'old' EU countries often eventually settle in the host country rather than engage in temporary or circular migration. Friberg (2012), in his study on Polish labour migrants in Norway, distinguishes three stages in migration processes: an initial stage of temporary work abroad, followed by open-ended transnational commuting, which often results in permanent settlement. According to Friberg, liquid migration is merely a transitional stage in the new migration dynamic in Europe, during which most CEE migrants had flexible, mostly low-paid, jobs. When these jobs ended, the migrants 'without income, housing or access to unemployment benefits, (...) have little option but to return' (Friberg 2012: 1602). In the second stage, Friberg describes a condition of 'permanent temporariness' and 'transnational commuting', where migrants profit from the high wages in Norway while benefiting from the low costs of living in Poland. However, the strain of family separation leads many to bring their families over, ultimately choosing to settle in Norway (Friberg 2012: 1602).

Bygnes and Erdal (2017), in another study on Polish labour migrants in Norway, found that most research participants preferred what they termed a 'grounded life' in Norway. The migrants '...either had a strong desire to stay in Norway or found themselves in circumstances where prospects for return faded a little more with each year spent in Norway' (Bygnes and Erdal 2017: 110). However, they also noted that some research participants either preferred the 'liquid conditions' of temporary or circular mobility or lacked the necessary resources – such as stable employment and adequate housing – for permanent or long-term settlement in Norway. The latter group appeared to be trapped in a state of liquid migration (Bygnes and Erdal 2017). Ultimately, the authors distinguished two groups among their interviewees: those who are settled in Norway – often with partners and children – and those who work in Norway, while their families remain in Poland and who are more or less satisfied with their 'transnational commuting'.

Ryan (2018, 2019) identified a clear preference for long-term or permanent settlement among the Polish migrants in the UK whom she interviewed. She found that most of her interviewees initially arrived in the UK with short-term migration intentions: 'The mantra of coming "for a year" was common amongst both Irish and Polish migrants' (2019: 181). However, over time their migration intentions shifted: '...moving along a sliding scale from initial, temporary, short-term goals to longer term settlement...' (2019: 184). Factors such as having a professional career in the UK, a stable relationship – particularly with British partners – and/or children contributes to the desire to settle. Skilled Polish participants feared fewer career opportunities if they returned, as the skills and qualifications acquired in the UK were '…not easily transportable back to the country of origin' (Ryan 2019: 186). However, as she acknowledges, these findings may have been affected by the selective sample of highly skilled interviewees who had lived in the UK for at least 10 years. The aspect of settlement and the desire to

lead a stable life also feature prominently in Pszczółkowska's (2024) study. She conducted 73 interviews with Polish respondents located in various parts of Ireland, the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. Most respondents, particularly those in the UK and Ireland, had been living in these countries for more than five years and most were highly skilled migrants. Her respondents had no immediate plans to move because of the 'solid life' they had gained through migration.

One intriguing question concerning the UK is what impact the 2016 Brexit referendum had on the settlement aspirations of CEE migrants in the UK. The UK was a main destination for CEE migrants after the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007. At the same time, mass immigration – framed as 'taking back control of our borders' – was a central issue in the Brexit campaign. From the perspective of liquid migration, one might expect that the weaker legal position of EU migrants in the UK post-Brexit would result in a mass departure of CEE migrants from the UK (Jancewicz, Kloc-Nowak and Pszczółkowska 2020). Contrary to this expectation, Brexit did not trigger a 'Brexodus' (Guma and Jones 2019; Jancewicz *et al.* 2020; Kilkey and Ryan 2021; Lulle, Moroşanu and King 2018; McGhee *et al.* 2017). Instead, many CEE migrants in the UK opted to formalise their stay by applying for permanent residence or UK citizenship rather than leaving. Jancewicz *et al.* (2020) found that Brexit had little impact on the residence intentions of most long-term Polish migrants they interviewed. In some cases, it even motived these latter to extend their stay in the UK. Similarly, Markova and King (2022) found that about half of their respondents preferred to stay in post-Brexit UK, while the other half considered leaving. Ultimately, Brexit did not result in a mass departure of CEE migrants from the UK. As Kilkey and Ryan (2021: 245–246) observe: 'Having lived in London for several years, they had invested too much to leave. For most, going back to Poland was not a viable financial option. With children in local schools and partners in local jobs, moving to a third country was usually not an option either'.

There are also several quantitative studies on the migration duration of CEE labour migrants. Earlier, we pointed out two limitations of these quantitative studies and statistical evidence: the issue of non-(de)registration in population registers and the problem of selectivity. Strockmeijer *et al.* (2019) addressed both issues by using data from employment registers instead of population registers and by adopting a cohort approach. Their study tracked formally employed CEE labour migrants in the Netherlands over a period of five years (2010–2025). The objective of their study was to access how many of the formally employed CEE labour migrants in the Netherlands could be labelled as either short-term or long-term migrants. Migrants were labelled as 'settlement migrants' if they worked for at least seven months per year and had registered with the municipality. At the start of their research, in 2010, this applied to 43 per cent of all formally employed CEE migrant workers in the Netherlands. However, five years later, only three-quarters of them were still present and were also still employed. The authors assume that the others had, meanwhile, left the country, rather than thinking that they are still present but no longer employed (not working or self-employed). Overall, they conclude that '…a third of the labour migrants from Central and Eastern Member States can be characterised as settlement migrants after being in the Netherlands for more than five years. They spend most of the year working in the Netherlands and continue to do so in the subsequent years' (Strockmeijer *et al*. 2019: 2444).

Another Dutch cohort study by Manting *et al.* (2022) followed seven groups of EU migrants (including from Poland and Bulgaria) in the Netherlands over a 7-year period, from 2012 to 2019. Their study used data from population registers, which tend to overestimate the share of long-term migrants, since short-term migrants are less likely to register. Nonetheless, they found that '...more than half of all EU migrants stay in the Netherlands only for a short while – a couple of years only' (Manting *et al*. 2022: 1036). Polish migrants generally stay somewhat longer in the Netherlands compared to other migrant groups, such as those from Spain or the UK. In a similar cohort study, Moreh (2014) tracked Hungarian migrant

workers who arrived between 2007 and 2010 in England and Wales. One year later, in 2011, fewer than half of them were still present in the country; the rest had left. Moreh (2014: 88) concluded that this reflects a '...shift in mobility types, from a longer-term and more stable migration to a more "fluid", "liquid", "circulatory" type of mobility…'.

Kaczmarczyk and Massey (2019) argued that ethnosurvey data provide a more reliable picture of the settlement practices of migrants than (often incomplete) population register data. In our own study on Polish, Romanian and Bulgarian migrant workers in the Netherlands, based on ethnosurveys in 10 Dutch municipalities (n= 654), we found that about one in four interviewees can be characterised as 'settlers'. These respondents often had regular and permanent work, spoke Dutch and had Dutch friends – but were less attached to their home country. Other migrant categories in our study, such as circular and transnational migrants, were less likely to stay for longer periods of time. They either commuted between the origin country and the Netherlands on a regular basis or they intended to migrate to other countries as well (Engbersen *et al.* 2013). In a follow-up study, in which we contacted our previous respondents three years later (in 2013), we found that the share of 'settlers' increased to about half of all interviewees we could trace (38 persons of a total of 75): they were still present in the Netherlands and intended to stay at length (Engbersen *et al.* 2017: 343). After three years, more migrants had decided to settle permanently than they had initially intended. In a similar study, Šūpule (2021) conducted a quantitative analysis of survey data (n=1391) on Baltic labour migrants in several Nordic countries. The findings revealed that, as in the original Dutch study, about one in four respondents can be categorised as 'settlers'.

In conclusion, we identified several quantitative and qualitative studies examining the settlement intentions and practices of CEE migrant workers in the 'old' EU countries. Various qualitative studies on CEE migrants in countries such as Norway and the UK challenge the concept of liquid migration. A common finding is that interviewees initially intended to stay for a short period but ultimately extended their residence. For these migrants, temporary migration often serves as a first step to more permanent settlement (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Friberg 2012; Ryan 2018, 2019; Pszczółkowska 2024). However, this outcome may be influenced by the over-representation of long-term residents among the interviewees. Even Brexit, which disrupted the residence rights of EU migrants in the UK, did not result in a 'Brexodus'. Instead, many CEE migrants tried to formalise their UK residence instead of leaving (Guma and Jones 2019; Jancewicz *et al*. 2020; Kilkey and Ryan 2021; Lulle *et al.* 2018; McGhee *et al.* 2017). In general, one could say that settlement migrants often have somewhat higher incomes and more stable employment positions (Strockmeier *et al.* 2019: 2443). However, as Bygnes and Erdal (2017) observe, others lack the resources needed to settle, such as stable employment and adequate housing; these individuals seem to be trapped in liquid migration, a category which we explore later in this article.

We have discussed the limitations of quantitative studies on migration durations, as these studies tend to overestimate the share of long-term migration for various reasons. Nevertheless, the available research indicates that only about a quarter to a half (at most) of all CEE migrants can be characterised as settlement migrants. The others either did not intend or were unable to settle – and left the host country within a relatively short period (Engbersen *et al*. 2013, 2017; Manting *et al.* 2022; Moreh 2014; Strockmeijer *et al.*, 2019; Šūpule 2021). As Manting *et al.* (2022: 1036) concluded, after tracking various EU migrant groups in the Netherlands over a 7-year period: '...more than half of all EU migrants stay in the Netherlands only for a short while – a couple of years only' (…). The temporary nature of these migration patterns are explored in the remainder of this article.

Temporariness 'by choice'

We identify two types of temporary migrants. On the one hand, there are those who deliberately choose temporary migration, preferring to live and work in the destination country for a limited time only or even simultaneously in multiple countries, thus embracing a transnational lifestyle. On the other hand, there are those who may prefer to settle in the host country but lack the resources – such as stable employment and adequate accommodation – to do so. In this section, we focus on migrants who deliberately chose temporary migration. Due to the scarcity of quantitative data on the prevalence of both categories, we primarily rely on qualitative studies.

One illustrative example of 'temporariness by choice' is those known as the 'searchers', as described by Eade *et al.* (2006). They are '...predominantly young, individualistic and ambitious migrants. They occupy a range of occupational positions from low earning to highly skilled and professional jobs' (Eade *et al.* 2006: 11). They keep their options open; they may pursue a career in London but they may also move elsewhere or return to Poland when the economic situation improves. According to Eade *et al.* (2006), about 40 per cent of the Polish migrants in London can be characterised as 'searchers'. In a similar study, Moreh (2014: 100) found that 'a majority' of his interviewees, Hungarian migrants in the UK, were 'searchers'.

A comparable category in our own research consists of 'bi-national' or 'transnational' migrants. They have strong economic and social attachments to both the Dutch host country and their countries of origin. Although they generally have higher incomes than other CEE migrants, they spend less money on remittances. They are acquainted with native Dutch residents but also visit their home countries more often than settlement migrants. They are also less likely to stay in the Netherlands for more than five years compared to the settlement migrants in our sample. In our original study, almost 20 per cent of the respondents were identified as 'transnationals'. In our follow up-study, three years later, the share of 'transnationals' in our sample was about the same (Engbersen *et al.* 2013: 971, 2017: 343). The already cited similar study on Baltic labour migrants in Nordic countries found that 28 per cent of them could be classified as 'transnationals'. These migrants are often students or higher-skilled workers, although they often had low-skilled work. Their primary motive for migration is personal development and they do not intend to return to the home country within five years (Šūpule 2021: 136).

Several studies on European youth mobility, notably by King and Lulle and their colleagues, offer examples of temporariness by choice. These studies examine migration from various CEE countries, including the Baltic countries, to the UK. Prior to Brexit, the UK – especially London – was an attractive 'escalator region' for young, highly skilled and ambitious CEE migrants (King *et al.* 2018; Lulle *et al.* 2018). One key research question relates to the prospects of these young migrants: will they remain in the UK, return home or go elsewhere? In this context, the authors explore the concept of liquid migration (King 2018; King *et al.* 2018; Lulle, Moroşanu and King 2022). Their study on young Baltic migrants in the UK reveals that '...for most interviewees there was huge uncertainty and ambiguity about the future. (...) What we found (...) was a rather widespread intentional unpredictability about the future…' (King *et al.* 2018: 294). As the authors argue, this reflects '…the migratory habitus of this "new generation" of intra-European migrants'. This flexible attitude is partly attributed to the young age and lifestyle of their interviewees. In contrast, older migrants with professional careers and/or families with children generally tend to seek more certainty in their migration decisions. Another factor influencing this fluidity is the reversibility of return migration within the EU. Prior to Brexit, migrants always had the option of a 'second return' to the UK after a disappointing return migration. The authors conclude: 'Hence, our evidence on the future perspectives of these migrations and migrants is fully consistent with

the fluid open-endedness of "liquid migration" ...' (2018: 297). Another study within the same project distinguishes three types of migrant: planners, dreamers and accidental migrants. According to the authors, the latter category, in which the highly skilled are over-represented, resembles what we refer to as liquid migration: 'The accidental migrants moved spontaneously and for adventure and were often influenced by the decisions of others, as they were willing to just move and see what comes next. Their decision-making matches best the "liquid" migration framework, which stresses the European free movement regime as an enabler for flexibility and unpredictability in young people's lives lived across borders' (Koikkalainen *et al*., 2022: 12).

Another study that exemplifies temporariness by choice focuses on young and highly skilled Estonian migrants in London. Saar and Saar (2020: 54) note that migration to 'escalator regions' such as London is '…often (...) just temporary and used for career advancement'. However, their interviewees did not migrate primarily for economic reasons but for personal development. They see London as a place with great economic opportunities, while also valuing '...the city's possibilities of diversity, culture and entertainment…' (2020: 58). Yet, London is not where they want to settle. It is viewed as 'a passage of life', followed by an intention to return to Estonia to start a family: 'In this context, Estonia was described as a safer and a better place for children…' (2020: 59). A Latvian study, based on a subset of data from a comprehensive web survey targeting Latvian migrants residing in the UK, Germany and other EU countries, highlights a significant contrast between highly skilled Latvians educated within their home country and international students, termed as global graduates, who pursued their education abroad (Kasa 2023). This study revealed that the former group tended to adopt a more settled lifestyle, whereas the latter embraced a more fluid lifestyle characterised by multiple migrations.

Ciobanu (2015) explores the phenomenon of multiple migrations among mainly (higher) skilled migrants from Romania, analysing how their migratory patterns often involve multiple moves between countries. Her interviewees, Romanians mainly residing in the greater area of Lisbon in Portugal, had often lived in other European countries or worked abroad while their families remained in Portugal. Many had family members residing in other European countries as well. Ciobanu (2015: 467) argues that '(...) the concept of liquid migration characterises the increasing diversity in migration patterns throughout Europe' but it does not acknowledge the phenomenon of multiple migrations which she describes in her study. Where Romanian workers go is mainly determined by three factors: transnational social networks that 'open doors' in other countries, evolving migration policies for Romanians in Europe and economic opportunities. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Romanian migrants mainly moved to Southern European countries like Italy, Spain and Portugal, benefiting from regularisation policies in these countries that granted regular status to non-EU citizens. However, after Romania (and Bulgaria) joined the EU in 2007 and especially after all EU countries opened their labour markets for Romanians and Bulgarians in 2014, many Romanians migrated to countries such as Belgium, Ireland, the UK, Germany and the Netherlands, attracted by the higher wages in these countries and the decreasing availability of jobs in Portugal. Germany became a major destination for Romanians (Ciobanu 2015: 482; cf. Sandu 2017; Voivozeanu 2019). These studies show how the migration decisions of CEE migrants are affected by changes in the institutional context of migration.

However, temporariness by choice is not limited to the young, adventurous and higher-skilled. Medium- and lower-skilled CEE workers also take advantage of the opportunities offered by the open European labour market. A Latvian study – based on a survey of more than 6,000 Latvian emigrants and 15 in-depth interviews with internationally mobile global talents – concludes that studies on liquid migration should pay more attention to blue-collar workers such as builders, welders, machine operators and others: 'Even without a high level of formal education, they are in high demand

internationally and nowadays constitute a significant share of the transnational and global nomads' (Mieriņa and Laudere 2023: 1703).

Additionally, a substantial body of economic-demographic literature, based largely on labour-market and ethno-surveys, examines temporary and circular migration from Central Europe, particularly from Poland. Okólski (2001, 2012) introduced the concept of 'incomplete migration', which pertains to the circular and temporary migration patterns of low-skilled workers from peripheral Polish regions before EU enlargement, in which they left their families behind. For these individuals, migrating abroad was a survival strategy (Kaczmarczyk *et al.* 2020). Since 2004, however, migration from Poland to Western Europe has involved relatively younger and better-educated migrants. Nevertheless, lower-skilled workers still represent the largest group (in absolute terms) and, for many, temporary and circular migration remains a relevant option (Fihel and Kaczmarczyk 2023). The relatively higher minimum wages make precarious, flexible and temporary jobs attractive, leading lower-skilled workers to actively seek these roles in more prosperous EU countries (ILO 2024). Early post-accession studies have referred to some of these workers as 'target earners' or 'hamsters' who return home after a certain period, while others maintain a more circular existence, particularly in agriculture and horticulture.

In conclusion, we found that a substantial number of CEE labour migrants are (still) engaged in temporary migration patterns. Some of them are classified as 'searchers', 'global graduates', 'global nomads', 'transnationals', 'bi-nationals' and 'accidental migrants', who are open for career opportunities in several countries and are willing to move from one country to another (Eade *et al.* 2006; Engbersen *et al*. 2013; Kasa 2023; Šūpule 2021). In general, those who opt for flexible 'liquidity' are either younger or better positioned – or both. Many of them do not migrate primarily for economic reasons but for personal development and to experience the culture and diversity in other European countries. On the other hand, temporariness by choice is not just something for the young, adventurous or highly skilled. Medium- and lower-skilled workers from Central and Eastern Europe also take advantage of the opportunities created by EU enlargement.

Trapped in liquid migration

Alongside migrants who deliberately choose temporariness, there are also those who – as Bygnes and Erdal (2017: 105) observe – are 'trapped in liquid migration' (cf. Erdal and Oeppen 2022). Settling in a host country, particularly when migrants want to take their families, requires certain conditions and resources in terms of economic certainty, sufficient income, adequate housing and, preferably, access to social security. However, as numerous studies show, many CEE labour migrants in the 'old' EU countries are often unable to meet these conditions. They hold low-skilled and uncertain temporary jobs, live in shared accommodation and have no or only limited access to social security and other welfare-state services (Loomans 2023). These are not the conditions in which to settle in a host country and have your family come over. For many labour migrants, these harsh conditions are important reasons for choosing the strategy of becoming a target earner or circular migrant, while others feel primarily trapped in liquid migration.

Two subcategories of CEE migrant workers, in particular, appear to be unable to settle permanently in the host country: employees from temporary work agencies (TWAs) and so-called 'posted workers'. CEE migrant workers, particularly in the Netherlands and the UK, are often not directly employed by employers in the host countries but by TWAs. Dutch studies estimate that between 25 and no less than 60 per cent of all Polish migrant workers in the Netherlands are employed by a TWA while in the UK, between 40 to 50 per cent of all CEE labour migrants are estimated to work for one (Been and de Beer

2022; Strockmeijer 2020: 36). As Strockmeijer (2020: 42–43) shows, CEE labour migrants in the Netherlands, particularly those employed by TWAs, more often have lower wages and temporary labour contracts than native Dutch workers or workers with another migration background. TWAs often offer 'all-inclusive' package deals for migrant workers: not only work but also housing, insurance and transport (both from the sending to the host country and daily commuting to work). As Been and de Beer (2022: 177) argue, these '…practices increase labour migrants' dependency on the temporary work agency, which makes it less likely they will object to malpractices and thereby increases the risks of underpayment and exploitation'. A Dutch Parliamentary Commission reported how employers and TWAs try to make maximum profit from their foreign workers. They do so by economising on housing costs – providing inferior housing (often shared accommodation) for high rents – and charging high costs for transport. Some employers take advantage by bluntly underpaying foreign workers and not paying overtime and/or holiday pay (Commission Roemer 2020: 14)

Posted workers are another category of migrants who are not in the position of long-term or permanent settlement. Posted work allows companies in one EU country to employ workers temporarily in another while retaining the social-security rights of the sending country. This structure, rooted in the EU's freedom to provide services, brings significant risks for posted workers in labour-intensive sectors (Advisory Council on Migration 2024). As posted workers are formally employed by employers or TWAs in the sending country, they participate in the social-insurance programmes and work under the conditions and norms of the sending country. This has significant competitive advantages for their employers, particularly when CEE workers are posted in more-advanced welfare states in Western and Northern Europe (Arnholtz and Lillie 2023). Posted workers generally work abroad for short periods of time and return home when the job is done; Arnholtz and Lillie (2023) speak of 'workers' hypermobility'. The temporariness of the job and their short stay in the host country ensures that workers generally comply to inferior working conditions. Their dependence on their employers for transportation, housing and other services limits their ability to demand better working conditions and higher wages. Their short stay also obstructs contacts with the authorities, trade unions and regular co-workers; in short, their isolated position also obstructs their opportunities to improve their working conditions. All this often results in precarious work and sometimes in outright labour exploitation (Arnholtz and Lillie 2023; Velizarova and Kirov 2018; Voivozeanu 2019).

What posted workers and foreign employees from TWAs also have in common is that they are often housed in shared accommodation. Manting *et al.* (2022: 1036) found that almost two-thirds of the seven groups of EU migrants in the Netherlands (not only migrant workers but also family migrants and foreign students) live in shared accommodation after arrival. Although shared housing is often seen as an 'in-between phase', Manting *et al.* (2022: 1041) found that '...a sizeable group of EU migrants tended to remain in shared housing on a more long-term basis (…) This is most likely related to their more precarious labour market positions'. Migrants from Poland and Bulgaria more often live in what the authors call 'long-term sharing' than other (Western European) migrant groups. However, they also found that Polish migrants have more than average access to social housing, which is highly restricted in the Netherlands. This shows that Polish migrants in the Netherlands tend to reside longer in the Netherlands and are better integrated in the system than other EU migrants.

To summarise, many CEE migrant workers – in particular posted workers and employees from TWAs – experience under-payment, inferior working conditions, high costs for housing and transportation and limited job certainty. Moreover, many of them are housed in shared accommodation – often in shared bedrooms. As a result of all this, CEE migrant workers who may want to settle in their host countries are unable to meet the conditions for settlement – in terms of fixed employment and adequate housing – to

do so. They seem to be trapped in liquid migration. All of this raises the question as to why CEE migrants accept this under-payment and these uncertain and inferior working conditions. The answer is relatively simple: the wages and working conditions in their home countries are generally even worse. As Voivozeanu (2019: 93) reports from interviews with Romanian migrant workers in Germany: 'In Romania one earns very little in comparison to what one earns here [in Germany]. This is why I am here. Otherwise, I would have been near my family… I would have been in Romania, and I would have carried on my life instead of drudging here'. CEE migrant workers often remain in low-skilled, low-paid jobs due to structural constraints such as the non-recognition of qualifications, language barriers, an insecure legal status and a reliance on social networks that channel them into precarious work. Those employed through temporary agencies or as posted workers face particularly limited opportunities for labour-market mobility. While some accept poor conditions in the hope of gaining upward mobility – the so-called 'immigrant bargain' (Alba and Foner 2015) – this prospect often fails to materialise, leaving them effectively trapped in liquid migration. A recent study on Romanian returnees adds another dimension to this discussion. It shows that many Romanian returnees are reluctant to re-migrate to other EU countries due to prior migration experiences with precarious work, marginalisation and social isolation. Given these negative experiences, they prefer to stay in Romania. According to the authors, this shows 'the temporal limits of liquid migration' (Moroşanu and Şerban 2025: 3).

Concluding discussion

The enlargements of the European Union in 2004 and 2007 have intensified labour migration from Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe, sparking extensive research on these emerging patterns, one of which is encapsulated in the concept of liquid migration. This concept has received mixed evaluations and critiques – in particular, that liquid migration overemphasises the transitory and voluntary nature of CEE migration. In this paper, we have shown that migration from Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe can, indeed, lead to permanent settlement. It is difficult to determine precise figures but the studies we analysed suggest that between a quarter and (at most) a half of labour migrants eventually settle long-term. The remainder stay only temporarily, ranging from a few months to several years. However, some studies may overstate the extent of settlement, due to selective sampling and a focus on formally registered migrants.

Alongside settlement migration, two subtypes of liquid migration are identified in this paper: 'temporariness by choice' and 'trapped in liquid migration'. The former includes both higher-educated and lower-skilled migrants. UK-based studies frequently feature highly educated migrants, emphasising narratives of personal growth and lifestyle migration, though many work below their qualifications, especially in hospitality. London has long been a key destination, a trend now in decline post-Brexit. Other studies highlight lower-skilled migrants who deliberately opt for temporary labour migration following the opportunities provided by changes in the institutional context in Europe since the early 2000s. They are concentrated in sectors like construction, transport, distribution, agriculture, horticulture and the meat industry. While some are 'target earners' aiming for financial goals before returning home, others exhibit circular migration, particularly in agricultural roles. These patterns demonstrate that more-traditional forms of seasonal and circular labour migration continue to coexist with newer forms of intra-EU mobility.

A fine line separates this lower-skilled group – who choose non-settlement – compared to those who are trapped in liquid migration, who aspire to settle yet face structural barriers. Engaged in similar sectors as those opting for a liquid life, these migrants rely heavily on secondary labour markets

facilitated by migrant networks, international recruitment agencies and 'posted worker' arrangements. Despite their efforts, they struggle to attain stable employment, an adequate income or suitable housing, which undermines their prospects for settlement. These migrants accept low wages and poor conditions because they are still better off than those in their home countries, leaving them trapped in liquid migration. This situation shows how being trapped in liquidity is strongly related to the vulnerable economic position of migrant workers, in particular their lack of access to stable employment, adequate housing and social security in the destination countries.

In this article, we paid limited attention to the differences between the various CEE countries, mainly due to the limited availability of comparative information in the studies on liquid migration that formed the basis of our analysis. Nevertheless, the available evidence suggests that the labour-market positions of foreign workers from northern CEE countries (notably Poland and the Baltic states) tend to be more favourable than those of labour migrants from Romania and Bulgaria. Several factors may explain these differences. Labour migrants from Poland and the Baltic states generally arrived earlier in the EU destination countries, owing to the later accession to the EU of Romania and Poland and the (partly) different transitional arrangements that applied to them. Labour-market segmentation also plays a role. Danish research shows that Polish labour migrants in Denmark are more likely to work in industry, typically with somewhat higher wages, while Romanian labour migrants are more often employed in agriculture. However, the same research also shows that the wages of both groups are well below the Danish average (Felbo-Kolding and Leschke 2023). In addition, differences in human capital and experiences of stigmatisation – the latter especially with regards to Romanians and Bulgarians with a Roma background – may further contribute to the divergent employment and wage outcomes among migrant workers from different CEE sending countries.

Another important issue that received relatively little attention in our analysis concerns the future of CEE labour migration to Western and Northern Europe. We identify two trends that reduce both temporary and long-term labour migration from CEE countries. First, economic and demographic developments in the sending countries play a significant role. Wage differences between sending and destination countries are a crucial driver of migration. As countries like Poland experience rising economic prosperity and increasing wage levels, the incentive to work abroad is diminishing. This trend may further accentuate differences between CEE countries, as economic developments in countries such as Romania and Bulgaria continue to lag behind. Demographic shifts also contribute to declining labour migration. Ageing populations and the shrinking size of working-age cohorts (18–45 years) in CEE countries are likely to limit the scale of labour migration from these countries (Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy 2025). The effects of these processes are already visible in the Netherlands, through the increasing inflow of non-EU labour migrants from countries such as Belarus, Georgia, Moldavia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan – partly via (irregular) posted-worker arrangements (Heyma, Bussink and Vervliet 2022; Nederlandse Arbeidsinspectie 2025).

Second, some receiving countries are actively intending to reduce the demand for foreign workers by tightening regulations in economic sectors that heavily rely on cheap and temporary migrant labour. Germany, for instance, introduced stricter regulations for the meat industry with its many foreign and posted workers (Ban, Bohle and Naczyk 2022). A similar debate is unfolding in the Netherlands, where concerns are growing about certain economic sectors' structural dependence on low-cost, temporary migrant labour through precarious arrangements – such as posting workers and fraudulent TWAs (Advisory Council on Migration 2024). These practices often result in migrants earning less than the legal minimum wage and being excluded from collective labour agreements. In response, policy measures such as enforcing collective labour agreements, high minimum wages and restrictions on

temporary contracts and self-employment could discourage these exploitative forms of temporary labour migration (Kremer, Went and Engbersen 2020). Although flexible and precarious employment may decline in sectors like meat-processing, the increasing reliance on third-country nationals – some originating from non-EU countries in Central Europe – working under (irregular) posted-worker arrangements, points to a persistent demand for cheap, temporary labour. This suggests that, rather than disappearing, some types of liquid migration are likely to endure, albeit in adapted or less-visible forms.

In addition to the limited attention we have paid in our analysis to differences between CEE workers from various countries and to the future of labour migration, there are two further limitations to the present study. Firstly, it focuses mainly on temporariness in relation to labour-market positions, leaving other dimensions of liquid migration underexplored. Secondly, it focuses on intra-EU East–West migration, even though the concept of liquid migration has also been applied to other migration corridors, such as South–North migration within Europe (Domínguez-Mujica and Díaz-Hernández 2019; Fernández-Suárez *et al.* 2024; Pratsinakis, King, Himmelstine and Mazzilli 2019) and to non-EU contexts (Abbaszadeh, Duran, Hir and Mohammadpour 2023; Azeredo 2023; Gońda 2024). Azeredo's (2023) study on Brazilian migration to Australia is the most detailed non-EU case application of the concept and we endorse his call for future research to apply the concept broadly in order 'to reach common grounds of universality and contest' (Azeredo 2023: 10).

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Negotiating Mobility: Sociocultural Grammars of Albanian Irregularised *Kurbet*-Migration to the United Kingdom

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Irregularised migration from Albania to the United Kingdom emerges as a governance-produced status, negotiated through socioculturally mediated practices, rather than as a criminal propensity. Drawing on digital-historical ethnography with Albanian migrants who entered the UK via irregularised routes (2015–2020) and a Bourdieusian relational approach, this article explores how emic grammars of kurbet (obligatory sacrifice), kanun (reputational ordering) and besa (commitments of trust) shape the interpretation and moral evaluation of mobility. Through repeated enactment, these grammars sediment as dispositions within a mobile habitus (endurance, reputational vigilance, reciprocity expectations) and mobilise resources (trust guarantees, route knowledge, embodied resilience) that become capital only when recognised as valuable within specific fields (kinship, diaspora, brokerage, algorithmic field). Yet, within UK border-labour regimes, often mediated through intermediaries, the same resources are misrecognised as illegality or commodified as priced intermediation, producing ambivalent effects that normalise risk and recalibrate moral obligations. The article contributes a relational theory-of-practice account that links irregularisation to field-specific regimes of recognition and valuation.

Keywords: Albanian migration, irregularisation, kurbet, cultural capital, moral economy, migration infrastructure

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Introduction

Albania has been described as a 'country on the move' (Carletto, Davis, Stampini and Zezza 2006; Vullnetari 2012) and a 'laboratory for the study of migration' (King 2005: 133). Beyond demographic shifts or economic necessities, mobility has operated as an enduring social practice, deeply embedded in historical narratives and collective imaginaries (Nicholson 2004: 878). Since the late Ottoman period, Albanian trajectories have been shaped by cyclical episodes of mass exodus amid political and economic instability (King, Dalipaj and Mai 2006: 412–413) and by periods of enforced immobility under restrictive regimes, most notably during the isolationist communist era (Carletto *et al.* 2006; King 2005; King and Mai 2008; Vullnetari 2012). These collective dynamics intersect with individual mobilities for work, education and family reunification (Vollmer 2023), producing layered assemblages of movement and enforced stasis that cannot be reduced to a single, linear causal register.

Since the collapse of communism in the early 1990s, more than half of Albania's population has left a country that has fewer than three million inhabitants. Cross-border movement remains a defining feature of Albanian social life, sustained by enduring mobility aspirations and the routinisation of multiple 'exit' strategies, including irregularised and, at times, clandestine pathways (King *et al.* 2006: 413–414). Nearly 60 per cent of Albanian adults report an intention to leave (Esipova, Pugliese and Ray 2018) and about one in seven would consider irregularised routes (Balla 2023: 32).[1] The United Kingdom (UK) has become an increasingly key destination within this landscape (King *et al.* 2006: 413). In 2022, approximately 12,300 Albanians attempted irregular entry, representing 28 per cent of all small-boat arrivals (Migration Observatory 2022). This marked increase was quickly politicised through securitising and criminalising narratives. Regardless of later fluctuations in arrivals, Albanian mobility has been discursively framed as an 'invasion' and linked to organised crime, constructing 'Albanian migrants' as dominant actors in drug smuggling, human trafficking and other illicit economies.[2] Such rhetoric does not merely misdescribe migration but also constitutes mobility as a threat and legitimises the escalation of restrictive bordering, punitive enforcement and the administrative production of irregularity.

Against the prevailing criminalising conjuncture, this article is situated within critical migration and border studies, challenging state-centric categories and the methodological nationalism that sustains them (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Because political discourse can obscure the underlying dynamics of migration (Kearney 1997: 324), we foreground migrants' situated knowledge and the sociocultural grammars through which mobility is made meaningful and morally assessable in practice. Albanians draw on a layered lexicon of mobility (*kurbet* from the Turkish–Arabic *gurbet*, the more formal *mërgim* and the Euro-Atlantic loanwords *emigrim*/*emigrant* and *refugjat*) which indexes distinct moral connotations (loss, sacrifice, necessity) as well as differentiated registers of citizenship and belonging (Mai and Schwandner-Sievers 2003: 944–945). As an emic grammar, *kurbet* names a long tradition of temporary work mobility (Hristov 2015: 32; Markov 2013: 248; Nicholson 2004: 878) and, more broadly, denotes a state of being-in-the-world rather than a legal or administrative category (Papailias 2003: 1064). To maintain the focus on contemporary processes of irregularisation while retaining the *longue durée* of Albanian mobility, we employ the compound *kurbet*-migration as an analytic term that reads present-day movement through *kurbet*'s moral economy and its idioms of endurance and obligation, without collapsing vernacular categories into state classifications.[3] We treat *kurbet*-migration relationally by tracing how it is mediated through *kanun* and *besa* as emic grammars that render mobility morally intelligible and organisationally actionable, structuring practices of kinship reciprocity, brokerage and reputational adjudication that often function as informal infrastructures

coordinating access to routes and intermediaries within transnational fields governed by border-labour regimes (Hajrizi 2011: 46; Papailias 2003: 1064; Voell 2003: 89–92).[4] Attending to these emic grammars allows us to ask whether and how historically rooted patterns of 'life in motion' are being reproduced or transformed as they encounter contemporary bordering and labour valuation regimes (Hristov 2015: 34).

The article proceeds in four parts. It first develops a theoretical framework linking irregularisation, the autonomy of migration and emic grammars to border-labour regimes of recognition. It then outlines the digital-historical ethnographic design, including ethical considerations and limitations, before presenting findings on *kurbet*, *kanun* and *besa* as gendered and generationally recalibrated moral–reputational infrastructures, on tactical mobilities under border fortification, on commodified solidarity and brokerage and on digital technologies as infrastructures of connectivity, coordination and (in)visibility. The conclusion synthesises the article's contributions to debates on irregularisation and briefly sketches non-securitising implications.

Situating the debate: Irregularisation, the autonomy-of-migration and sociocultural grammars

Critical governance scholarship shows how irregularisation is produced through border, visa and asylum regimes that securitise mobility and organise differential inclusion and deportability (de Genova 2002; van Liempt, Schapendonk and Campos-Delgado 2023). Securitising discourse constructs hierarchies of permissible mobility and legitimates policing, deterrence and criminalisation. At the same time, security bureaucracies produce administrative anxieties and threat continuums that reorganise inclusion/exclusion beyond humanitarian reason (Bigo 2002). These governance logics operate alongside labour-market demands, producing a mixed regime of internal/external controls and 'fencing'/'gate-keeping' strategies, such that intensified border fortification coexists with selective workplace porosity (Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini 2011). Ethnographic political economy further details how enforcement becomes embedded in market and institutional networks, producing a counterproductive 'illegality industry' in which (non-)state actors can reproduce – and profit from – the very irregularity which they publicly denounce (Andersson 2016).

Governance-only accounts can obscure migrants' practical tactics and solidarities. The autonomy-of-migration perspective foregrounds migrants' collective capacities to assemble tactical repertoires (alternative knowledges, situational solidarities and adaptive mobilities) through which state-controlled movement is navigated, circumvented and contested (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). These tactics are grounded in practical moral reckonings of necessity, obligation and fairness, including vernacular claims to legitimacy articulated under surveillance, through practices of subversion such as mimicry and opacity (Scheel 2025). States respond with ambivalent moral stances that combine repression with selective compassion (Fassin 2005), producing probationary regimes of deservingness, where irregularised migrants must accumulate proofs of reliability and social worth to access conditional inclusion (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2012).

To bridge governance-centred accounts of irregularisation with autonomy-of-migration perspectives without reducing migrants' practices to 'culture', a relational Bourdieusian approach can specify how sociocultural grammars operate as practical sense linking tactics, moral evaluations and the field-specific conditions under which action becomes intelligible and recognised as valuable. Emic grammars (such as *kurbet*, *kanun* and *besa*) provide socioculturally resonant idioms and repertoires through which mobility (loss and separation, obligation, honour and trust) can be narrated and rendered morally intelligible in practice (Mai and Schwandner-Sievers 2003; Voell 2003: 90–92). Read in Bourdieusian

terms, these grammars sediment as durable, transposable dispositions that generate perceptions and practices without conscious calculations or obedience to explicit rules, yet they can become misaligned with transformed conditions and thus require recalibration (Bourdieu 1990: 52–63). Migrants' resources become capital only through field-specific processes of recognition, mediated by institutions and social relations rather than carried as inherently valuable assets (Erel 2010: 645–649). Resources validated as social or symbolic capital within family, diaspora or brokerage fields may be misrecognised or actively devalued within state and security fields structured by securitising and classificatory logics, where practices rooted in sacrifice and obligation are reclassified as illegality or threat (Bigo 2002: 70–76). Accordingly, even where emic repertoires endure as embodied orientations, the dispositions and resources they generate are continually contested and differentially valued across fields, producing asymmetric recognition regimes in which the same orientations yield divergent effects depending on field-specific criteria and power relations (Bigo 2002: 74–76; Erel 2010: 645–649).

Researching *Kurbet*-migration: Digital ethnography, oral histories and reflexive limitations

To explore how irregularisation is produced and negotiated through governance pressures, tactical agency and sociocultural mediations, we adopt a digital ethnographic design that integrates historical reconstruction through oral-history testimonies (King and Vullnetari 2016: 198, 200) with the analysis of digitally mediated testimonies and platform-based traces (Pink *et al.* 2016: 109–111) in order to trace how vernacular moral claims, reputational signals and bordering logics circulate across time and socio-technical environments.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews (60–110 minutes) were conducted in Albanian with migrants who entered the UK via irregularised routes (2015–2020), subsequently lived and/or worked undocumented for several years and later obtained lawful status through legal routes, in some cases facilitated by employment sponsorships. Participants were predominantly men aged 23–40 from northern Albania, with diverse schooling backgrounds.[5] Recruitment combined purposive and snowball sampling, beginning with key informants in personal networks and expanding through peer referrals until thematic saturation was reached, operationalised as the point where interviews added no new analytic themes (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006). Interviews were conducted through end-to-end encrypted video-conferencing and instant-messaging applications (Zoom, WhatsApp, Signal), enabling secure and sustained mediated ethnographic engagement across distance while acknowledging reduced interactional density and richness relative to co-present modes of fieldwork (Pink *et al.* 2016: 13). In parallel, we analysed publicly accessible platform materials, including user-generated posts, videos, comment-thread interactions and artistic representations circulating on social media (TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook), alongside mediated interview formats and investigative reporting (Murthy 2008) that documented and mediated the experiences of Albanians travelling to the UK. We treated these textual and visual materials as 'digital ethnographic traces' embedded in socio-technical environments, extracted migrant testimonies and critically assessed how platform affordances, editorial selectivity and media framing jointly shape visibility, circulation and credibility (Gray, Gerlitz and Bounegru 2018).

The analysis followed a reflexive thematic approach, moving iteratively between the ethnographic materials and the study's analytic commitments (Braun and Clarke 2019). Transcripts and digital artefacts were initially coded grounded in participants' lexicon (*kurbet, besa, kanun, sacrifice, obligation, risk, intermediation, solidarity*) and subsequently organised into higher-order analytic categories and theoretical constructs (moral economies, solidarity networks, commodification). We treat themes as

interpretive patterns generated through reflexive engagement and iterative refinement across cases. We adhered to project ethical guidelines and GDPR, obtaining informed consent after providing detailed information on research purposes, data usage, confidentiality protections and withdrawal rights.[6] We implemented enhanced confidentiality measures, including pseudonymisation, removal of identifying details, encryption and anonymised transcripts – and explicitly informed participants that no information would be shared with immigration authorities. Participants were offered the opportunity to review excerpted transcripts and to withdraw any statements which they felt compromised their safety or dignity. The inclusion of digital materials was restricted to publicly shared content – avoiding private posts – and we remained attentive to the risks of re-circulation and stigmatisation (Murthy 2008). The researcher's partial insider positionality (Albanian) facilitated rapport and interpretive nuance around emic grammars, while necessitating continuous reflexivity to avoid romanticising solidarity or moral obligations. We maintain a constructivist epistemology, prioritising situated accounts of participants over the researcher's preconceptions.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, the purposive sampling strategy and relatively small sample size constrain generalisability. Second, the predominance of male participants from northern Albania, who have at least a secondary education, introduces epistemic blind spots regarding women, regional origins and others with lower educational attainment. Third, the retrospective nature of interviews entails recall bias, as participants reconstruct journeys undertaken years earlier, potentially smoothing over hardship or amplifying particular narratives. Fourth, because the study includes individuals who successfully regularised their status, survivorship bias is likely, underrepresenting those deported, indefinitely detained or trapped in protracted irregularity. Fifth, ethical and methodological boundaries shaped our inquiry as we did not solicit detailed accounts of post-arrival employment in legally sensitive sectors (e.g., cannabis cultivation), both to protect participants from potential legal exposure and because such questions exceeded the scope of our ethics approval.[7]

Mobilising *kurbet*, *kanun* and *besa*: From emic grammars to mobile habitus and convertible capital

Participants mobilise *kurbet*, *kanun* and *besa* as flexible interpretive–evaluative schemas through which mobility is narrated, evaluated and justified under conditions of constraint and risk.

Kurbet, historically codified as 'journeying far… to support the family back home,' carries a moralised script of pride, courage and sacrifice (King 2005: 135), articulated through expressive repertoires such as songs, sayings and memorial verses (Papailias 2003: 1064; Pistrick 2010: 29). It is an affectively dense and constitutively ambivalent register, narrated both as painful loss and as a source of prosperity, development and well-being (Bon 2017: 302–303). *Kurbet*-migration can thus legitimate high-risk mobility and simultaneously sustain moral claims to dignity and contribution. Gender is constitutive of this grammar. The Albanian adage, *burrin e njeh kurbeti, gruan e njeh djepi* (literally: *kurbet* knows the man, cradle knows the woman), casts *kurbet*-migration as a masculine identity-ground (Dimitriadis 2022: 177; King *et al.* 2006: 413; Papailias 2003: 1064; Pistrick 2010: 30, ft 1). Men still describe *kurbet*-migration as the quintessential ritual of masculine responsibility and adulthood: 'Prison or the army don't make you a man; what makes you a man is taking responsibility for someone else…we absolutely want to be someone's hero' (Fatlum 2023). This gendered schema aligns with earlier UK-bound mobility patterns in which men were positioned as primary economic actors and women's entry was frequently channelled through subsequent family reunification (King *et al.* 2006: 418; Vathi 2010; Vullnetari 2012:

78). Nonetheless, recent evidence indicates a more heterogeneous *kurbet*-migration landscape where women and children are increasingly present, thereby actively unsettling the binary allocation of movement to men and care to women (Dimitriadis 2022; Markov 2013: 251; Vollmer 2023). Women's accounts register the simultaneity of constraint and agency, where mobility is lived through ethical ambivalence and affective burden: 'I put my son's life at risk, and for that I truly feel guilty' (Kupsi 2023). Youth testimonies further elucidate how *kurbet*-migration becomes embodied as a disposition of early responsibility within a habitus of provision (Vathi 2010): 'By the time we were 14 or 15, we already had to think about providing for the household' (Fatlum 2023) … and… 'I would sacrifice myself so that my sister… and my brother… could have my help in paying for their education' (Florin 2023), illustrating how obligation-driven risk is moralised as care and provision and become symbolic capital when validated as moral worth and 'proper responsibility' by and within familial regimes of value. Interlocutors narrate the intergenerational transmission of *kurbet*-migration – 'My father emigrated several times… almost all my cousins live abroad now' – embedding mobility within familial memory and aspiration (Fatlum 2023). Departure is understood as a rite of passage and participation in a moral economy of provision, where hardship becomes legible as duty for kin and household futures, rather than an individualised 'choice' (King *et al.* 2006: 413–414). Yet contemporary narratives signal an emergent hybridisation of moral economies and neoliberal subjectivities, where collective obligation sits alongside self-making. Lumjan (2025) presents *kurbet*-migration as both a necessity and a pathway to personal advancement: 'Having completed university and being unable to find employment... forced me to take the only immediate solution to create opportunities for myself and at the same time to help my family'. This recalibration reflects a shift in *kurbet*-migration, reframing it as duty-cum-entrepreneurial self-making rather than pure sacrificial obligation, a configuration echoed in the accounts of Gjergji (2023), Xhoi (2024) and Fatlum (2024), who emphasise self-realisation through departure.

Kanun, Albania's customary legal code rooted in tribal organisation and patriarchal values, provides classificatory distinctions (honour/dishonour, loyalty/betrayal, insider/outsider) and assigns moral weight to actions and relationships. It operates not as a static 'rulebook' but as 'an internalised system of predispositions, a kind of framework and set of guidelines for social action', through which actors interpret, judge and legitimate social worth (Voell 2003: 89). Thus, *kanun* functions both as grammar that classifies conduct through honour and obligation and as habitus that disposes actors to perceive and act through those classifications. Yet scholars caution against treating *kanun* as a totalising explanatory framework, emphasising instead that it operates as a contextually activated repertoire whose idioms and prescriptions are selectively mobilised and pragmatically reworked into 'mutated' forms across specific social conditions (King *et al.* 2006: 416). In this sense, *kanun* is best understood as a flexible repertoire that becomes a practical resource for organising obligations, honour, loyalty, hospitality and dispute, especially where formal governance (state/legal field) is absent, distrusted or experienced as arbitrary (Rochester 2024: 90–94). In diasporic, transit and informal mobility, *kanun*-derived dispositions are mobilised as reputational resources that organise access to support and routes, enable trust-based brokerage and discipline disputes through guarantees and expectations of obligation (Arhin 2016: 83; Leman and Janssens 2012: 174–176). These reputational resources become symbolic capital when recognised by co-ethnic networks, brokers and community gatekeepers in informal governance settings, whose recognition converts 'being known as honourable' into credible access and cooperation. Interlocutors confirm that *kanun* persists as an evaluative schema but is pragmatically recalibrated: 'Before, they [conflicts] were resolved with murder; today… with fines, big money' (Fatlum 2024). This selective adaptation sustains *kanun*'s ethical idioms of honour and obligation while

contesting violent elements as legitimate authority. Still, patriarchal and generational hierarchies persist, concentrating gatekeeping power among male elders and established migrants (King *et al.* 2006: 420–429).

Embedded within the *kanun* logics of honour, *besa* is defined as 'a verbal agreement' creating an 'unbreakable bond of trust and loyalty' (Rochester 2024: 90). In diasporic narratives, *besa* also serves as a comparative interpretive–evaluative schema through which hosts and migrants judge moral reliability and honour associated with keeping one's word, a key counterpoint in boundary-making narratives of sameness and otherness (King and Mai 2008: 180). Beyond moral comparison, *besa* also operates as a practical trust infrastructure. Albanian migrants in Greece rely on word-of-mouth arrangements grounded in *besa* to secure employment (Papailias 2003: 1067), while intermediaries may rely on reputation and deferred payment to stabilise high-risk journeys, including illicit transit infrastructures (Kosic and Triandafyllidou 2003: 1004). As a disposition, *besa* entails embodied promise-keeping and, at the extreme, readiness to protect others even at high personal cost (Hajrizi 2011: 46). Historically activated to offer sanctuary and safe passage to anyone seeking refuge, most notably to Jews during World War II (Rochester 2024: 90–91), *besa* continues to provide hospitality, shelter and protection and also to organise cooperation in 'grey' fields where trust is scarce by producing credible commitments that can be practically mobilised. Testimonies reiterate *besa*'s normative force within migrant groups: 'When you give your word [*besa*], you will keep it' (Fatlum 2024). *Besa* can become symbolic capital insofar as it is recognised as a credible commitment (King and Mai 2008: 180) and, in other fields, as a pledge that ties personal honour to collective projects (Rochester 2024: 92), thereby raising the stakes of breach, since failing to keep *besa* risks a loss of honour and social standing and may trigger reputational sanctions, including the withdrawal of network support or exclusion from communal cooperation (Voell 2003: 92).

Tactical mobilities under fortification: Routes, risks and improvised agency

Albanian journeys to the United Kingdom evidence tactical agency as improvisation within state architectures of control. Intensified policing iteratively reshapes the cartographies of movement.[8] Traditional direct trajectories via Italy, France and/or Belgium to Calais and Dunkirk have given way to circuitous multi-border itineraries that transit Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, Germany and northern France – or via Spain to the southern UK coasts (Piranjat 2022a). These tactical reconfigurations require navigating serial checkpoints while concealed in commercial lorries or train carriages (Arben 2024; Dasar 2024), demonstrating the embodied resilience that enacts the *kurbet*-migration grammar's valorisation of endurance as moral fortitude. Sea crossings in overcrowded, inadequate dinghies are perilous passages, with capsizing a recurring risk (Ajsberg 2025; Piranjat 2022b).[9] Air travel constitutes a third strategy, often pursued after failed land or sea attempts. Migrants typically use forged EU passports – primarily from Italy or Greece – and employ double-booking tactics, scheduling simultaneous flights to EU and UK destinations; they present the EU-bound ticket at security checks before boarding the UK flight with falsified documentation (Shala 2024). Detection risks remain high. Interlocutors reported interceptions in Spain and Germany due to linguistic incongruence with the claimed nationalities (Arben 2024; Florin 2023).

Tactical innovations spread through networked circulation. Migrants hide in train and subway facilities, cut access points into lorry roofs, then reseal them with adhesive (Fatlum 2024; Florin 2023) and use paprika or coffee to mask scent traces from sniffer dogs (Glauk 2024; Kingsley 2022). Temporal strategies are equally crucial. Crossings are timed to coincide with periods of heavy rain that impair

surveillance equipment or during security shift changes, when vigilance is compromised (Gjergji 2023). Real-time coordination via WhatsApp, Signal and Telegram enables quick plan adjustments, allowing for rapid recalibration as routes shift and risks intensify.

State bordering practices render mobility into an inherently punitive ordeal. Intensified surveillance infrastructures, such as barbed wire, electric fencing, motion sensors and thermal cameras, do not deter passage but compel escalated bodily risk. Florin (2023) recounts navigating 7 security zones with barbed and electric wire, cutting nets underwater while evading guards and cameras: 'One of us was seen by the cameras and the alarm went on ... they chased us'. Gjergji (2023) describes climbing a light pole to avoid triggering alarm-equipped netting, risking severe injury: 'I jumped ... risking either breaking a leg or breaking my head, depending on how I landed'. Such testimonies demonstrate how fortification infrastructures externalise harm. Danger becomes a prerequisite for passage, not an exceptional incident – and affective harms permeate the route. Encampments near Calais are depicted as traumatic 'waiting zones' of precarity; an investigative journalist recounts: 'The night I spent in the camp… There were 2 armed fights, constant gunfire, children crying and families distressed' (Harlicaj 2022). Channel crossings are narrated as physical and psychological ordeals: 'The journey across the Channel was torture. It was cold, stormy and incredibly frightening' (Artan 2022).

Post-arrival, protracted legal uncertainty, inadequate protections and exclusion from regularisation pathways sustain conditions of deportability and systemic exploitation. UK detention facilities operate as sites of structural violence (Bateman, Karaj and Perrigueur 2022), where carceral logics of confinement (concrete cells, restricted communication and indefinite temporalities) are masked by performative recreational amenities (fitness, ping-pong, tennis, PlayStation), often described by interlocutors as 'soft prisons' (Ajsberg 2025; Fatlum 2023). Deaths and suicide attempts across ostensibly 'non-detention' accommodation and immigration removal centres, exemplified by the December 2023 suicide aboard the Bibby Stockholm barge, underscore how the UK's hostile, carceral migration regime produces structural violence, where prolonged uncertainty, isolation and the systemic neglect of mental health precipitate acute psychological harm and, at its extreme, fatal consequences (MiCLU 2023; Wheeler 2024). For families, especially mothers travelling with young children, structural violence intensifies through gendered vulnerability. The imperative to protect dependents heightens psychological burdens, while stigmatising discourses frame these journeys as 'illegal' acts of desperation rather than expressions of agency constrained by exclusion (Ada 2022; Kupsi 2023).

Commodifying solidarity: From kin reciprocity to priced intermediation

Albanian mobility is sustained through layered solidarities that include familial-diasporic networks, contingent migrant mutual aid and increasingly commodified intermediary services, exposing a shift where *besa*-based trust and *kanun*-based loyalty coexist with transactional logics that price risk and quantify obligation (Alban 2024). Solidarity forms a hybrid moral economy where reputational sanctions, payment-upon-arrival agreements and kin-brokered introductions illustrate how gift and price intermix under constraint.

Familial bonds and diaspora connections serve as solidaristic infrastructure, providing tangible support such as financial assistance, housing and employment pathways, as well as the emotional resilience vital for survival in hostile environments (Carletto *et al.* 2006; Hoxhaj 2022; King and Gëdeshi 2020: 144). These networks mobilise resources grounded in kinship obligations which, within family/diaspora fields, are recognised as legitimate reciprocity. 'Solidarity comes not in the form of words of empathy but with a decisive to-do list, categorical imperatives prescribed in quasi-military

fashion' (Ypi 2022). Established relatives provide shelter and jobs and fund travel costs amounting to thousands of pounds (Glauk 2024; Lumjan 2025). Florin (2023) reports, for instance, that his cousin provided emergency aid during transit in Belgium. Beyond kinship, migrants organise contingent acts of solidarity and trust-building among fellow travellers. When familial networks fail, hometown ties often take hold. One migrant sheltered his travel companion after his relatives did not appear: 'I wouldn't leave him stranded on the road and I brought him to my hotel' (Ajsberg 2025). Migrants share food, shelter, route intelligence and reliable contacts; they also collaborate to decipher transit schedules and coordinate crossings (Gjergji 2023). Yet collective strategies have unintended consequences. Large, coordinated movements attract border surveillance, amplifying detection risks and rendering solidarity networks more vulnerable to detention. This tension between intra-collective solidarity and state surveillance shapes migrant experience, rendering mutual support vital yet insufficient against securitised regimes that criminalise collective passage.

Restrictive border regimes intensify reliance on informal networks that operate as commodified infrastructures of mobility (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Intermediaries, often labelled 'smugglers' in public discourse, are described by participants as infrastructural necessities under closure.[10] They organise underground crossings, arrange alternative routes and secure essential documents, often using payment-upon-successful-arrival models that blend trust-based commitments with economic exchange. Lumjan (2025) recounts lorry crossings with payment deferred until safe arrival, while Glauk (2024) notes that his uncle released the fee only upon secure entry into Bristol. 'Without them [intermediaries], it's nearly impossible to cross. The borders are too tight; you need someone who knows the system' (Florin 2023). Albanian intermediaries often recruit co-ethnics through kinship ties and clan networks, drawing on *kanun*-derived loyalty and reputational guarantees to secure high-risk journeys (Leman and Janssens 2012: 170–172). This reliance signals the 'commodification of solidarity,' a reconfiguration where social relations organised through reciprocity and *besa*-trust become partially mediated by monetary exchange, yet remain anchored in reputational guarantees, as failed passage invites collective sanction within transnational migration networks. A 15-year-old boy's testimony epitomises this dynamic: 'I had to borrow £4500 from relatives in Belgium to buy my place on the boat' (Reid 2023). Fees are differentiated. Lorry crossings cost £4500–£5500 per attempt, while sea crossings, though cheaper, carry a lethal risk (Glauk 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, prices surged to £20000–£30000 per journey, intensifying financial extraction among vulnerable individuals (Lumjan 2025).[11] Accommodation providers offer reduced rates with 'supplementary assistance', framed as a form of solidarity, yet also transactional. As one intermediary put it: 'For every day you remain in the hotel, the fee you are owed might be reduced… It is better to wait until the sea calms and, by 2 a.m., I will bring you a taxi' (Piranjat 2022a). These arrangements are calibrated and negotiated, transforming moral obligation into a commercialised service with explicit terms.

Intermediary accountability diminishes under market logics. Informal verbal agreements prevail, rendering migrants as disposable consumers within volatile crossing markets. Interlocutors recount switching intermediaries after failed attempts (Glauk 2024; Kupsi 2023) or enduring confinement in lorry cabins for days, without ventilation or food (Florin 2023). Such experiences expose the ruthless logic of commodified mobility, where social bonds are recast as transactions and human connections are stripped of moral and social dimensions, signalling a deeper reconfiguration of *kurbet*-migration social relations in transnational spaces. Arben (2024) diagnoses a field-shift: '*Kanun* and *besa* are steadily eroding because, once monetary exchange becomes involved, there must be someone trusted by both parties… If it were by *kanun* or by *besa*, there would be no need for intermediaries'. What erodes

is not the moral idioms themselves but their capacity to regulate mobility, as price and quasi-contractual arrangements displace honour-based obligation.

Digital technologies as infrastructures of connectivity, (in)visibility and risk

Digital technologies increasingly mediate contemporary *kurbet*-migration, reshaping practices of mobility, kinship and sociocultural reproduction. Social-media platforms and messaging applications (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok), together with GPS tracking, form an essential mobility infrastructure that stitches fragmented itineraries and enables tactical coordination (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014). Migrants now leverage digital tools to coordinate their journeys, receive real-time updates during perilous crossings (Florin 2023), communicate *en route* (Arben 2024) and document their experiences through selfies (Lumjan 2025). Digital communication sustains affective proximity: 'I talk to my parents every day, even from thousands of miles away…they send me photos of the house… it feels like I'm still there with them' (Xhoi 2024), producing a sense of co-presence that tempers the emotional costs of being far from home. Yet the same platforms that afford coordination and affective proximity also expose migrants to intensified risks, deceptions and surveillance. On TikTok and other platforms, crossings are advertised as 'safe' and 'affordable' routine services, which can normalise risk and facilitate deception (Kupsi 2023; Lumjan 2025). Digital mediation further reconfigures the politics of visibility and bordering, as platform traces circulate beyond intended audiences, becoming material for criminalising media narratives and tools for state agencies to conduct risk profiling, surveillance and targeted deportation. Digital participation thus remains a contested space where migrants' tactical autonomy is continually renegotiated against their growing legibility to securitised bureaucratic and policing regimes.

Digital infrastructures are not just channels through which journeys are organised, lived or traced. They have also become public arenas where sociocultural norms are interpreted, contested and rearticulated. Online comment threads, emojis and hashtags operate as algorithmically legible proxies for collective emotion and emergent forms of solidarity (Oltmann and Espinoza-Vasquez 2024). Visual culture constitutes a particular potential modality of this rearticulation. In a widely circulated diptych, the young artist Shazart (2024) demonstrates how emic grammars traverse platform publics, generating counter-hegemonic imaginaries of *kurbet*-migration. The first panel depicts the 1991 exodus towards Italy, with tens of thousands of Albanians clinging to a cargo ship amid post-communist turmoil. The second panel reprises this collective choreography, as Channel crossers carry an inflatable dinghy along the shoreline, dressed in orange life vests (see Fig. 1). Through deliberate compositional echoes, the artwork constructs transgenerational continuity, recoding irregularised mobility as a historical extension of *kurbet*-migration repertoires. As these images circulate across TikTok, Instagram and Facebook, they elicit platform-specific affective responses. The trending hashtag *#eksodi2022* [exodus 2022] amplifies collective indignation, while emojis like the 'heart on fire' or 'clapping hands', alongside single-word affective markers such as '*dhimbje*' (pain), '*dëshpërim*' (despair) or '*shpresë*' (hope), condense complex moral judgments about sacrifice and courage into algorithmically sortable signals that feed back into which narratives gain visibility and which remain marginal. Platform algorithms thus constitute a distinct field in which narratives and visual representations shaped by sociocultural grammars are validated and ranked through engagement-based metrics (e.g., visibility, likes, shares, hashtag circulation). Unlike other fields, where face-to-face judgments prevail, the algorithmic field treats affective resonance and virality as value, reshaping which *kurbet*-migration stories become legible and who is positioned as a credible narrator, often privileging sensational accounts rather than

quotidian endurance. By filtering and amplifying accounts of loyalty, exploitation and suffering, platforms also shape how younger generations learn what counts as acceptable *kurbet*-migration, what a 'true' *besa* entails under commodified conditions and whether *kanun*-derived hierarchies should be upheld or contested in transnational spaces. Visual memory-work, such as Shazart's paintings, functions as an epistemological intervention by re-situating contemporary border precarity within the *longue durée* of Albanian mobility as a sedimented response to recurring structural violence.

Figure 1. Artistic Diptych Counter-Narrative of the 1991 Albanian Exodus and Contemporary Channel Crossings

Source: Shazart (2024); reproduced with permission from the artist.

These dynamics position digitally mediated practices as a contemporary layer within the transnational field of Albanian *kurbet*-migration. Digital infrastructures reshape how emic grammars are transmitted and enacted, reconfiguring dispositions (coordination and risk assessment) and shifting how fields recognise resources (trust guarantees, reputational signals and route knowledge) as capital within algorithmically governed regimes of visibility and value. In so doing, they intensify field ambivalence by broadening access to information and solidarity while simultaneously deepening exposure to deception, exploitation and surveillance.

Conclusions

> *The UK's immigration system does not find criminals – it creates them. It projects criminal intent well before any criminal act has occurred. But it is hard to explain any of this to someone who has not experienced first-hand the cruelty, the contempt, the moral arbitrariness of the immigration authorities. And even those who have experienced it tend to forget* (Ypi 2022).

Ypi's (2022) insight, grounded in lived experience, underscores how the UK immigration regime can pre-emptively criminalise mobility. Building against this criminalising conjuncture, the current article argues that Albanian irregularised migration to the United Kingdom must be understood as governance-produced irregularisation within and through punitive border-labour regimes, amplified by securitising discourses and hostile-environment logics, rather than as deviance or surplus mobility. It shows how mobility is also a socially situated practice mediated by historically sedimented sociocultural dispositions that travel, are revalued and transform across uneven transnational fields.

Taken together, the findings support a three-level relational model linking emic meaning-making (*kurbet*, *kanun*, *besa*), incorporated dispositions within a mobile habitus and the field-specific recognition (or misrecognition) through which resources become convertible capital (Erel 2010). Empirically, this model clarifies how endurance and obligation legitimate high-risk routes under border fortification; how *besa*-based commitments and *kanun*-inflected reputational ordering regulate access to intermediaries while being reconfigured through priced intermediation and the commodification of solidarity; and how digital platforms operate simultaneously as infrastructures of coordination and as fields of visibility that intensify exposure to surveillance and criminalising narration. The core ambivalence lies less in the grammars themselves than in the uneven regimes of valuation, where the same practices and signals can be recognised as honourable obligation in kinship/diaspora fields, commodified as priced intermediation within brokerage fields and reclassified as 'illegality' in the UK border-security field.

Overall, this article contributes a relational theory-of-practice account of irregularised mobility that brings emic grammars into dialogue with governance-produced border-labour fields – and specifies how agency, valuation and moral economies are co-constituted under restrictive regimes. For Albanian scholarship specifically, the article analytically updates *kurbet* beyond a historical idiom of departure by theorising it as a contemporary grammar of obligation/endurance, while tracing *kanun* and *besa* as travelling reputational infrastructures that are recalibrated, contested and stratifying across transnational and diasporic fields rather than simply 'persisting' or 'disappearing'. Two non-securitising policy implications follow. First, since intensified enforcement tends to restructure mobility by deepening reliance on risk and intermediaries, harm reduction requires widening regulated mobility channels (including circular labour schemes and transparent regularisation pathways) to reduce exploitation and price-mediated risk (King *et al.* 2006). Second, because criminalising framings operate

as symbolic power that legitimates punitive escalation while obscuring structural constraints and migrants' moral economies, a decriminalised public discourse becomes a necessary condition for humane and workable policy design (Dimitriadis 2023).

More broadly, the article offers portable analytics for studying irregularised migration elsewhere by centring socioculturally situated practices within border-labour regimes of governance and valuation and by tracing how grammar-inflected resources are differentially recognised, commodified or disqualified as capital across transnational fields. This approach enables relational accounts of mobility, vulnerability and political contestation that move beyond criminalising frames.

Notes

1. A 2023 nationally representative survey found that 14 per cent of respondents would consider using irregular means, such as a dinghy or a lorry. This finding derives from the question: 'Would you try using a dinghy or a lorry to sneak into the UK?' (Balla 2023: 32).
2. In 2022, British officials employed highly charged and stigmatising rhetoric to describe Albanian arrivals, referring to an 'invasion on our southern coast', 'the illegal migration problem' and 'very harmful, serious and organised criminality' (Dimitriadis 2023). As one senior law-enforcement official testified before the Home Affairs Committee: '…there is a huge amount of very harmful, serious organised criminality in the UK committed by Albanian criminal gangs. Whatever sort of criminality you can think of – the most serious sort – there are Albanian criminal gangs dominating in those markets, whether it is drug smuggling, human trafficking, guns or prostitution' (Home Affairs Committee 2022: 10).
3. Nicholson (2004: 878) also shows that early post-1990 labour migration was widely understood as a continuation of earlier patterns of seasonal and long-distance work mobility (including Ottoman-era traditions and pre-World War II migration) and was popularly named '*the new* kurbet'.
4. *Kanun* denotes Albanian customary law associated with honour and social ordering, while *besa* refers to keeping one's word and trust (Hajrizi 2011; Papailias 2003: 1064; Voell 2003: 89–92). While *besa* is widely invoked as an ethical idiom of trust, it is reported to be used more explicitly in northern Albania and less explicitly in the south, where it may operate more as an implicit behavioural expectation than a formally invoked concept (King and Mai 2008: 180).
5. The demographic profile of participants, mainly younger, educated men from northern Albania, broadly aligns with recent trends in Albanian migration identified by King and Gëdeshi (2020) and Balla (2023). However, the sample is biased towards males with at least a secondary education.
6. This research is part of the SOLROUTES project (Solidarities and Migrants' Routes Across Europe at Large), which has received ethics approval from the University of Genoa (*Comitato Etico per la Ricerca di Ateneo – CERA*). The ethnographic sub-project Node Albania: Beyond Irregular Pathways, Cultural Frameworks, Solidarity Networks, and Agency in Albanian Migration to the UK was subsequently approved by the SOLROUTES Scientific Committee for Ethnographic Research and Ethics (SCERE) on 24 September 2024. All participants have been pseudonymised to ensure confidentiality and full compliance with research ethics protocols.
7. One participant briefly alluded to the involvement of a family member in criminalised labour sectors ('weed's house'). We did not probe further, as documenting labour exploitation in

criminalised economies requires specialised legal safeguards and trauma-informed protocols to avoid reinforcing stigmatising narratives that conflate Albanian ethnicity with illegality.

8. For detailed accounts of earlier waves of Albanian migration to the UK, including route trajectories, see King *et al*. (2006): 418–419.
9. In December 2022, an Albanian migrant was among 34 survivors of a Channel-crossing disaster when a dinghy sank while *en route* to the UK. Although physically unharmed, he was left severely traumatised, illustrating the intense psychological and physical toll of such journeys (Top Channel 2022).
10. Interviews indicate that Albanian migrants typically refer to these actors as intermediaries (*ndërmjetës*), a term that carries no inherently negative or derogatory connotations. By contrast, public discourse frequently labels them smugglers or traffickers (*kontrabandistë*/*trafikantë*), reframing their role through registers of exploitation rather than solidarity.
11. Recent research confirms a market price differential for underground crossings: small-boat journeys cost between £2500 and £4000 (or €3000–€4700) per person, while truck crossings for Albanian migrants have surged to £20000–£25000 (€23600–€29500). For other nationalities, the highest reported truck price travel was £17000 (€20000). This economic disparity helps to explain the dramatic rise in small-boat crossings, particularly among Albanians, who constituted the largest proportion of Channel crossings in 2022 (see also GI-TOC 2024).

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‘In Hungary, Everything Is Better’ – Recently Arrived Older German Migrants’ Narratives about Relocating to Rural Hungary

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International retirement migration (IRM) is a constantly diversifying phenomenon, in which new concepts and geographies are emerging and new social groups are becoming involved. In this paper, we intend to fill a research gap in terms of the geographical scope of IRM by focusing on Hungary as a host country for a growing number of older migrants from Western European countries. The paper focuses, in particular, on older German citizens settled in rural Hungary, who constitute the largest group of Western European migrants illustrated both by statistical data and empirical evidence. Based on semi-structured interviews conducted with German migrants over 50 years of age living in small peripheral villages, we show how they explain and justify their decision to relocate to Hungary. Based on this empirical evidence, we demonstrate the complex and changing nexus of economic, lifestyle-oriented, political and ideological motivations shaping the decision to migrate. While, regardless of the period of migration, economic and lifestyle-oriented considerations can be identified as determining factors in migration decisions, the narratives of those German citizens aged over 50 who have relocated since the mid-2010s emphasise their dissatisfaction with the political and social circumstances in their home country as a primary incentive to migrate and portraying Hungary as an attractive destination in political and ideological terms.

Keywords: international retirement migration, lifestyle migration, geoarbitrage, political and ideological motivations of migration, relative status loss

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Introduction

International retirement migration (IRM) has been a theoretically discussed and an empirically well-documented social phenomenon in the recent decades. Globalisation, the rise of mass tourism, increases in wealth and the number of years spent in retirement all contribute to the greater willingness of older adults to relocate and start a new life in another country. IRM is closely related to the theoretical framework of lifestyle migration, which focuses on the individual lifestyle choices of relatively affluent migrants (Benson 2010; Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 2016). However, current research shows that IRM is a constantly diversifying phenomenon, where new aspects are emerging – including new geographies, motivations and timing – and new social groups are becoming involved in this type of migration (King, Cela and Fokkema 2021). Some traditional destinations have become saturated by lifestyle and retirement migrants and new frontiers for IRM are opened up (King, Cela, Morettini and Fokkema 2019) at both European and global levels. It is not just the retired who are involved in older people's international migration; some approaching retirement also move abroad to where they intend to live until and after reaching their retirement age (Bolzman, Fokkema, Guissé and van Dalen 2021; Green 2014). Increasingly, more older adults with a lower social status and who experience economic precarity choose migration as a coping strategy (Botterill 2017; de Jong 2022; Iorio 2020; Toyota 2022).

Based on empirical evidence consisting of semi-structured interviews with German migrants over 50 years of age, the aim of this paper is to contribute to IRM scholarship by widening its geographical and thematic scope. On the one hand, we demonstrate that Hungary has become an increasingly attractive destination for West-European, predominantly German, older citizens; on the other, we attempt to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex and changing nexus of lifestyle-related, economic and political, ideological motivations for migration. By answering the question of why they migrated to rural Hungary, the focus of this paper is on how they explain and justify their decision to migrate. Our empirical results support both the relevance of lifestyle migration and of geoarbitrage (Hayes 2014) as an analytical framework of IRM. Our contribution is to highlight the relevance of political and ideological motivations for migration in the narratives of those German migrants 50+ who have recently relocated to small peripheral villages in Hungary. Our results suggest that processes such as the immigration of third-country citizens and the unexpected crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russo-Ukraine war and their lived or feared consequences, as well as the growing dissatisfaction with public policies aimed at addressing these challenges, might all shape people's motivations to migrate and fuel migration to Hungary. Thus, our empirical evidence from Hungary draws attention to the growing importance of political and ideological considerations in how recently arrived migrants explain and justify their migration decisions, a phenomenon thus far under-discussed in the literature on IRM.

The article starts with a theoretical framework, where we describe current trends and ongoing debates on IRM and related research areas. Next, we introduce Hungary as a destination country for older German citizens, highlighting their increasing number and spatial distribution in Hungary. We then present the methodology, reflecting on the field sites and some social characteristics of the interviewees. The empirical results are interpreted in four sections, which detail these older migrants' perceptions and interpretation of 1) immigration to Germany, perceived as a physical and cultural threat; 2) the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, interpreted as a lack of political and public representation and as a restriction of individual autonomy; and 3) the social injustice resulting in the crises of livelihoods. Finally, we show how recently arrived German migrants aged 50+ portray the receiving country compared to the home country, discussing the importance of values, meanings and imaginations attached to Hungary within the narratives on migration. The subsequent discussion

embeds our empirical results in a broader context and interprets them in the light of the literature. In the conclusion we briefly summarise the main findings and the contribution of our research to the understanding of the complex and changing phenomenon which is IRM.

Theoretical and conceptual framework of IRM

The early literature on IRM predominantly focused on the population and migration aspects of the phenomenon, while ageing has increasingly come to the fore (King, Warnes and Williams 1998). In the early 2000s, retirement migration was already associated with transnational lifestyle and the privileged position of migrants (Gustafson 2001). This idea has been elaborated by Benson and O'Reilly (2009: 609), who defined lifestyle migrants as 'relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life'.

Lifestyle migration is applied as an analytical and conceptual framework rather than a coherent theory – 'a lens rather than a box' (Benson and O'Reilly 2016: 25) – within the international migration literature (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 2016; Korpela 2020). Lifestyle migration as a 'lens' focuses on subjective aspects of migration and migrants' self-narratives, on how imaginations and meanings of other places shape one's decision to relocate and how people then build up a new way of life in a different country (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Hayes 2021). Other authors have pointed out the importance of the relationality of lifestyle mobility (Botterill 2017; Torkington 2012) and emphasise that multi-layered hierarchies, societal structures and geographical and political positions shape this type of migration (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Korpela 2020; Ormond and Toyota 2017).

According to Benson and O'Reilly's (2009) frequently cited definition, lifestyle migrants aim to achieve a better way of life through residential mobility. Their purpose is to attain a slower pace of life, better climate conditions and idyllic rural spaces where the cost of living is relatively lower, there is a feeling of security and a sense of community spirit. While a number of qualitative case studies have since been published, a debate has been articulated on the conceptualisation of lifestyle migration. Huete, Mantecón and Estévez (2013: 337) criticised the lack of a precise definition of 'relatively affluent' people and raised the point that labour and lifestyle migrants often share similarities (including motivations), which would justify observing the two forms of residential behaviour 'as parts of the same continuum of mobility types'.

This critique indicates that relative privilege and affluence do not equate to a lack of economic constraints (Huete *et al.* 2013). A literature review containing 90 articles on international retirement migration revealed that the third-most-important motivation of retired migrants was the lower living costs in the host country (Savaş, Spaan, Henkens, Kalmijn and van Dalen 2023). This means that at least some older adults decide upon migration to lower-income countries in order to maintain or enhance their socio-economic status. Repetti, Phillipson and Calasanti (2018) emphasised how economic pressures impact on the choices of Northern European retirees seeking to relocate to Mediterranean countries. In this context the authors identify IRM as a type of economic migration. In a similar way, Hayes (2015) and Hayes and Pérez-Gañán (2016) referred to many North American retired migrants who relocated to Ecuador due to economic motivations as 'economic amenity migrants – migrants whose relocation is shaped by a search for a lower cost of living, sometimes under conditions of financial duress' (Hayes 2015: 274). Benson and Osbaldiston (2016) argued that privilege is produced by social structures. Therefore, power asymmetries and economic and material conditions should be taken into account when talking about the 'free choices' of individuals. In accordance with Korpela (2014), they concluded that social and economic constraints facilitate, limit and shape migrants' choices and actions.

Based on his research evidence Hayes (2014, 2015, 2021) introduced the concept of geographical arbitrage, a critical political geographical framework within IRM studies. In Hayes' approach, in north–south international retirement migration, retirees who sold their labour in high-cost labour markets transfer their pensions, savings and daily expenses to low-cost locations, where they can finance an accommodation and lifestyle that they could not afford from their pensions or savings in their home countries. Thus, international retirement migration is 'the lifestyle equivalent of financial arbitrage or trading which seeks to benefit from price differentials in different markets' (Hayes 2014: 10). Through their relocation, migrants take advantage of 'individual arbitrage opportunities' constituted by global structural hierarchies and inequalities, while migrants' lost former economic and social statuses and their relative vulnerability in the home country are transformed into a relative privilege and affluence in the receiving country (Hayes 2015). However, while the purchasing power of retired migrants becomes higher and their socio-economic status might increase after relocation due to lower costs of living (Bender, Hollstein and Schweppe 2018; Hayes 2014, 2015; Iorio 2020; King *et al.* 2019; Repetti *et al.* 2018), relative privilege and social vulnerability might coexist (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Botterill 2017). Ormond and Toyota (2017) addressed economic and care-related vulnerabilities of retired migrants. Recent empirical evidence has indicated the growing presence of economically vulnerable groups participating in IRM (Botterill 2017; Iorio 2020; King *et al.* 2021; Toyota 2022).

Some scholars draw attention to the fact that the concept of 'retirement' became more flexible (King *et al.* 2021). In its narrowest meaning, IRM implies migration at or after retirement; however, more and more people move abroad before reaching retirement age, with the subsequent retirement in mind, while others may have taken early retirement (Bolzman *et al.* 2021). In order to grasp this flexibility in terms of time of migration, Bolzman *et al.* (2021) introduced the term international near-retirement or retired migrants (INRRM), while others proposed to use the term 'later-life' migrants (Green 2014; Warnes and Williams 2006). However, in this paper we use the established term of IRM, keeping in mind the flexible timing of older people's migration.

IRM is also an increasing diversifying phenomenon in terms of geographies (King *et al.* 2021; Ormond and Toyota 2017). While case studies on heliotropic migration are well documented in both the European (Benson and O'Reilly 2009; Casado-Díaz 2006; Gustafson 2001; Lundström 2014) and the US contexts (Matysiak 2022), rural destinations (Benson 2010; Stockdale 2010) and cities (Korpela 2020) also attract retirees. However, the scope of possible IRM destinations has broadened both in terms of new countries beyond European destinations (Bolzman *et al.* 2021; Botterill 2017; Ertuğrul 2016; Green 2014) and new regions adjacent to previously popular areas (King *et al.* 2019). Bulgaria is an emerging destination country for Italian pensioners on the periphery of the EU, due to its lower cost of living and coastal character (Iorio 2020). Recent research has demonstrated that Hungary, as a landlocked post-socialist country, has also become a target country for IRM, mainly for older German citizens (Koós, Tátrai and Gábriel 2025). In our article, we aim to put Hungary on the rapidly changing map of international retirement migration (King *et al.* 2021). Central and Eastern European countries seem to be becoming increasingly preferred target destinations for retired and near-to-retirement migrants, which can be explained by increasing structural constraints in their home country and a lower costs of living in the host countries, underlining the relevance of the concept of geoarbitrage (Hayes 2014; Iorio 2020).

Hungary as an old/new destination for older German citizens

Hungary is a post-socialist country (thus globally having a semi-peripheral position) and has been a member of the EU since 2004. Its economic indicators are below the EU – and very often the Visegrad Group countries' – average. Hungary's political and economic dependencies did not arrive with its EU accession but can be traced to much earlier – to the period of state socialism. Melegh (2023) raises the point about Hungary's dependency concerning migration processes by highlighting the role of the inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) and related social and institutional changes. He argues that the increases in emigration and FDI rates are correlated both globally and in Eastern European countries. While Hungary has been both a sending and a destination country for labour migrants since the transition in 1989 and especially after its EU accession, it became an increasingly popular target area for older migrants from Western Europe, especially Germany (Koós *et al.* 2025).

The migration of Western European citizens to rural Hungary is not a new phenomenon. Ethnographic research in the early 2000s reported an increasing number of migrants who had bought houses and settled permanently in the countryside since 1990 (Járosi 2006; Szőke 2006). Among them, Germans formed the largest group, the majority of whom were lower-middle-class retirees. They preferred the south-western region of Hungary, attracted by the proximity of Lake Balaton and the numerous thermal baths. Within the region, the most popular destination was Somogy County, where German migrants settled in small peripheral villages with only a few hundred inhabitants, characterised by population decline and ageing, impoverishment, insufficient infrastructure and a shortage of public and private services. As Szőke pointed out, retired German migrants were pursuing amenity-led lives and their relocation to rural Hungary served 'as a strategy to maximise consumption. (…) they receive their proper welfare assistance from Germany, which they spend in a place where prices are relatively lower (…) they can afford more types of goods and commodities in Hungary then they would in Germany' (Szőke 2006: 43). Their relatively privileged position in the locality was manifested in their bigger, renovated houses and higher pensions and levels of consumption compared to local inhabitants (Járosi 2006; Szőke 2006). We could say that the evidence from these early ethnographic research studies fits the concept of both lifestyle migration and geoarbitrage.

According the 2022 census data, the number of foreign citizens living in Hungary has increased significantly since the turn of the millennium (2001 = 93,000, 2022 = 218,000). The increase is particularly noticeable in the case of older (60+ years) migrants; their number tripled over 20 years (9,600 and 37,000, respectively). Most older migrants came from Germany, ahead of countries such as Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium. German citizens constitute not only the largest group among older foreign citizens living in Hungary but also, between 2001 and 2022, the most dynamically expanding one (1,003 and 11,240, respectively). The 2022 census data are in accordance with the pension stock statistics provided by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany: in 2022, an average of 11, 460 retirees living in Hungary received an old-age pension from Germany (Rente 2022), while this average number was only 5,361 in 2012 (Die Rentenbestände in Der Gesetzlichen Rentenversicherung in Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2012). Hungary's growing popularity as a destination country may depend on at least two structural factors. Indeed, Hungary's EU membership (since 2004) facilitates the relocation of retired and near-to-retirement European Union citizens, providing them with freedom of movement, the transfer of pensions and other benefits or liquid assets as well as entitlements to residence and health services. The costs of housing and everyday life in Hungary may also attract German citizens. However, as we will argue below, political and ideological values, meanings and imaginations (Xiang and Nyíri 2022)

attached to Hungary also shape the decision to relocate to the country, representing a recently emerging phenomenon in IRM scholarship. In other words, the migration of older German citizens to Hungary is not primarily of interest because it places the country on the map of IRM but, rather, because it highlights the increasing importance of political and ideological motivations as incentives of international retirement migration.

Compared to other older Western European citizens who tend to live in the capital and bigger cities, the majority of older German migrants prefer rural areas as places of residence. Most of them were registered in South-West Transdanubia, mainly in small, peripheral villages in Somogy and Zala County (Koós *et al.* 2025). Previous research evidence (Járosi 2006; Szőke 2006) and recent statistical data indicate a certain continuity regarding older German migrants' preferences by selecting regions and settlements to relocate. The remarkable consistency of their spatial distribution could be explained by the relatively low estate prices (Koós *et al.* 2025) in peripheral villages, which may correspond with the lower socio-economic status of migrants in their home country.

Methodology and some characteristics of the interviewees

Research fields and research method

The selection of the field sites was based on quantitative data analysis. In the first step, we chose the South Transdanubian region, Somogy County in Hungary, where a relatively large group of older German migrants live (Koós *et al.* 2025). In the second step, we did preliminary fieldwork in villages in Somogy County: we conducted interviews with the mayors, local inhabitants and migrants aged over 50 in order to explore these places' social and economic situations and the effects of the Western European citizens' immigration on these settlements. In the third step, we chose three small villages (with a population of 200–700) where we carried out sociological fieldwork conducting interviews with local inhabitants and migrants between 2022 and 2023.[1]

By selecting these small and disadvantaged villages, we aimed to examine in depth why these German citizens relocate to peripheral villages which are lacking good infrastructure, amenities or unique landscapes and which usually attract more-affluent-lifestyle migrants. We contacted our interviewees using the snowball method as well as via random encounters or visits. In total, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Western European migrants,[2] among them 24 from Germany, of whom 21 people were older than 50. The majority of them (16 interviewees) had relocated to Hungary since the mid-2010s.

The interviews were conducted in German and recorded in the migrants' home; they lasted from one to three hours. Our questions covered the motivation for and the history of migration and an evaluation of the interviewees' lives and homes in the sending and receiving countries. The interviews were also open to new topics that the interviewees wanted to share. It is important to note that the interviews with migrants aged 50+ were conducted and analysed by Hungarian researchers, who do not share the same social experiences as their interviewees. Consequently, Hungarian researchers were more or less unfamiliar with the social, economic and political context of Germany – especially in terms of lived experiences – but were familiar with the Hungarian context. *Vice versa*, these German migrants were quite unfamiliar with the broader Hungarian social, economic and political context. However, this did not prevent them from creating a big picture of the 'Hungarian reality', representing it as an attractive destination for those who want to leave Germany. Since both the unfamiliarity and familiarity of the

social horizons were mutually brought into play during the interviews and the analysis (Ertuğrul 2016), we consider these interviews as narratives crystallising – besides personal experiences – the migrants' subjective perceptions and individual representations of social reality. These narratives can show how these migrants subjectively perceive and interpret their situation in the sending and the receiving countries, how their interpretations of their migration trajectory help them to express what they are afraid of and what they wish for in the future (Lamont and Swidler 2014).

The interviews were transcribed and analysed with the focus on the main topics of the interviews. In this paper, we concentrate on the complex set of motivations for migration. During the analysis, we identified different patterns and topics 'emerging' from the interviews, which were subsequently grouped and interpreted as different motivations to migrate. Nevertheless, these motivations can only be analytically dissected from each other: their interpretation opens the way to scrutinise the complex nexus of economic, social, political and ideological motives in shaping migration decisions. Our analysis is partly inspired by the grounded-theory approach (Charmaz 1995) and also closely resembles ethnographic content analysis, especially in terms of analysing the data in an inductive, iterative and reflexive way (Altheide 1987).

Who is coming? Older German migrants in three peripheral settlements

The composition of our interviewees is diverse in both geographic and socio-economic terms. Within Germany, they lived in different regions and in diverse types of settlement (metropolises, cities and villages) before their relocation to Hungary. With the exception of a few younger families and individuals, our interviewees were either near to retirement or retired (50–64 years and older) living on old-age or early pensions or disability benefits. The age composition of the sample corresponds to recent research evidence on the flexible timing of migration in older age (Bolzman *et al.* 2021; Green 2014). Some families near to retirement live on their savings from the sale of their property in the home country and/or run a small enterprise in Hungary. Their previous occupations are diverse, ranging from small entrepreneurs to public and private employees, indicating lower-middle and working-class positions in the home society. Some of the interviewees reported unstable employment in their active lives, which unfavourably impacted on their financial conditions and perspective in their retirement years. In line with recent research evidence, the socio-economic composition of our interviewees illustrates the growing participation of lower-class and economically vulnerable groups in IRM (Botterill 2017; Iorio 2020; King *et al.* 2021; Toyota 2022).

The majority of the interviewees live permanently in their Hungarian homes; only a few use their property as a second home. Some had never visited Hungary before migrating there and even those who had visited, had not planned to settle at tourist destinations. Their decisions were not influenced by tourist attractions and leisure facilities. Rather, in choosing their future place of residence in Hungary, the most important consideration was the favourable price of properties, which indicates their lower or even vulnerable socio-economic status and explains their relocation to peripheral villages.

The decision to migrate is always a complex process, interwoven with individual motives, expectations, hopes and desires. Some of our interviewees reported 'watershed moments' (Benson 2012: 10), representing a turning point in their lives – such as the loss of a family member or a new relationship – as factors that brought about migration. They also mentioned the search for tranquility and a slower pace of life and even a wide space suitable for keeping horses or subsistence farming, as important considerations. However, when our interviewees explained why they had left their home countries and had chosen Hungary as a new destination, besides individual motives, financial

considerations (affordable price of estate, lower living costs) and, in some cases, geographical proximity to family members, most of them referred to subjective experiences of worsening political climate and deteriorating social and economic conditions and perspectives as motivations for both leaving the home country and relocating to Hungary. With very few exceptions, such an argumentation was surprisingly common among those migrants who had arrived in the last few years, since the mid-2010s. It explains why we focus on this subgroup of 16 German migrants aged 50+ in this analysis.

Results: Migrant narratives reflecting relative status loss in relation to social changes

Based on the analysis of the empirical data, three intersecting topics emerged which underpin the complexity of the phenomenon of international retirement migration and demonstrate the interrelated motives of migrants aged 50+ arriving in Hungary from Germany. Topics emerging from the migration narratives were subsequently grouped under the following concepts, containing both the perceptions and the interpretations of deteriorating conditions in the home country within the individual narratives: 1) immigration to Germany was perceived as a threat to safety and culture; 2) the management of the COVID pandemic was interpreted as the lack of political and public representation and the restriction of individual autonomy; and 3) social injustice, resulting in the crisis of livelihood. In this section, we analytically dissect these topics and interpret the interplay of the three domains.

Immigration to Germany: physical and cultural threat

The first main topic reflects the interviewees' perceptions and interpretations of immigration to Germany, which they interpret as a threat to their safety in both the physical and the cultural sense in the country of origin. The participants expressed the feeling of being threatened at both an individual and a cultural level, mainly due to the increasingly growing immigrant population, especially the inflow of non-Christian migrants from outside of Europe. Beyond the perceived threat to their individual safety, challenges concerning living together with the migrant population and the restriction of freedom as a barrier of individual autonomy were also depicted, as the following excerpt from an interview with two women shows:

> *J: We're Catholic. We want to eat pork.*
> *H: Exactly!*
> *J: We want women to wear short skirts.*
> *H: Exactly!*
> *J: I want to go where I want.*
> *H: And in Germany it's not like that. In Germany, women have to walk around in closed dresses because if they rape her, they say it's her fault because she was wearing a short skirt. And this is absolutely not right*! (Helga and Josefa, F.-s, 60 and 75 years old).

As the interviewees expressed their opinions, they excitedly interrupted each other, constructing common meanings of being threatened. These meanings are not fixed but are created through contrasting the two groups which make the comparison rather one-sided and selective. In their accounts, Christianity equals a non-Islamic, European and white population. The following excerpt makes this contrast even sharper, linking it to crimes committed by non-white immigrants and expressing general threat and fear as a reason to leave Germany.

> [The city] *is no longer safe. Why? Because all the dark-skinned people are walking around with knives. A good acquaintance of mine lost his son last week. He was stabbed. Just for nothing. That's it. And this has happened several times. And that's when I really say I do not want to live here* [in Germany] (Ulla, F. 53 years old).

These elements are intertwined with the critical attitudes towards the current redistribution of welfare benefits. Our empirical research points out that welfare services provided to the immigrants and refugees in the country of origin provoked indignation among German citizens aged 50+ who were settled in Hungary and who resent the immigration and social policies that put them at a disadvantage.

> *The millions of refugees who live now in Germany are beneficiaries of our social system. They immediately enter our social system. A German woman who has worked for her whole life hardly receives any pension. But every refugee receives a pension without having ever paid a cent* [of tax]. *This is a great disparity. (…) Now, when someone comes as a refugee from Ukraine, which is outside the EU, to Germany, they receive a pension. (…) I have to work until I am 67 yet these Ukrainian women receive a pension at the age of 59. And I, as a German woman, receive it only when I am 67. (…) And this is such an imbalance, outrageous to all Germans! This needs to be said. It doesn't work that way* (Johanna, F. 62).

Some of our interviewees reported that they began to seriously think about their migration after 2015, when hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Middle East had entered Europe, especially Germany. Even those who had arrived in Hungary before 2015 mentioned the growing number of immigrants as a sign that 'things are going wrong' in their home country and one that encourages the recent out-migration flow. Besides anxiety over the loss of their individual safety and the vulnerability of Western culture and society, participants also expressed their feelings of being excluded from the public because they felt that the problems and fears related to the immigration of third-country citizens, especially Muslims, were not represented in politics and the mainstream media.

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic: the lack of political and public representation and the restriction of individual autonomy

The second topic emerging from the narratives of these German migrants was the lack of political representation and the erosion of autonomy that were perceived as the restricted expression of opinion on social issues in their home country. This topic emerged in the context of in-migration and the German government's migration policy as well; however, our interviewees' feeling of being marginalised in public had only intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic was a frequently problematised issue in the interviews for various reasons, as it united several challenges of everyday life. Many of the interviewees decided to move to Hungary during or shortly after the end of the pandemic, which means that the migration decision was possibly related to the COVID-19 situation.

COVID-19 brought several restrictive measures into everyday life, including obligatory screening, the mandatory wearing of face masks in certain institutions, lockdown and strongly recommended vaccination. The fear of losing control over one's own body and the problem of the 'indoctrination' of the government and the mainstream media in Germany were raised by many migrant interviewees.

When people took to the streets to protest about Corona, the police beat people. People were beaten, for their rights! Why should my body, why should my body, if I don't want it, be vaccinated? Why!? It is my body! Why?! And if I get sick, I'm sick. I don't give a damn! (Helga, F. 60).

[In Germany] *I see a lot of lying, manipulation and forcing people to have an opinion that's dictated by the state. You can't think freely anymore; you can't say what you think! Otherwise, you'll be cornered right away. And I think that's terrible. (…)* [During the COVID pandemic] *You couldn't make your own decision. The restrictions became harsher and harsher and went in the direction that one became an outcast if one had a different opinion. (…) I, as far as my health is concerned, it is my responsibility – and I won't let politics prescribe to me… That's what I don't understand and I won't let them force me to… And this was one of the reasons* [for migration] (Emma, F. 57)

While immigration and the German migration policy were clearly rejected by our interviewees, the judgment on the Covid pandemic and the related policy was not unanimous among migrants aged 50+. While some had been vaccinated, others not only refused to be but questioned the severity of the epidemic. The interviewees also revealed that there had been a heated debate among them about the pandemic and the vaccination. However, some of the interviewees experienced and interpreted the COVID-19 pandemic and the related measures as a threat to one's basic human rights in terms of restrictions on freedom of expression and on decisions over one's own body. In the accounts of these interviewees, the restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the virus are perceived as the constraint of peoples' individual agency, resulting in the general dissatisfaction with and distrust in the state and politics – and often giving 'the last push' to migrate.

Social injustice resulting in the crisis of livelihood

From the perspective of our interviewees, the critique of German migration policy is also connected to the redistribution of welfare benefits, which favours refugees and immigrants who are implicitly labelled by the participants as undeserving beneficiaries of goods – in particular, social allowances produced by tax-paying citizens.

Our interviewees' judgement on the redistribution policy in their country of origin is also linked to the current crisis of the Russo-Ukrainian War in a twofold way. In addition to complaints about the support of immigrants, we heard stories about Ukrainians arriving in Germany on buses to pick up aid for refugees and then returning on the same bus to Ukraine. However, beyond that, as the excerpt below illustrates, some interviewees formulated a more general criticism of the support for Ukraine before and during the war.

I don't understand German politicians. We started a war [WW2]. *Why do they interfere in the war of Ukraine? And they supported Ukraine also before the war. Does Hungary* [do] *the same? Surely not. Germany supports every country… and our pensioners, our pensioners! I saw it when I went to work early in the morning. I saw pensioners looking* [for food] *in the trash. And you feel ashamed! Because our own German people have nothing to – eat and they throw away the money!* (Helga, F. 60).

In the accounts of some participants, redistribution policies linked to the immigration and the Russo-Ukrainian War favour foreign countries as well as immigrants and refugees to the detriment of its citizens, especially pensioners living in poverty. This was dramatically portrayed in stories about

pensioners being forced to rummage through the garbage or to 'collect empty bottles and expired food to survive' (Helmut, M. 63). This generally dark picture of economically deprived pensioners in the country of origin becomes more nuanced and personalised by individual experiences of financial and economic constraints which reveal more personal economic motivations to migrate to Hungary. The consequences of immigration to Germany and the COVID-19 pandemic were narrated in ideological and political terms, in a discursive way that may push into the background economic factors such as structural constraints and lived experiences and as a fundamental motivation for migration to Hungary. However, livelihood crises, that is, the increasing costs of energy, housing and day-to-day living, were reported by our interviewees regardless of their own economic and social status. Small entrepreneurs complained about the increasing costs of energy causing a shrinking demand for their services and unfavourable prospects for their business. Others, as the following excerpt illustrates, faced the risk of poverty in their home country.

> *My children asked me if I was going back. No. Because I wouldn't be able to afford the way I live with my pension and widow's pension alone in Germany. Then I really should live on the subsistence minimum, checking every cent to see if I can buy this or not, because the apartment rental is so expensive. (…) In Germany, I might ask 'Hello, I have 300 euros left* [out of 1,200 euros]. *How am I going to get out of this?*' (Lotte, F. 73).

Whether they talked of their personal difficulties or not, our interviewees identified deteriorating living conditions in general, especially for retirees, as an incentive for migration, pointing to the declining purchase power of the pensions: 'A lot of people come here because of their pensions. In Germany, everything became so expensive that they can't pay it from their pensions' (Josefa, F. 75).

In his research on North American and Canadian retired migrants in Ecuador, Hayes found that research participants escaping the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis often identified themselves or were described by previously arrived migrants as 'economic refugees' (Hayes 2015; Hayes and Pérez-Gañán 2016). However, our interviewees did not talk about themselves as economic refugees and when asked why they had relocated to Hungary, they did not at first mention economic motivations. However, the accounts on the general economic and individually experienced livelihood crisis and the impossibility to 'survive' on their current or expected pensions points to their economic and social vulnerability – i.e., their lived or feared impoverishment and the relative loss of their economic and social status in their home country. Yet, it should be emphasised that, in the narratives of recently arrived German migrants aged over 50, the general economic and individually experienced livelihood crisis alone does not explain or justify their migration decisions. The economic and livelihood crisis and the fear of status loss or impoverishment are linked to and interpreted as the deteriorating consequences of the immigration and welfare policies of the German government. Thus, in these narratives, economic, political and ideological considerations, as incentive factors of relocation to Hungary, are inextricably intertwined.

Portraying the receiving country

The 'narratives of decline' (Benson and O'Reilly 2009: 610) – that is, the lived experiences as well as the feared cultural, political, social and economic impacts of recent changes in the home country, as presented above – culminate in statements that we often heard from our interviewees, such as 'Germany

has completely changed' and 'Germany is no more my country'. Most of them also expressed their intention to never return.

The accounts of recently arrived German migrants aged over 50 represent the search for a better quality of life abroad as a 'comparative project' (Benson and O'Reilly 2009: 610). Thus, the explanations of why our interviewees decided to migrate are based on the perceived contrasts between the home and destination countries. It is important to note that we never asked our interviewees about their political views, party preferences or how they think about Hungarian politics – and we did not encourage them to make direct comparisons between the home and the host countries. However, during the interviews, while portraying the deteriorating circumstances in their home country, they obviously contrasted them to the Hungarian conditions, especially in ideological and political terms.

In the context of immigration to Germany, the perceived threat to individual safety has frequently been contrasted with the feeling of safety in the host country. While complaining about the crimes committed by immigrants, our interviewees added that, in Hungary, they do not have to be afraid of being attacked on the streets and they can dress as women however they wish. Referring to the strong 'indoctrination of the state' and the strict restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, some participants felt that, in Hungary, 'There is more freedom here' (Johanna, F. 62). In the accounts of our interviewees, the attractive Hungarian conditions are presented in a personalised way – that is, they are attributed to the politics of the then Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán. While 'Germany does nothing for its people' (Helmut, M. 63), Orbán is praised for 'standing for his own people'. 'Orbán wants to stay out of the war [in Ukraine] and he is absolutely right' (Helga, F. 60). In contrast to Germany, where retirees are facing poverty, in Hungary Orbán 'is doing something for pensioners, even if by a small amount – and he twice raised pensions'. Moreover, 'He does not allow migrants to enter the country, does not welcome refugees' (Josefa, F. 75). 'Orbán has a very good family policy, it must be said. It has nothing to do with this gender or LGBTQ… things. He supports families and from our Christian point of view, this is the right way' (Johanna, F. 62). She also added how delighted she and her husband were with the result of the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election (with the victory of Fidesz, the ruling party since 2010), because 'it turned out that Orbán is very good and it strengthened us that we had made a good decision [to migrate to Hungary]'.

Our empirical analysis suggests that the meanings of values such as freedom, safety, autonomy or Christianity are less fixed but flexible and situational since they are selectively interpreted in and by the contrast between Germany and Hungary as their home and host countries. These meanings are constructed in the migration narratives and serve as the basis for the justification of the migration decision. In this way, the inherently selective comparison between home and host countries creates a discursively constructed 'political landscape' of Hungary as a safe and free host country.

Discussion

Through its lens focusing on migrants' narratives, research on lifestyle migration provides a broad framework on how motives and imaginations shape decisions to migrate and start a new life in other places (Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Hayes 2021). The complexity of the motives, values and imaginations of migrants aged over 50 may vary from person to person. However, they show well identifiable patterns based on similar individual experiences and perceptions and shared meanings and discourses. These patterns of motives and imaginaries might be – and, in fact, are – very complex and interrelated (Savaş *et al.* 2023; Spaan, Henkens and Kalmijn 2023; Xiang and Nyíri 2022) and may change over time with the subsequent flows of migration.

In the Hungarian case, analysis of the narratives of German migrants over 50 revealed the complex nexus of ideological, political and economic motivations and their dynamically changing constellation as well as the construction of values, imaginations, hopes and wishes attached to Hungary, all fueling migration and the selection of the destination country. Those who had moved to rural Hungary in the early 2000s more often mentioned economic and lifestyle considerations as the motivation for their migration. They wished to start a new life abroad by looking for an affordable property and low cost of living as well as for a quiet and calm rural environment. On the contrary, those retired and near-to-retirement migrants who have relocated to Hungary in recent years, ahead of financial and lifestyle-related motives, emphasised the perceived threat and the lived experiences of political, social and economic changes and their detrimental consequences on their lives in Germany, triggering their decision to migrate. The strikingly concordant discourses of adverse changes in their home country range from immigration as a threat to personal safety, culture, the COVID-19 pandemic and related policies and the contribution of the Russo-Ukrainian War to the livelihood crisis, which are all interpreted and narrated in very similar ideological and political ways. When explaining the motives for migration, our interviewees depicted the living conditions and the ideological and political climate in their home country as becoming intolerable for them and argued that they had had no other choice but to 'escape' by relocating to Hungary, which is considered to be a 'safe' country in ideological and political terms and which is often contrasted to the country of origin. For them, Hungary has been an attractive destination because of their interpretation and imaginaries of its political landscape that would fit their desires and expectations.

Lifestyle migration is a process rather than an act and therefore an inherently 'reflexive project' of individuals. Scholars draw attention to the fact that migrants explaining the context or reasons and motives for their migration always tell us 'retrospective stories' *after* their relocation (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 2016). Hayes points out that we need to take into account that 'discussions of motivations are not always true representations but often are stories that are told in order to justify a decision' (Hayes 2015: 271). Keeping this in mind, we should emphasise that our interviewees did not explicitly state that they had chosen Hungary for ideological and political reasons. However, the discursively constructed contrast highlighting the difference between the home and the receiving country retrospectively justified their decision to relocate to Hungary, a country portrayed as providing shelter for those who want to escape the consequences of the perceived political, social and economic decline in Germany. The decisive role of imaginings of other locations is widely analysed in the literature on lifestyle migration (Benson 2010, 2012; Benson and O'Reilly 2016; Hayes 2021). As our findings reveal, migrants aged 50+ moving recently to rural Hungary have not been motivated by dreams of a rural idyll, beautiful landscapes, a healthy climate or cultural heritage but, rather, by imaginings of the political landscape of a country presenting a safe and free place to live.

Drawing on examples from China and Russia, Xiang and Nyíri (2022) argue that major shifts in the world after the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine may increase the importance of values in the migration process. As our research highlights, the meanings of values such as freedom, safety and autonomy were constructed in and by contrasting the home and the host countries, influencing both the decision to migrate and the selection of the destination country.

Our analysis illustrates that the predominance of political reasoning in the narratives of recently relocated migrants aged over 50 may conceal (or at least push into the background) the importance of economic factors, both in terms of lived experience and of structural constraints. A recent survey conducted among Dutch retirement migrants in the top 40 destination countries, among them Hungary, analysed the correlation between the main motives for migration, the selected destination and migrants'

socio-economic status. They concluded that 'people whose migration was economically motivated were more likely to migrate to Hungary, where people would benefit from the lower cost of living compared to the Netherlands' (Spaan *et al.* 2023: 13). In our research, German migrants aged over 50 did not mention economic reasons for migration as the most significant motivation. However, in the course of the interviews, they thematised economic and financial hardship and a fear of impoverishment which, together, outline their vulnerable economic and social position and imply a probable (and relative) status loss in their home country. They relocated to a low-cost country because they could not live up to the standard that they consider as a decent and safe life and could not afford to realise their plans and dreams in their home countries for financial reasons. Our research evidence underlines the relevance of the concept of geoarbitrage at the geographical scale of inter-European migration (Hayes 2014, 2015, 2021; Hayes and Pérez-Gañán 2016; Iorio 2020). By migrating to peripheral settlements in a semi-peripheral country of Central and Eastern Europe, our interviewees escaped the risk of poverty or relative status loss and managed to maintain their relatively privileged socio-economic position as Western European citizens through relocation. However, the analysis of the narratives of recently arrived German migrants over 50 shows that, in the Hungarian case, economic factors influencing the decision on relocation to a Central and Eastern European lower-cost country are inextricably intertwined with and embedded in political and ideological considerations.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of interviews conducted with a specific subgroup – the recently arrived German migrants aged 50 and over relocating to peripheral small villages in Hungary – the aim of this paper was to contribute to IRM scholarship with empirical evidence from Central and Eastern Europe. Statistical data on Western European, especially older German citizens', migration to Hungary indicate an increasingly significant migration process, putting the country on the map of IRM. Our qualitative research highlights the complex and changing economic, political, and ideological motives fueling retirement migration to rural Hungary and implies the growing importance of political and ideological considerations in migration decisions.

We are aware of the limitations of our explorative study, especially the lack of statistical validity: our research evidence does not provide general conclusions relevant to all older (German) migrants relocating to rural Hungary. We analysed the narratives of a specific subgroup of German migrants aged over 50, the recently arrived who settled down in the Hungarian rural periphery. The conduction and analysis of the interviews are framed by the mutual unfamiliarity and familiarity of the social horizons (Ertuğrul 2016) since the researcher and the migrant participants come from different countries – and, even if they currently live in the same country, this is not necessarily in the same social realities. We consider the interview transcripts to be narratives displaying personally lived experiences, fears or subjective perceptions and interpretations of social phenomena. This means that we did not seek to challenge these different social realities against each other beyond the extent to which the interviewees did so in their comparisons in the interviews; nor did we seek to confront them with any potential internal contradictions in their opinions.

Despite these limitations, our research evidence is consistent with other research findings on IRM and reveals new tendencies in the subsequent flows of international retirement migration in the European context. We demonstrated the socio-economic heterogeneity of migrants, the participation of less-affluent and more-vulnerable groups in IRM and the relevance of economic considerations in their decision on migration. While focusing on the complex set of motivations in the migration decision, we

identified a specific subgroup of German over 50s migrants who have recently relocated to peripheral villages in rural Hungary and who emphasised less the lifestyle-oriented and more the political, ideological motives in their narration. The meanings of values and imaginations attached to Hungary, however, are not fixed but actively constructed by contrasting the home and receiving countries in the migration narratives. However, our results indicate that political and ideological considerations are becoming more important in migration (Xiang and Nyíri 2022), while this does not seem entirely independent from lived fears of (relative) status loss, impoverishment and the perceived changes of the redistribution policy. The Hungarian case corroborates the diversity and complexity of IRM demonstrated by previous research and highlights its changing characteristics in space and social composition over time.

Our research findings underline the analytical relevance of the conceptual frameworks elaborated by scholars of lifestyle migration and geoarbitrage in the context of international retirement migration to Central and Eastern Europe. The analysis showed the complexity of IRM and demonstrated that a single approach cannot explain this type of migration. While the conceptual framework of lifestyle migration thematises the phenomenon and provides details on the role of lifestyle factors within migration, the theoretical frame of geoarbitrage underlines prevailing global and social inequalities. The diversity of motivations and the complex nexus of social, economic and political dimensions are reflected in the individual perception of the changes in the home country related to the immigration of third-country nationals, the management of the COVID pandemic, the Russo-Ukrainian war and the overarching lived experience of the crisis of livelihood. This perception also mobilises fears and desires and the values of freedom, security and autonomy constructed in and by migration narratives which, in these individual migration stories, justify the relocation to small peripheral villages in Hungary. Beyond that, the main contribution of our analysis is to bring to light political and ideological motivations rooted in a general dissatisfaction with the political climate in the home country as essential incentive factors in the discussion of IRM.

Notes

1. In accordance with ethical standards and GDPR regulations, all interviewees were informed about the project's aim and the way we use data before the start of the interview. We asked for their consent to record and assured them that data would be anonymised. As a consequence, all the names mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.
2. During the preliminary fieldwork we learned from mayors and other locals that the vast majority of Western European migrants came from Germany; however, we did not want to limit our interviews to German migrants. We also conducted interviews with migrants from the Netherlands, England, France and Belgium.

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The Posting of Workers in an Eastern European Labour Market: From Social Dumping to a Multi-Faceted Labour Mobility Instrument

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The posting of workers has been fiercely discussed and analysed as a mechanism of social dumping in the Western European labour markets. This paper takes a reverse perspective and analyses the posting of workers in Slovakia as an Eastern European case whereby posting is presented as a multifaceted labour mobility instrument. We combine a review of the national regulatory framework and administrative data with stakeholder interviews to provide a rich account of why and how posting is used by employers and regulated and enforced by public authorities. We show that, while posting is a specific instrument of short-term intra-EU mobility formally enabling the mobility of services, it effectively plays a much wider role, transcending the low-cost competitiveness objective. We argue that the rise and embedding of posting in Slovakia is sustained by a specific regulatory and labour market context which is reliant on a flexible workforce with a weak enforcement of labour rights and characterised by erratic policy changes. Our study illustrates that the divide in the posting literature between sending and receiving countries is becoming outdated because supposed 'sending' countries like Slovakia are receiving substantial numbers of posted workers; they are also increasingly posting in a different way to earlier.

Keywords: posting of workers, labour mobility, flexibility, regulation, workforce, Slovakia

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Introduction

The posting of workers has increased dramatically over the past decade (Lens, Mussche and Marx 2022a). In 2022, more than 4.6 million posting permits (Portable Document A1 – PDA1) were issued within EU member states and the UK (de Wispeleare, de Smedt and Pacolet 2024). To those sceptics who anticipated a decline in or even the demise of posting in the context of the 2018 Revised Posting Directive, it might come as a surprise that, after a Covid-related temporary halt, posting has continued to rise. This raises the issue of how to explain and understand this phenomenon in the context of broader economic, social and policy developments in the EU and the respective member states. In addition to growing overall figures, the posting landscape has, in recent years, also become much more geographically diverse (Zwysen and Akgüç 2025). In fact, posting happens not only between East and West but also within its subregions – and is also a prominent form of labour mobility in the Eastern European economies (Danaj, vah Jevšnik, Kiełbasa and Szaraniec 2023; Heindlmaier, Assmus and Schmidt 2024). Posting is geographically unbalanced, with recent evidence showing that, actually, most posting – both in relative and absolute terms – happens between Western economies (Zwysen and Akgüç 2025)[i] and does not always follow patterns or trends of intra-EU labour mobility (van Nuffel and Afanasjeva 2019). To date, this EU-wide territorial diversity of posting patterns has not been extensively researched nor fully understood (Lens *et al.* 2022a).

Furthermore, existing studies present evidence mainly from the Western European perspective (Arnholtz 2021, 2023; Dølvik and Eldring 2006; Kahmann 2006). Recent studies about posting from Eastern European countries focus on the role of the regulatory framework in the use of posting, mainly in the context of the labour-market protection of third-country nationals being posted to Western Europe (e.g. Heindlmaier and Assmus (2026) for Poland and Slovenia; ELA (2025) for Poland, Portugal and Slovenia). Their focus remains on the role of labour market intermediaries – mainly temporary work agencies – supplying labour. However, the significant rise of posting in Eastern Europe calls for further research into the role of migration regulation and other social and economic policies that would allow us to better understand the ways in which posting is organised in Eastern Europe.

Since its inception, posting has inspired a fierce debate across the member states and stakeholders (Kyriazi 2023). It highlights economic inequalities across Europe that are both reflected in, and mitigated by, institutional differences regarding the implementation of social rights, including equal working conditions (Bottero 2020; Heindlmaier and Assmus 2026; Scharpf 2010). The Eastern enlargement of the EU further intensified the debate, presenting posting as an instrument for recruiting cheap labour and a social dumping threat (Arnholtz and Lillie 2020; Cremers, Dølvik and Bosch 2007; Dølvik and Eldring 2006; Houwerzijl and Berntsen 2019). Some researchers have even argued that there is an explicit ideological and functional split between Western and Eastern European member states regarding posting, which is reflected in the salient character of debates and legislative processes related to posting in the European Parliament (Michon and Weill 2023; Scholten and van Ostaijen 2018). Yet, firm-level perspectives focusing on posting companies in Belgium reveal different motivations to post – which include low-cost objectives but which cannot be reduced to competitiveness logic alone (Lens *et al.* 2022a).

This paper aims to enrich the existing debate by studying the evolving posting landscape in Slovakia where both incoming and outgoing postings have grown significantly. The country, in the past, suffered from structural labour-market difficulties; this is now combined with labour and skill shortages driven by a strong and expanding foreign-owned automotive sector and the related industries. Importantly, Slovakia has been strongly embedded in the European labour mobility dynamic, with a significant share

of its active labour force seeking employment in Western Europe following the country's accession to the EU in 2004. Past research also shows a strong position of mostly foreign employers in negotiating favourable regulatory conditions as well as the pressure on skilled and flexible labour (Šćepanović and Bohle 2018). More generally, Slovakia is a small, open and highly transnationalised economy dependent on knowledge from the West (Pavlínek 2022). This paper thus interrogates posting in a different institutional and regulatory context than most studies to date.

We argue that the Eastern European perspective is relevant in order to have a fuller understanding of posting as an intra-EU temporary mobility mechanism which has been gradually advancing towards a mixed mosaic of posting exchanges across EU countries. We ask the following research questions: *What is the position of posting within the overall migration policy framework in Slovakia? How and why is this instrument used in a small and highly transnationalised economy?* We illustrate the changing role of posting in the European semi-periphery and problematise the distinction which is often made in the posting literature between sending (Eastern) and receiving (Western) countries. We show that posting in Slovakia has been diversified from mostly low-cost posting to more diverse forms, corroborating findings about Belgium (Lens *et al.* 2022a). Using qualitative research methods, we first systematise the administrative data about posting and interpret the trends in connection to the main regulatory changes regarding posting and migration policies in the country. We then present the perspectives of various actors gathered through semi-structured interviews on posting to and from Slovakia.

The posting of workers in the European Union: a literature review

Alongside migration to another member state based on free movement rights and cross-border commuting, posting represents a third main form of labour mobility within the EU (Lens *et al.* 2022a), with recent evidence showing that its overall figures are sizeably larger than other forms of free mobility in the EU (Zwysen and Akgüç 2025: 55). It is specific in being employer-driven and tied to the freedom to provide services in other member states temporarily. Posting is limited to a maximum of 12 (18 after one extension) months and posted workers do not integrate permanently into the host country's labour market. Contrary to the other two forms of labour migration, it is rather strongly regulated at the EU and national levels, specifying the conditions under which services could and should be provided (Bottero 2020). The legal status of posted workers is characterised by 'duality': whilst they continue to be employed in the country where their employer is based when posted to another country and retain their social security attachment there, the working and pay conditions of the receiving country should be observed. The equal principles in pay and working conditions between standard employees and posted workers have been strengthened in the 2018 Revised Posting Directive.

The main research agenda about posting, to date, is linked to the regulatory and enforcement challenges that posting brings and the institutional changes it facilitates from the perspective of *Western European* economies. This literature highlights the pressures that posting has exerted on labour standards, labour relations and regulatory frameworks, both nationally and at the EU level (Arnholtz 2021, 2023; Arnoltz and Lillie 2020; Dølvik and Eldring 2006; Kahmann 2006). Studies present rich accounts about employer motivations and the working conditions of typically Eastern European workers in the Western European labour markets (Arnholtz 2021, 2023; Dølvik and Eldring 2006; Kahmann 2006; Voivozeanu 2019). Commonly discussed themes include the emergence of dual labour markets, job displacement in some sectors and downward pressure on working conditions and social rights in the West (Bernaciak 2015), with references to posting re-affirming or creating new hierarchies amongst workers – keeping standards for some very low (Arnholtz 2023; Arnholtz and Lille 2023; Cukut

Krilić and Zavratnik 2023). Various regulatory and enforcement challenges have resulted in pressures on institutional changes in (Western) countries and at the EU level (Arnholtz and Lillie 2020; Arnholtz and Andersen 2018; Arnholtz and Wright 2023; Dølvik and Visser 2009; Michon and Weill 2023).

Across the EU, employers rely on posting to increase their national and global competitiveness, whilst posting has been shown to respond to skill and labour shortages in the EU (Lens *et al.* 2022a; Moriarty, Wickham, Krings, Salamonska and Bobek 2012). Posting can also serve as a potential stabilisation instrument for countries facing asymmetric shocks, with significant macro-economic benefits (de Wispelaere and Pacolet 2015). Whilst the profits seem unequally shared between capital and labour, Muñoz (2024) documents substantive economic gains for firms and individuals in sending countries. Taking the workers' perspective, when posting is implemented according to regulations, working in a country with higher wages and better labour standards can benefit posted employees. Yet, the often-raised issue is the wide-spread breach of the rights of posted workers, which has been attributed to limited enforcement capacities, different rights regimes, the fragmentation of enforcement structures and responsibilities and poor access to information (Kováčová, Moran, Mýtna Kureková and Studená 2024; Rennuy 2020; Wagner 2015; Wagner and Berntsen 2016).

Posting has traditionally been used to supply cheaper labour from Eastern European countries to high-income countries in Western Europe (Heindlmaier and Assmus 2026). It has been concentrated in selected economic sectors, such as construction and transport, giving companies in the West opportunities to reduce labour costs and to avert obligations which they have to observe towards workers in standard employment (Berntsen and Lillie 2015). Importantly, whilst most accounts speak of posting in low-wage sectors (Voivozeanu 2019), posting has been used beyond the cost-effectiveness motives. Lens *et al*. (2022a), based on data about Belgium, document three types of posting: i) competition; ii) specialisation and iii) expert posting. The last type applies to the mobility of highly skilled professionals and, in such instances, a posted worker might become more expensive than a local worker. Employers' motives for posting in such cases are driven by skill shortages, specialisation needs or the career development needs of key staff. To date, no study has investigated whether such varied forms of posting are also used more broadly, including in Eastern Europe.

Posting in the Eastern European (EE) member states has a number of specific features. First, poor enforcement and the growing role of temporary working agencies have been at the forefront of research about posting in EE countries (Andrijasevic and Novitz 2020; Danaj and Meszmann 2024; ELA 2025; Mussche, Corluy and Marx 2018; Thörnqvist and Bernhardsson 2015; Voivozeanu 2019). Second, whilst Eastern European countries continue to be net senders, they are increasingly becoming receiving countries for posted workers. A good portion of incoming postings are of third-country nationals (TCNs), who might be posted further within the EU (Danaj and Meszmann 2024). Danaj *et al.* (2023) document that Slovenia and Poland belong to the main sending countries for TCN workers posted to other EU countries, arguing that the East might serve as a gateway to their posting. However, a good portion of third-country posted workers remain in these countries, implying a changing role of posting within these economies.

Third, the enforcement and qualities of posting in different Eastern European countries are mediated and mitigated by their institutional characteristics and socio-economic regimes (Heindlmaier and Assmus 2026). For example, while national legislative and regulatory frameworks generally serve the capital interests, Slovenia ensures a certain level of third-country workers' protection due to maintaining neo-corporatist structures favouring tripartite dialogue and pursuing workers' rights and social protection reforms. In contrast Poland, with its marginalisation of trade unions and lower social-security protection, is characterised by more relaxed employment schemes for TCNs. The variation in the use of posting and the motivation of employers is determined also by other demographic and

structural changes, such as a constantly growing number of TCNs in Poland, especially from Ukraine (Kiełbasa, Szaraniec, Mędrala and Benio 2022).

These specific national and EU policies combined have transformed labour migration in Central and Eastern Europe multi-directionally, making temporary mobility a distinctive feature of their labour markets. The above discussion demonstrates that posting is a dynamic instrument that has served different needs and motivations – and its utilisation results from a complex set of needs as well as policy and structural opportunities and constraints. Compared to Western Europe, posting takes place in an environment with weaker labour rights and looser enforcement.

Methodology and approach

Due to significant data limitations about posting that would help us to characterise the different types of posting (for example, a lack of data about the socio-demographic profiles of posted workers, their education, skills, gender or firm-level data), this paper uses qualitative methodology to gather and interpret information about how and why posting is used in Slovakia. More specifically, we utilised semi-structured stakeholder interviews to learn about the viewpoints and experiences of varied groups of stakeholders engaged in posting practice (posting firms, migration NGOs) and regulation, enforcement or oversight (public agencies, a law firm, social partners) (see Table A1). We follow a methodology similar to that used by Danaj, Hollan and Scoppetta (2020) and Riesco-Sanz, López and Maira Vidal (2020), as engaging different actors helps us to obtain a balanced and rich perspective of stakeholders holding potentially different positions.

Research participants were identified following an intensive desk research mapping the legislative and regulatory environment related to posting in Slovakia (Kováčová, Studená and Mýtna Kureková 2021). Participants were contacted based on publicly available information, capitalising also on authors' expertise from previous research on intra-EU labour migration. Among research participants are key public institutions engaged in designing, implementing and enforcing regulation related to migration generally and posting specifically (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family; Ministry of the Interior; National Labour Inspectorate; Social Insurance Agency) (Kováčová, Studená and Mýtna Kureková 2021). Moreover, social dialogue partners – three employer associations and two labour unions on the sectoral and peak level – are members of the high-level tripartite body, and thus are directly engaged in and informed about legislative changes and their objectives. Moreover, the interviewed employer associations assemble companies in the key sectors in the Slovak economy (automotive industry) and from a posting perspective (construction sector).

We strategically focused on large employers in (1) the automotive sector (2 multinational companies) as a dominant sector in the Slovak Republic; and (2) the construction sector (1 company) as a sector within which most of the outgoing postings take place. While the overall number of companies might appear low, employer perspectives were richly represented in employer associations' and unions' interviews. The law firm active in multiple CEE countries and serving clients in employment and migration agenda was able to share combined perspectives, referring to both employers and employees. While we do not engage with posted workers, as they are generally difficult to reach, we used vignettes that presented model examples of possible day-to-day issues and practices related to the regulatory environment and its implementation with respect to posted workers. The vignettes were designed for both directions of posting – outgoing and incoming – and used to elicit insights into posting practices from different sides of the institutional relationship: posting employers, social partners, public officials and migration-focused NGO workers. They were presented after a series of more-general

questions about respondents' (and their institutions') involvement in posting and experiences with posting, including the assessment of regulatory changes ranging from the transposition of the 2018 Revised Directive to developments in national regulation.

The questionnaire(s) involved the following areas (vignettes were followed by a set of questions): (1) key information about stakeholders (especially how the company uses posting or how the public authority is involved in implementation or enforcement); (2) how the instrument is being used (meeting legal requirements, access to information, challenges, role of intermediaries/agencies); (3) provisions on the payment and taxation (formal rules, practices, etc.); (4) working hours and collective agreement provisions; (5) companies' practices concerning dealing with specific problems that may occur during the posting of workers (work-related injuries/OSH); (6) interpretation of specific characteristics of posting in Slovakia (e.g. the posting of the self-employed, activities of temporary work agencies).

Altogether, 13 interviews were conducted during September–December 2020 and an additional 7 (9 participants) were conducted during February–April 2023. Further details regarding the interviewees are summarised in Table A1 (Appendix). Interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed using content-focused transcription by the authors and analysed thematically, identifying key information related to the research questions. Respective interviewees are anonymised at the personal level but we reveal their identities at the actor level, as this is relevant for presenting the data and for its meaningful interpretation. Participants signed informed consents and were notified about the purpose of our research – including its use for publication purposes – and about the funder. Furthermore, to de-sensitise the research process, neutral vignettes asking respective actors to assess an example situation, rather than to describe a concrete case from their practice, were used.

The posting of workers, labour migration and an evolving regulatory framework

Different forms of labour mobility, including posting, are widely spread in Slovakia and have contributed to the flexibilisation of the Slovak labour market over the past decade. Next, we present data about posting and labour migration before discussing the legislative and regulatory context relevant to the use of posting in Slovakia.

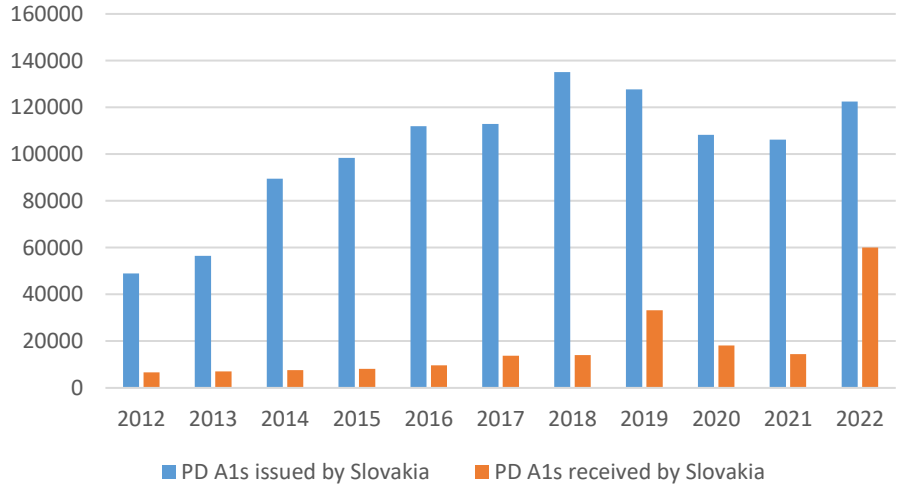
Increasing posting and labour migration to and from Slovakia

As a result of structural labour-market difficulties until the mid-2010s, labour mobility in Slovakia is characterised by high rates of short-term labour migration and comparatively smaller but fast-growing numbers of incoming labour migrants (Kahanec and Kureková 2016). In 2022, according to Labour Force Survey data, approximately 110,000 people from Slovakia worked abroad, with a decreasing trend in short-term labour mobility since 2017, when it constituted more than 150,000 workers.[3] Although Slovakia is traditionally a migrant-sending country, immigration has been on the rise. According to data from the Central Labour Office of the Slovak Republic, the number of foreign nationals soared between 2017 and 2022, when the numbers of them employed in Slovakia increased from approximately 63,000 to over 148,000. The rising trends apply to both EU nationals and TCNs, while the latter category of immigrants has been substantially more dominant than the former since 2018. An additional stream of mobility involves cross-border pendulum migration to Hungary, Austria and the Czech Republic.

Over the past decade, both incoming and outgoing postings have also grown significantly, which makes Slovakia an excellent case for a broader analysis of posting. To illustrate this, in spite of Slovakia being the tenth-smallest EU country by population, in 2022 it ranked seventh in the number of outgoing

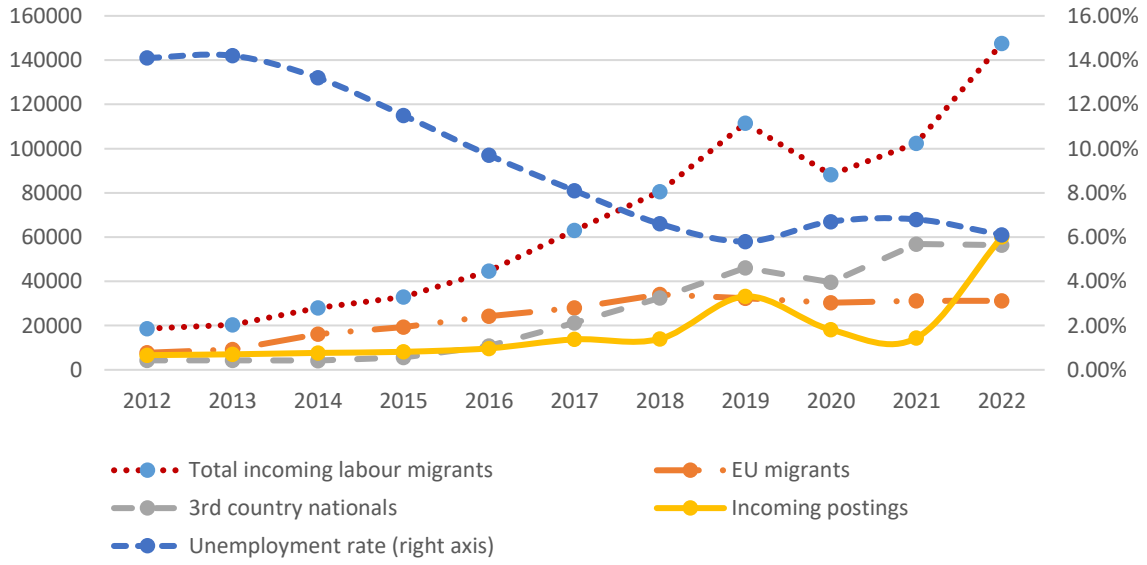
posting placements among EU countries. Between 2012 and 2022, the number of outgoing postings grew 2.5 times (from 48,900 to 122,500 issued PDA1s), while the number of incoming postings rose tenfold (from 6,600 to current 60,100) (see Figure 1). Whilst posting *to* Slovakia is less significant than posting *from* Slovakia, there was a clear upward trend in incoming postings in the years preceding the COVID pandemic and, whilst, in 2021, the number plummeted to 14,500, it then soared again to around 60,100 in 2022 (see Figure 1). Although the trends in the incoming postings correspond with the trends in the immigration stock, interestingly, the shifts in incoming postings since 2018 are quite erratic, in contrast to the steady inflow of EU nationals (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Posting of workers to and from Slovakia (2012–2022)



Source: Authors based on de Wispelaere and Pacolet (2015, 2018) and de Wispelaere *et al.* (2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2024).

Figure 2. Incoming migration and postings to Slovakia compared to the trend of the unemployment rate (2012–2022)



Sources: Central Labour Office of the Slovak Republic (Statistics), de Wispelaere et al. (2024); Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, DataCube, 2020, Labour Force Survey.

Based on the information known from PDA1 documents (administrative documents certifying posting), we know the main sectors and the main countries of posting. The main sectors of outgoing and incoming posting show different structures (Table 1), which indicates potentially different rationales for why companies post their workers abroad or use posted workers. Workers are posted from Slovakia to another member state mainly in industry (81.6 per cent), out of which the construction sector takes up about 50 per cent. A lesser share is posted in services (17.3 per cent) and a negligible number in agriculture. Workers posted from other member states to Slovakia in 2022 are employed in the services (47.7 per cent) and industries (52 per cent). The construction sector is under-represented relative to outgoing postings (3.9 per cent versus 50 per cent).

Table 1. Sectoral structure of incoming and outgoing postings, 2022

	Total	Industry	of which: Construction	Services	Agriculture
Outgoing (total)	87,025	71,019	43,253	15,021	985
(percentages)		81.6%	49.7%	17.3%	1.1%
Incoming (total)	54,716	28,475	2,124	26,117	124
(percentages)		52.0%	3.9%	47.7%	0.2%

Note: Only postings according to Article 12 for which sectoral data were available. The table shows only the postings for which the sector information was available.

Source: Own elaboration based on de Wispelaere *et al*. (2024).

Workers from Slovakia are primarily posted to Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic; incoming workers are posted to Slovakia predominantly from Germany, Italy and Poland (de Wispelaere, de Smedt and Pacolet 2024). Interestingly, Slovakia issues a high share of PDA1s to self-employed persons (Moran 2024). In 2022, about half of all posted workers were self-employed, which is the highest share of posted self-employed workers in the EU, despite the overall share of the self-employed in Slovakia being at the EU average level (15 per cent, whereas the EU average is 14.5 per cent) (de Wispelaere *et al.* 2024).[ii]

In the context of the interviews, we were able to gather more insights into the qualification structure of the posted workers in specific sectors and jobs, which are not available in the official data. Similarly to Lens *et al.* (2022a) for Belgium, we also identify various motives for companies to use posting. In terms of postings from Slovakia to other EU countries, these are reported to represent mainly the postings of workers at lower and medium qualification levels, e.g. operators. However, posting is also used within multinational companies to achieve the training of technical and managerial staff abroad, indicating specialisation and expert posting (Interviews 4, 9 and 11). Postings from other EU countries to Slovakia are often used for highly qualified workers, e.g. software and production specialists (postings from Germany). There are other cases which do not fit into such polarised qualification patterns. Regarding the Slovak automotive sector, there is an increasing demand for labour at lower qualification levels from different countries, including Bulgaria or Romania, EU accession countries, e.g. Serbia – as well as non-EU countries, e.g. Vietnam (Interviews 11 and 20). This is corroborated by the findings of the ELA report on TCNs from 2023, which claims that the main corridors of TCNs posted to Slovakia are Hungary and Poland, while the major nationalities of the TCNs are Ukrainians, Serbians, and Russians (ELA 2023).

Outgoing migration, including posting, is still driven by large wage differentials abroad and by manpower and skill needs in the respective key destination countries. Due to wage differences, Slovak construction firms, employing a high share of self-employed workers who are exempt from the application of the destination country's equal pay conditions stipulated in the 2018 Revised Posting of Workers Directive, are competitive and able to offer services abroad, also using this approach as a diversification strategy (Interview 13). The high share of self-employed workers among outgoing postings also reflects a national context, in which bogus self-employment in the construction sector is tolerated (Holičková, Kahanec and Guzi 2026; Moran 2024). This partly explains why outgoing posting numbers from Slovakia remain high and continue to grow even after the enactment of the Revised Posting Directive, transposed in 2020, which introduced equal pay conditions. It is sustained by the fact that many outgoing postings are of self-employed workers who are not subject to the equal wage regulation (Interviews 7 and 17). Employers based in Slovakia might also use the posting of workers as a flexibility instrument with which to address the cyclical and seasonal character of their sector, mainly in the construction industry. Furthermore, erratic changes to posting figures over the past decade, we argue, are a reflection of the changes in the broader migration policy framework, beyond that of posting regulation. We outline examples in the next section.

Legislative and regulatory changes to labour migration and posting: 2012–2022

The evidence above shows that Slovakia has been strongly embedded in the European labour mobility dynamic. This has been corroborated by labour and skill shortages, which are likely to persist due to demographic ageing. These trends urge Slovak authorities to regulate and implement various mobility instruments at the national level. This includes not merely the posting of workers, which stimulates short-term mobility, but also other instruments, such as national visas, that may serve as a gateway to long-term migration.

The labour migration regulatory framework in Slovakia in the past decade can be best characterised as complex, facing frequent changes to conditions of employment and being reactive rather than proactive. In fact, the 2021 IOM report identified 12 basic labour mobility instruments of the Slovak legal system, which are used to manage labour migration (Drozd, Mészárosová and Paulenová 2021). During 2012–2022, the immigration flows (using various mobility instruments) are negatively associated with the number of unemployed persons, demonstrating the increasing demand for domestic and foreign labour (Figure 1). The *ad hoc* and often temporary solutions for labour shortages and skill needs have created a fragmented regulatory framework for employing foreign workers and contributed to the complexity of human-resource management in connection with the employment of foreign workers.

We would like to briefly illustrate more-significant policy interventions in the area of the employment of foreigners in the past decade. These interventions concern not only the enforcement and regulation of posting but also the regulation of temporary staff allocation via temporary work agencies (TWAs) and of the employment of TCNs. Firstly, the amendment of the Act on Employment Services in 2012 distinctly differentiated between the temporary staff allocation as an equivalent to personal leasing to the host employer and the posting of workers; it defined them as two different policy instruments of labour mobility. As stated by the former high-ranking representative of the Ministry of Labour (Interview 7), the amendment addressed a wide (mis)use of temporary staff allocation by temporary work agencies in a bid to decrease labour costs at the expense of workers' rights. Legal interventions were made to also improve the conditions of outgoing posted workers. The 2012

amendment stated that, to post workers to another member state, the Slovak employer must employ the worker for at least 90 days before the start date of the posting. This policy change aspired to address the dubious practices of the TWAs – i.e. recruiting workers solely for posting and terminating the employment contract with the agency worker instantly after posting was finished (Interview 7).

Furthermore, the 2018 amendment to the Employment Services Act introduced changes to the application of the 'shortage occupations' (*nedostatkové povolania*) procedure. Employers needing to hire foreigners could benefit from the accelerated issuance of the residence permit for the concerned foreign workers but only if the company's share of third-country nationals amongst their employees was below 30 per cent. Such measures changed the incentive structures for some companies which, for example, then resorted to bogus contracts with the self-employed among incoming posted workers or addressed labour shortages by the services provision of TCNs posted through TWAs, who are exempt from the 30 per cent foreigners' cap (Interviews 5 and 14). At the same time, the amendment of the Commercial Code (in effect in 2020) eased access to the self-employed status for foreigners (Interview 8).

In sum, different erratic changes have had critical implications for employers' strategies in the recruitment of foreign workers and the usage of different channels of labour mobility. Clearly, the needs of employers for qualified labour and the cumbersome processes required to bring in foreign workers have collided. These frequent alterations in the Slovak migration law also impacted on posting practices and changed employers' strategies in using labour-mobility instruments to flexibly respond to changing labour-market needs. Moreover, posting practices and the choice of labour mobility channels are also shifting in response to migration policy changes in other countries. For example, the Polish authorities introduced national visas, enabling TCNs to work on Polish territory under relaxed conditions, then being posted to the other member states, including Slovakia (Brzozowska, Matuszczyk, Salamońska and Siwierska 2021).

Stakeholder perspectives: Different rationales for posting

In this section, we present insights from the interviews to illustrate the different ways in which posting has been used in the context of the European and Slovak legislation and regulations over the past decade (Lens *et al.* 2022a). We organise this along two lines of inquiry: posting *to* Slovakia and posting *from* Slovakia. We present the views, practices and experiences of the different stakeholders, focusing mainly on companies' decisions to post and/or receive posted workers relative to other options, such as using other migration and mobility routes. We also offer insights into how posting is enforced by the main authorities.

Posting from Slovakia

In the interview process, we found that companies' decisions regarding posting are conditional on several factors related to the legal and regulatory frameworks in the destination country, sector of activities, size of the company, competitive strategy and other related issues. Companies are rational profit-seekers and they are bound in their decisions by the nature of their business opportunities and the potential margin that they could realise. In general, conditions and regulations in destination countries, including application of the Posting Directive, have been perceived by Slovak employers and employer associations as protective measures against competition from Eastern European countries. The representative of the largest employer association shared that:

> [T]*here is a lot of circumstantial evidence – an issue often discussed in* Business Europe – *that the aim* [of the Posting Directive] *is to eliminate competition under the veil of improved working conditions; on the one hand it may be legitimate, on the other hand it denies the principles of the free market* (Interview 11).

A representative of the construction industry employers' association observed that the conditions are tightening and the space for competition based on wage differentials is diminishing:

> *Gone are the days when Slovak workers were cheaper, it* [wage] *is no longer a benefit, now countries are protecting the market, local competition is watching this closely and ensuring that regulations are not violated, conditions must be respected* [for example, in Germany, employees must be employed as German workers, plus travel allowances] (Interview 3).

When considering posting from Slovakia, the destination country's labour regulation, legal conditions and other relevant factors are assessed against other options in the sector of activities. This we see particularly reflected in the growing numbers of self-employed workers posted from Slovakia; this in effect enables companies to compete on the basis of wages, as the hard-core provisions related to equal wages and working conditions do not apply to posted self-employed workers. Furthermore, the employer contributions in Slovakia (more than 35 per cent) are amongst the highest in the EU. To illustrate: an employer from a multinational construction company posting regularly in different countries across Europe and the world pointed to the fact that employer contributions are lower in other EU countries compared to Slovakia (e.g. 35.2 per cent in Slovakia compared to approximately 22 per cent in Germany in 2022). Therefore, whilst posting from Slovakia is widely-used for worker mobility, other options (e.g. starting a subsidiary company abroad) are assessed in destination countries with lower employer contributions.

However, companies' cost effectiveness decisions cannot be viewed in isolation from other objectives such as attaining a better position in the strategic value chain and engaging a more skilled workforce. One interviewed company stressed that, whilst high labour costs due to social insurance payments play an important role in registering the company in Germany and employing Slovak workers there directly rather than posting, other factors, including the organisational values, are considered in the strategic decisions.

> *There is another thing, because we have a high percentage share of employer contributions in Slovakia (…) they* [the company] *would very much like to leave them insured in Slovakia, they even have the mentality that they are patriots and they would understand it (...) people would also welcome it, not everyone is young, some are already before retirement, and do not want to change the social and health insurance system. But we as a company want to win the order and we want to compete, and of course we also want to earn something so that we can (…) make investments in technology (...) so basically this will force us not to support the Slovak social institution and it is precisely because of this that we change it to Germany or another country because, if we stayed with people insured in Slovakia, we would not win the contract etc.* (Interview 13).

Interview participants note that, from posted workers' viewpoint too, the quality of social and health care services is higher abroad than in Slovakia. This discrepancy between the high wage cost levy on employers and weaker benefits for the employees is also raised as an issue:

> *Although an employee* [posted in other countries] *has a high salary, he also pays more but, when he is insured there, he gets a share of this social package, whether he is in Germany or in Austria or wherever, he can also ask for allowances (...) So, let's look at this from the perspective that when you take a European average in employers' wage cost levy, despite the fact that we are so poor meaning that, here, we have a minimum wage incomparable to* [note: lower than] *other minimum wage levels in the EU, we nevertheless have one of the highest wage cost levies. That is a barrier for us for sure (...)* (Interview 13).

Small companies in the construction sector posting from Slovakia to other EU countries, motivated by wage differentials in the past, are increasingly losing this motivation after the stricter rules for posting workers imposed by the Revised Posting Directive (e.g. limiting the duration of posting) became effective (Interview 11). This can be circumvented by contracting self-employed posted workers. The self-employed are exempt from paying employer security contributions and their total labour costs are therefore lower than a regular employee's labour costs. Posting could, in such cases, function as an 'easy work permit' based on the interview participants' views (Interviews 7 and 17). The self-employed are likely to be in a more vulnerable position as posted workers abroad and more evidence is therefore needed to uncover vulnerable spots in the common EU labour market. This was confirmed by the national trade unions' representative (Interview 4), who also noted that the posted self-employed workers remain fully out of the trade unions' reach. The vulnerability is particularly reinforced when posted workers are TCNs; the large companies in the construction sector make them register as self-employed and post them abroad (Interview 11). This concerns mainly those with lower qualifications in construction work which the locals are not motivated to do.

Several participants reported that posting to other countries is part of the complex worker mobility (in both directions). Interestingly, during Interview 19, the interviewee did not differentiate between posting via posting directive and intra-company transfers. This complexity of the worker mobility processes was repeatedly raised in the interviews. The interviewed companies did not reveal that they would be breaching the posting rules and regulations. Other participants, however, shared that including travel costs in the minimal remuneration of posted workers is a frequent malpractice of companies (Interviews 4 and 12). It is understood that paying higher wages and including travel costs on top of the minimum wage in the posting country would not be an economically viable option. Various setbacks in the access to clear, reliable and accessible information faced by companies also raise genuine barriers to lawful application of the rules – and explain the active role of private actors who facilitate different aspects of posting for many companies (Interviews 19, 14 and 15). The representative of the employers' association states the following:

> *If the market of consultancy companies were to be based merely on posting, it would not have been that extensive. It is, rather, a result of the struggle with legally employing foreigners and the posting is a part of it* (Interview 18).

According to our participants, the shrinking advantage of lower wages is caused not merely by tightening regulations in Europe and destination countries but also by the posting of high-skilled workers with a specialisation in construction work (Interviews 3, 4 and 13). Effectively, the skill profile of the workforce posted abroad is nuanced – and Slovak companies engage in the posting of specialists in certain professions. Further research confirms that employers' motivations to post workers abroad also vary in relation to more complex business strategies and their main economic activity (Holičková *et al.* 2026). For instance, while a common practice for multinational companies, especially in the

automotive industry, is to send a worker to a parent company to fulfil long-term assignments, niche service providers (mostly smaller companies) utilise postings usually on an *ad hoc* and short-term basis as a reaction to immediate needs in the supply chain, such as servicing equipment or delivering customised installations. Consequently, the multinational companies are concerned with the continuity of contracts or the long-term benefits of coordination, while companies engaged in short-term postings prefer more flexible solutions. To sum up in the words of a public official: 'When you read the coordination regulation, posting is a *specific* form of employment abroad. But unfortunately, over the years, it has become a *general* form of employment abroad' (*emphasis* added; Interview 17).

Postings to Slovakia

In our interviews, we received relatively limited responses from employers on the practice and problems related to postings to Slovakia; however, more information was shared by other actors among the trade unions, enforcement bodies and NGOs. According to the representatives of public institutions, employers continue to face various administrative challenges in bringing in foreign workers from third countries, irrespective of skill levels (Interviews 8 and 10). The foreign police departments struggle to meet the legal deadlines in issuing worker permits due to being understaffed and the whole process of employing foreigners is perceived as bureaucratic and lengthy. Employers report limited access to procedural information (Interviews 6, 10 and 12). Consequently, the posting and other policy instruments of labour mobility are utilised to circumvent the migration legislation and long bureaucratic processes (Interviews 3 and 19). According to a public official, the accumulation of the problems in the procedure of employing foreign workers occurs because: 'They [employers] do not want to wait, the process duration is long and foreign police often do not meet the legal deadlines (…) there were problems with some of the deadlines – for shortage occupations it is up to 50 days' (Interview 10).

Consequently, temporary work agencies have taken an active role in this complex field. Temporary work agencies, as labour market intermediaries supplying labour, comprise a range of companies, from informal brokers to private and public entities operating in cross-border contexts, that fall under different legal terms across European countries (Danaj, Gillis, Geyer, de Wispelaere and Bilitza 2025; ELA 2025). Such complexity in national legislation results in a lack of data on TWA postings, difficulties with monitoring the compliance of TWA postings with applicable labour and social security legislation and ambiguities concerning identifying the legal category of the particular posting (Andriescu, Buckingham, Broughton, de Wispelaere, de Smedt, Gascon, Ongono Pomme, Voss and Vitols 2024; Danaj *et al.* 2025; ELA 2025). In the absence of a transnationally harmonised definition of the TWAs, TWAs use various strategies to circumvent rules protecting workers, such as redefining their economic activity as a service provider rather than supply of labour (Danaj *et al.* 2025) which was also confirmed by empirical findings in Slovakia (Interview 7).

In Slovakia, one mechanism used by TWAs is intra-corporate transfers (ICT), introduced by the European Commission in 2014, and implemented in the national legislation in 2016 (European Parliament, Council of the European Union 2014). This regulation allows the TCNs to be posted from a company in a non-EU country to an EU branch. The public officials stated that some TWAs establish subsidiaries in third countries to take advantage of the ICT regulation and organise the posting of TCNs from their subsidiaries in the non-EU countries to a TWA in an EU country (Interview 7).

> *In our case, it became clear that posting had nothing to do with the principle of simplifying the cross-border provision of services in the EU single market. In Slovakia, almost without exception, this certainly*

> *does not apply to some top workers in IT companies (…) but, almost without exception in Slovakia, posting began to be abused to circumvent the rules for the inflow of workers from third countries to the Slovak labour market* (Interview 7).

As outlined in the previous subsection, sectoral conditions and trends, as well as competitiveness pressures, can significantly impact on how posting is organised at a plant level. For example, a multinational company included in our interviews applies a range of mobility channels to exchange workforce between the Slovak branch and the foreign mother company, including inter-company postings. Thus, a portion of the postings to Slovakia has been taking place in connection with knowledge transfer and learning (Lens, Mussche and Marx 2022b). On the other hand, less skilled workers are used through TWAs, which might post foreign nationals. A key factor is the increasing competitive pressure in the highly internationalised sectors, e.g. the automotive industry, resulting in pressures to decrease labour costs: 'The trend in the automotive industry is to reduce production costs (…) carmakers are pushing the suppliers, these have a lower budget, and are pushing for lower wages; they buy the service, it is not personnel costs' (Interview 12).

This participant also supported indications that, with the increasing pressure on labour costs, employers might avoid regulation, in line with the evidence regarding different social dumping strategies in other countries (Berntsen and Lillie 2015). The tension between securing worker rights and securing the supply of labour was evident in the interview with a law firm offering complex services to various domestic and foreign companies. In their reflection, they highlight labour force exigence and the diversity of strategies that firms use to address their acute needs.

> *Currently, the labour market is tight and companies are looking for just anybody, even from sister companies that are not so far away. There is a great need for manpower and the client will use all available methods – local hiring, TWAs, during the pandemic even lending employees between non-competing employers (...) if everything is used up and there is still not enough, the client will eventually resort to a difficult process, administratively and also financially, to try to get a worker from a third country* (Interview 19).

Overall, the protection of posted workers' rights seems troublesome and contributes to the frequent use of this policy instrument by TWAs. According to interview participants, including unions (Interviews 4 and 10), the motivation of posted workers, particularly among TCNs, is to earn as much as possible; consequently, they are more likely to accept compromised working conditions and lower wages – or even breaches of the labour law. This, together with the language barrier, a low level of trust in the public enforcement bodies and a lack of information about workers' rights, contributes to the vulnerability of workers and the way the posting is used as a policy instrument, especially by the TWAs (Interviews 2, 5, 6 and 8).

Trade unions are becoming more informed about the needs of workers posted to Slovakia (usually in the low-skilled segment) but this remains fairly limited to the instances where they enjoy a strong presence on the shop floor. Some company-level trade unions also perceive posted workers as a threat to local workers' working conditions (Interview 4), which undermines the access of the posted workers to the rights protection mechanism. This problem of the gap between regulation and practice is also dealt with by the enforcement authorities in the field (Interviews 7 and 10). However, the inspection and other law enforcement bodies face limited capacities in addressing the breaches of the law, especially *vis-à-vis* TCNs employed by the TWAs that operate across various jurisdictions (Interview 8).

Discussion and conclusion

Whilst most exchanges take the form of posting from Eastern Europe to Western Europe, the posting landscape is becoming much more geographically diverse. This paper has analysed rising posting figures in Slovakia and the growing importance of posting in Europe's semi-periphery, interrogating posting in a different institutional and regulatory context to most studies to date. We use original qualitative data acquired via semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders during the period 2020–2023. Evidence from the interviews is linked to developments in posting patterns in Slovakia – and a section describing key migration and employment policy changes, including those related to posting specifically. Our study, in broad terms, illustrates that the divide in the posting literature between sending and receiving countries is becoming obsolete because supposed 'sending' countries like Slovakia are receiving substantial numbers of posted workers and are increasingly posting differently to before.

Regarding our first question about posting's place within the overall migration policy framework, we show how posting has gradually become one of the dominant mobility pathways used by companies in Slovakia. We show that posting in Slovakia has been diversified from mostly low-cost posting to more diverse forms of postings to and from the country, corroborating findings about Belgium by Lens *et al.* 2022a. These include the exchange of knowledge within transnational companies or expanding business opportunities, especially in expert service sectors, for which posting can also be effectively used. A contextualised discussion of rising posting figures in Slovakia in the past decade reveals that this increase is sustained by its specific regulatory and labour market context reliant on a flexible workforce with a weak enforcement of labour rights.

Our account of posting documents how employers find creative ways to secure qualified as well as less-skilled workers to sustain industrial production, which forms the skeleton of Slovakia's economy. Importantly, the posting of workers happens at the fringes of national and EU legal rules and regulations due to the limited capacity and, at times, the will of key actors to enforce existing rules. This corroborates with other research that shows how the posting of workers is not only used to meet production needs but is also seen as a way to avoid strict labour migration regulations, especially for employing TCNs (Danaj *et al*. 2023; Lens *et al.* 2022b; Novitz and Andrijasevic 2020). The motivations of the employers and, particularly, TWAs to use posting as a policy instrument to address labour shortages and skill needs are intertwined with the motivations of the posted workers, especially those from third countries. They are portrayed as more willing to work longer hours, be more available and often more committed (Lens *et al.* 2022a; MacKenzie and Forde 2009). Importantly, posting serves as a flexibility instrument that is used to respond to a changing regulatory framework beyond that in posting, which might explain the continued growth of postings in the EU. A key policy implication is the need to address the complex mobility issues with a more integrated policy response, which is a finding that can be transposed beyond this particular case. The posting of workers should be assessed in the broader context of migration and labour market regulation policies, not only in Slovakia but in any Eastern European country actively engaged in posting. Weaker industrial relations and the liberal principles of worker rights protection are a common feature of Eastern European economies and this certainly contributes to how and why posting is used – also beyond Slovakia (e.g. for Poland and Slovenia, see Heindlmaier and Assmus 2026).

Our research revealed the complexity of different migration paths related to posting and the importance of contextualising the posting flows within the institutional framework. Tracing different paths of worker migration through the posting instrument from the perspective of Slovakia thus goes beyond a one-country case study. However, more research is needed linking posting to a broader regulatory framework. This is echoed by numerous actors approached during the course of this research

in calling for the building of stronger evidence regarding the practice of posting, gaps in posting and its relations to other channels of labour migration in and to Europe. We hope that our paper opens up new avenues for research in other countries that will lead to a contextualised interpretation and nuanced understanding of posting as one of the labour mobility channels used by companies and workers in the EU.

Notes

1. Defined in a more-narrow sense to include Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Ireland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.
2. Ethical approval was not required (per authors' institutional rules) as research subjects were public institutions or (physical or legal) individuals who shared information of public value and interest – not their personal or sensitive information.
3. Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, DataCube, 2020, Labour Force Survey, available at: http://datacube.statistics.sk/#!/view/sk/VBD_SK_WIN/pr3105qr/v_pr3105qr_00_00_00_sk (accessed 24 June 2026).
4. Eurostat, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsq_esgan2/default/table?lang=en (accessed 24 June 2026).
5. In 2021, 'Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic: Perspective until the Year 2025' was adopted, with the main objective to support the managed labour mobility of foreigners to the Slovak labour market. Migration policy and migration management in the country faced further shock in response to the start of the Russian war against Ukraine in 2022, as Slovakia has been both a transit country and the final destination for a large number of Ukrainian migrants. Specific legislation was passed to ease access to the social system and labour market for Ukrainian refugees. These most recent changes cannot be reflected in our data and are beyond the scope of this analysis.
6. In 2022, more than 4,000 incoming postings (6.7 per cent) were self-employed workers.
7. Legal Framework Directive on Intra-Corporate Transferees EN (ICT) sets the conditions under which non-EU nationals can enter and work in the EU for an intra-corporate transfer (i.e. a posting from a company operating in a non-EU country in a branch in the EU).

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All data used are publicly available and duly referenced. Qualitative data gathered via interviews are not publicly available as anonymity was granted to respondents who participated in this research.

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No AI was used in any form or at any stage of research or writing of this article.

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Appendix

Table A1. Overview of the interviews (fieldwork)

Interview No.	Gender	Organisation	Position
1	F	Local NGO	Researcher and NGO practitioner (immigrants' integration)
2	F	Local NGO	Expert and practitioner (immigrant issues)
3	M	Employers' association (peak level)	General Secretary
4	F	Trade union at the national level	Representative
5	M	Slovak Insurance Agency	Public official
6	F	International NGO	Immigration expert
7	M	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Public official (employment issues)
8	M	Bureau of Border and Foreign Police	Public official (immigration issues)
9	F	Employer in the automotive sector	HR department
9	M	Employer in the automotive sector	HR department
9	F	Employer in the automotive sector	HR department
10	F	National Labour Inspectorate	Public official
11	M	Association of employers in the construction sector	President
12	F	Employer in the automotive sector	Legal Consultant on posting
13	F	Employer in the construction sector	HR department
14	M	Social Insurance Agency	Public official
15	F	National Labour Inspectorate	Public official
15	M	National Labour Inspectorate	Public official
16	M	Trade union on the national level	Representative
17	M	European Labour Authority	National liaison officer
18	F	Employers' association	Representative
19	F	Law firm	Consultant
19	M	Law firm	Consultant
20	F	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Public official

Notes: Interviews 1–13 were conducted in 2020 and interviews 14–20 in 2023. Two respondents were interviewed twice.

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The Politics of Belonging among Polish Migrants in Île-de-France: Intersections of Gender, Religion and Race

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In both Poland and France, gender, sexuality and reproduction are central to the constructions of nationhood and statehood, with categories such as race, religion and ethnicity playing a crucial role in public debates surrounding sex, family planning and the roles of men and women. This article employs the theoretical framework of belonging and the politics of belonging to examine how Polish migrants in Paris and the surrounding region of Île-de-France renegotiate their identities in relation to broader national and global discourses on gender, race and religion. Focusing on first-generation migrants from diverse working- and middle-class backgrounds, the analysis explores how they navigate belonging to various collectivities – whether national, diasporic or religious communities – and how they assert their deservingness to live in the host country, maintain ties to their homeland, participate in civil society or cultivate a sense of cosmopolitan identity.

Keywords: Catholicism, identity, Polish migration, sexuality, whiteness

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Introduction

Migration challenges a person's sense of identity. People's long-established values, perceptions of self and relationships with others are no longer self-evident. It is therefore unsurprising that migrants engage in intense negotiations about where and in what sense they belong – whether to a state, a national community or a broader regional and symbolic entity such as Europe. Continued ties to their community back home, as well as new affiliations – whether with the host nation-state or a diasporic community – are often navigated through categories such as race, religion, gender and sexuality. Additionally, their position in relation to various collectivities is shaped by factors such as class, education, age and generation, to name but a few.

The intense negotiations surrounding belonging among Polish migrants residing in the Île-de-France region of France caught my attention while I was conducting ethnographic research on the intersections of Catholicism, sexuality and reproduction. While I gathered numerous deeply personal stories, I also found that my research topic prompted people to engage with broader debates potentially encapsulated in the term 'the politics of belonging' (Antonsich 2010; Crowley 1999; Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011a, 2011b). This is because both gender – along with the politics of sexuality and reproduction – and religion – racialised and ethnicised in Polish and French public discourse – are central to various constructions of nationhood and statehood. In this article, I employ the theoretical framework of belonging and the politics of belonging to analyse how Polish migrants in Île-de-France renegotiate identity and belonging in relation to broader public debates in both Poland and France.

After presenting my methods and theoretical framework, I begin my analysis by briefly demonstrating, through selected examples, that, in both Poland and France, gender, sexuality and reproduction are central to the constructions of nationhood and statehood. Furthermore, categories such as race, religion and ethnicity play a crucial role in debates about men and women, sex and family planning (Farris 2017; Yuval-Davis 1997; Zaretsky 2007). I argue that heated public disputes – such as the abortion debate in Poland or the controversy over headscarves in France – are deeply intertwined with the politics of belonging. I then illustrate how Polish migrant activists engage with these public discourses and negotiate a space for themselves within civil society in both Poland and France.

In what follows, I analyse the main themes that emerged from my interviews and participant observation in relation to belonging and the politics of belonging. For clarity, I divide the material into two sections. Firstly, I present the conservative discourses of belonging, which were particularly prevalent within parishes led by the Polish Catholic Mission in France, an organisation serving Polish migrants. These discourses, centred on belonging to the Polish national community, were more appealing to members of the working class and appeared to have a stronger influence on men. Secondly, I explore cosmopolitan models of belonging, which were especially popular among the middle classes and generally more attractive to women.

Naturally, the division between conservative and cosmopolitan discourses of belonging is not clear-cut. As is often the case with such categorisations in social science, treating them as rigid distinctions risks reinforcing stereotypes. Nonetheless, this framework proved useful for my analysis, as it highlights the plurality of belonging discourses within the studied group and demonstrates how belonging is shaped by social divisions related to class and gender that intersect with broader contemporary political conflicts.

Method

In 2022 and 2023, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork (Okely 2013) over the course of five months with Polish migrants in Île-de-France, carrying out 44 semi-structured interviews and engaging in participant observation at a variety of public events. These events ranged from religious services and historical commemorations to cultural gatherings, picnics, balls and social events organised by both religious and secular Polish diaspora organisations in France. The use of ethnographic methods allowed me to gain unique insights into spontaneously expressed convictions, while also situating them within the context of people's individual biographies and the practical challenges of everyday migratory life, which are directly linked to intersecting categories of class, gender, ethnicity, etc.

I recruited interlocutors through several channels: via Polish churches and events organised by parishes; through formal and informal secular organisations run by Polish migrants, such as the *Association des Polonais à Paris*, the Polish Library in Paris and the Polish Institute in Paris, as well as during events such as the Polish Film Festival; through various Facebook groups for Polish migrants; and, finally, by using the snowball method, whereby interlocutors recommended me to their friends and acquaintances. Due to this variety of organisations and events, I was able to contact interlocutors from different social groups, varying in experiences, political views and religious convictions. However, the very fact that I approached interlocutors mostly through Polish organisations meant that I was only able to conduct interviews with people who maintained ties to those organisations or who had Polish friends who recommended them to an ethnographer. Individuals who had fully integrated into French society and did not wish to cultivate ties with any Polish community are entirely absent from my sample.

My interlocutors were first-generation migrants, almost all of whom arrived in France between 1980 and 2020. Most of them (30 out of 44) were women and most held some form of post-secondary degree; however, more than half of those with higher education were employed in working-class jobs. Participants from big cities, small towns and rural areas were evenly represented, although there was a particularly large group of migrants from rural Subcarpathia – a region with a long tradition of economic migration to France. Interlocutors' ages ranged from 26 to 78. All were either Catholics themselves or had been raised in Catholic families.

All 44 interviews were recorded with the interlocutors' consent. Observations made during public events and informal conversations were recorded in the form of fieldnotes. Whenever possible, I made sure to disclose my status as an ethnographer to the people with whom I interacted during fieldwork. In my view, an ethical approach to studying such politically and emotionally charged topics required careful navigation of my own positionality. While the fact that I am Polish made access to interlocutors relatively easy, my long-term residence in Poland led many to assume that I was Catholic – which I am not – and that my political views were conservative – which they are not. During encounters in the field, I sought to balance honesty about my own positionality and convictions with a sincere desire to remain respectful toward the views of my interlocutors, avoiding confrontations that might create discomfort for either party.

The Polish diaspora in France is estimated to number between 500 000 and one million people, with a large proportion living in Paris – which is home to some of the oldest Polish diasporic organisations, both lay and religious. These include Polish churches, most of which are overseen by the Polish Catholic Mission in France (Leszczyńska, Urbańska and Zielińska 2020). Given the diversity of their backgrounds, migration experiences and levels of integration into French society, my interlocutors do not constitute a single, distinct migrant community. However, many identify as part of an imagined collective of Polish people living outside of Poland – traditionally referred to as the *Polonia* (Gońda 2021; Markowski and

Williams 2013; Nowosielski and Nowak 2022; Voldoire 2015) – and some maintain close ties with various institutions that organise religious and cultural life for the Polish diaspora in Île-de-France.

Belonging and the politics of belonging

The distinction between *belonging* and the *politics of belonging* is central to the theoretical framework I employ in this article (Antonsich 2010; Crowley 1999; Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011a, 2011b). *Belonging* refers to an emotional attachment or the subjective feeling of being 'at home'. In contrast, the *politics of belonging* – famously described by John Crowley (1999: 30) as 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance' – involves broader political projects that 'separate the world population into "us" and "them"' (Yuval-Davis 2006: 204) or the discursive resources used to define the boundaries of a collectivity (Antonsich 2010). Recent work points to the close relationship between the external borders of nation-states and internal boundaries separating contemporary societies into 'us' and 'them', both of which have ethnic, racial, religious and gendered dimensions (Fassin 2011; Haukanes and Pine 2021). Nira Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011a) underscores the importance of examining belonging through an intersectional lens, analysing it across three interrelated levels: (1) social location, determined by intersections of gender, ethnicity, race, age and other factors; (2) identity, seen as a narrative through which one defines oneself within a collectivity; and (3) values, which are associated with different forms of belonging. While belonging and the politics of belonging have traditionally served as frameworks for studying nationality and citizenship, some scholars, including Yuval-Davis (2011a), emphasise the increasing relevance of religious and cosmopolitan projects in shaping contemporary belonging.

In relation to migration, work concentrating on belonging usually deals with implications of anti-immigrant discourses, either by analysing who is constructed as deserving to belong within macro-scale political projects (Yuval-Davis 2006) or through ethnographic accounts of whether migrants feel that they belong in the host society (Blachnicka-Ciacek, Trąbka, Budginaite-Mackine, Parutis and Pustulka 2021; Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2008; Pawlak and Goździak 2020). Some scholars, like Pawlak and Goździak (2020), recognise the multiplicity of forms of belonging that migrants construct in their everyday practice, forms which are not always related to the official dimensions of citizenship and integration. I follow this path in asserting not only that migrants' belonging to the host society is constructed in many different ways but that being included within the host society may not be the main preoccupation for some migrants, who may be more interested in demonstrating their continued connection to the home country or constructing themselves as members of a diasporic community.

Research on identity and belonging among Polish migrants in Western Europe frequently examines the intersections of ethnicity, gender, religion and race, which all shape various positionalities and individual experiences of migrants, as demonstrated further in this section (Fiałkowska 2019; Nowicka 2018; Rzepnikowska 2019; Safuta 2018). Research shows that gender plays an important role in people's subjective constructions of belonging (Leszczyńska *et al.* 2020; Pawlak and Goździak 2020) and is also central to many larger projects of the politics of belonging. In nationalist discourses, women are often depicted as both biological reproducers and symbolic border guards of collective identity (Yuval-Davis 1997). Within migrant communities, however, the role of women is often paradoxical. While these communities tend to rely heavily on women's reproductive labour and respond to perceived threats to collective identity by imposing stricter controls over women's sexuality, migration frequently strengthens women's positions and can make them less willing to fulfil the roles related to cultural and biological reproduction (Ebaugh and Chafetz 1999, Leszczyńska *et al.* 2020). This shift in gender dynamics is influenced by several factors. While the loss of status accompanying migration may come

as a shock for men – who typically held more privileged positions in their communities of origin than their female counterparts – migrant women may enter the labour market for the first time in their lives. Owing to the high demand for reproductive labour in Western Europe, they often experience greater job stability than migrant men. Finally, compared to typically masculine occupations such as construction work, care work offers opportunities to acquire linguistic and cultural skills that help carers to navigate the host society and can sometimes enable upward mobility (Ebaugh and Chafetz 1999). Additionally, as Fiałkowska (2019: 99) notes in relation to Polish men in the UK (a phenomenon also relevant to other European contexts), 'The construction of masculinity which gave Polish men a privileged position in their country of origin, may become a burden in the UK, with some Polish men experiencing being seen as barbaric or primitive'.

Although Polish national identity is not always explicitly defined in biological terms within the dominant discourse, whiteness is often implicit in the construction of Polishness (Balogun 2020; Jaskulowski 2021). While peripherial whiteness does not always shield Central and Eastern Europeans from racism, studies indicate that Polish migrants often leverage their whiteness to negotiate their status in host societies, at times aligning with local anti-immigrant discourses and directing these sentiments towards migrants from other backgrounds (Baker, Iacob, Imre and Mark 2024; Blachnicka-Ciacek *et al.* 2021; Narkowicz 2023; Nowicka 2018; Safuta 2018). Some Polish migrants also invoke their Catholicism – frequently framed in contrast to Islam and constructed as a 'white' religion – to assert their right to live and work in Western Europe, positioning themselves as part of a shared European community (Yoshi 2016). This aspiration towards 'Westernness' is a significant feature of semi-peripheral political discourses and shapes how Islamophobia is interpreted and expressed in Poland (Bobako 2018).

Bobako (2018) identifies two main strands of Islamophobic discourse in Polish political debate: conservative and liberal. Conservative Islamophobia frames Islam as fundamentally incompatible with the Christian values on which Europe is historically founded – thus inherently antagonistic to European civilisation. In contrast, liberal Islamophobia links Europeanness with civil rights, portraying Islam as hostile to these rights and, therefore, incompatible with European ideals. Additionally, various femonationalist discourses seek to exclude immigrants of non-European descent – especially Muslims – from Western European national communities, citing a perceived opposition to women's rights as justification for exclusion (Farris 2017). I draw on the literature situated at the intersections of migration, gender and race in order to understand how migrants' negotiations of belonging are related to wider discourses of boundary-making.

Migrants *vis-à-vis* different projects of belonging

People migrating from Poland to France draw on and engage with various projects of the politics of belonging present in the public discourse of both countries. While a detailed examination of the hegemonic political projects of belonging in Poland and France is beyond the scope of this article, I offer several examples to illustrate how belonging is constructed in the public debates of both nations, as well as how migrant activists creatively draw on and relate to these debates. These constructions are framed through the lenses of gender, sexuality and reproduction, while their gendered nature is intertwined with categories such as religion, race and nationality. Additionally, these discourses often exploit the notion of 'Europeanness' (Baer 2020).

Given the pivotal role of the public debate on abortion in Polish politics and state–Church relations, I decided to focus my analysis of the links between gender and belonging in the Polish context on this

issue. The importance I accorded to abortion in the Polish context is also a direct result of the interest in this issue expressed by my interlocutors, most of whom followed more or less closely the media coverage of the protests of 2020. In the Polish context, abortion is where the categories of gender, ethnicity and religion meet, as the abortion debate is as much about the shape of the nation and state as it is about women and Catholic morality. This theme is less prominent in my discussion of the French public debate since, at the time of my research, topics related to same-sex marriage and modern Islamic clothing were more pronounced both publicly and in my interviews. Only after I had completed my fieldwork, in 2024, did abortion re-emerge in French politics, when the French constitution was amended to guarantee the right to terminate a pregnancy.

Poland

In Poland, the abortion law has undergone several amendments throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Pregnancy termination was made available on demand in 1956 and remained so until the end of state socialism. Access to it was severely restricted in 1993. Heated debates over abortion, often leading to legal changes, have been sparked during key moments in Poland's history, highlighting the central role of reproductive rights in the competing visions of Polish statehood (Kościańska, Kosiorowska-Le Rall and Pomian 2021).

In 2020, under the rules of the right-wing Law and Justice party, which remained in power between 2015 and 2023, the provision allowing abortion in cases of irreversible foetal malformation was ruled unconstitutional, rendering abortion in Poland virtually inaccessible. This decision ignited mass protests across the country. As with previous major turning points in Poland's abortion debate, the political conflict that was triggered in 2020 was about more than reproductive rights. It was about the state, the Church and their mutual relations – and about Poland's place in Europe (Kościańska *et al.* 2021). Right-wing politicians and Catholic Church officials tended to view the protests as an attack on the Polish national community (Polynczuk-Alenius 2022) and often referred to the historically rooted model of Polish femininity – the 'Mother Pole' (Kosiorowska-Le Rall 2022; Titkow 2012), an idealised figure of a Polish mother willing to sacrifice herself for her family and devoted to producing new citizens to defend the homeland. They scolded the protesting women for supposedly besmirching their feminine dignity, highlighting what they insinuated to be their non-normativity within the national community – a community whose boundaries, in their view, were safeguarded by self-sacrificing women prepared to give birth even in the most tragic circumstances.

Although not all protesters participating in the 2020 Women's Strike identified with feminism, feminist organisations were vocal actors in shaping discourse about abortion. Their arguments were often expressed in the language of human rights, accusing the state of torture for forcing women to carry pregnancies with no likelihood of producing a living child. The harm inflicted by the new law was directed at women who were European citizens, which, in their view, warranted international attention. The separation of Church and state – and the right to abortion as one of its perceived outcomes – was portrayed as a marker of 'Europeanness'. Thus, when some women protested for the right to abortion, they were also expressing a collective desire, as Poles, to belong to the European community of rights-bearing citizens (Baer 2020; Bucholc and Gospodarczyk 2024; Nawojski, Pluta and Zielińska 2019).

Contemporary opposition to abortion in Poland is closely linked to anti-gender campaigns – a global movement initiated by the Catholic Church. This movement actively resists feminism, women's rights and sexual and reproductive freedoms, framing the European Union and 'the West' as cultural colonisers. It portrays Western societies as successors to the Soviet Union, threatening traditional Polish

family values by promoting so-called 'gender ideology' (Bucholc and Gospodarczyk 2024; Graff and Korolczuk 2017, 2022).

France

The French republican ideology offers a different model of femininity that serves as a symbolic border guard of the French national community of equal citizens – a sexually liberated female citizen with an uncovered head. The work of Joan Scott (2007, 2016) provides a detailed account of the war that the French state has been waging against the headscarf. *Laïcité*, the distinctive French model of secularity, was established during the French Revolution on the principle of 'neutrality' within the masculine public sphere and the association of women with the private sphere and religion. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, *laïcité* has increasingly been constructed against Islam. Equality in the French republican discourse means the eradication of difference and the abstraction of the individual from her particular sociocultural context – 'It is as an abstract individual that one becomes a French citizen' (Scott 2007: 11). According to Scott, the 'sexual difference' poses a problem to this model of secular republicanism, which it resolved to ignore by reducing the equality between sexes to the equal right to engage in sexual activities. The Islamic veil, paradoxically, is viewed as ostentatious, because it reveals the problem which the sexual difference poses to the republican model of an abstract citizen.

Since the early 21st century, a series of laws targeting Islamic modest clothing have been enacted in France, such as the 2004 ban on 'ostentatious' religious symbols in public schools – a measure that, in practice, disproportionately affected girls wearing headscarves – and the 2010 prohibition on the concealment of faces in public spaces. The construction of a neutral self in the public sphere, alongside adherence to a set of supposedly universal values – the prerequisites for republican belonging – masks the deeply rooted attachment of the French national community to its 'white' Christian tradition. Muslim women, who are often portrayed as the symbolic antithesis of republican belonging, are thus excluded from full participation in this model of citizenship (Nilsson 2017; Scott 2007, 2016).

The connection between religion, sexuality and the French national project was exemplified by the protests known as *La Manif pour Tous* – first against same-sex marriage in 2012–2013 and, later, against granting access to *in-vitro* fertilisation (IVF) for single women and lesbian couples in 2019 (Béraud 2021; Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou 2017). This movement emerged within the broader context of anti-gender campaigns. It drew upon the 'family under siege' narrative (Zaretsky 2007) and advocated for a bourgeois model of the heterosexual nuclear family, thereby excluding other family structures from the national community and denying them state protection.

Migrant activism

Polish migrants living in Île-de-France are familiar with some or all of the debates and discourses of belonging underpinning the cases above; they engage with these issues as active participants in civil society. In France, as across Europe, Polish women organise and participate in complex activist networks aimed at spreading information about the situation of women and LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland. This activism takes place in the context of Poland's strict abortion law and, until 2023, it remained closely connected to the opposition to the anti-democratic policies of the far-right Law and Justice government (Binnie and Klesse 2013; Laureau 2021; Muszel 2024). In relation to abortion, feminist activists work to seek international support for pro-choice initiatives and organise assistance for Polish women seeking abortions. In some instances, such as with *L'Association Défense de la*

Démocratie en Pologne [Association for the Defence of Democracy in Poland], feminist engagement took place within the broader framework of liberal resistance to the Law and Justice government.

As demonstrated by my own research and suggested by the existing literature (e.g., Gober and Struzik 2018), Polish activists in France who raise awareness about the situation of women in Poland among both the Polish diaspora and French society are asserting their place – and the relevance of Polish affairs and the Polonia – in the sphere of French civil society. Through their activism in France, they also demonstrate continued engagement in Poland's public debate, emphasising their legitimate belonging to the national and civic community despite their emigration. Their contributions to Polish society are not merely recognised despite their departure from the country. In some cases, their experiences are deemed valuable precisely because of their exposure to life in Western European societies, which are often portrayed in Polish public discourse as more advanced in terms of democracy, secularity, civic rights and gender equality. As a result, Polish migrants living in these countries are positioned as authorities on women's rights issues.

While progressive migrant activism is ubiquitous, conservative social involvement among migrants seems more concealed. Following a brief observation by Leszczyńska *et al.* (2020) that some Polish migrants in the UK organise anti-abortion protests, I sought to identify similar examples of activism in Île-de-France. However, I found no evidence of organised anti-abortion activism led by Polish organisations or institutions in France. Furthermore, I was unable to locate research on migrant anti-choice activism either within or beyond the Polish context. This may suggest that, while pro-choice activism often connects to supra-national, European or cosmopolitan forms of belonging, anti-choice activism is largely confined within national borders, as the 'unborn children' whom these activists seek to protect are imagined as members of their own national community (Świstow 2008). Moreover, a partial explanation of this phenomenon may be provided by the accounts of my interlocutors, who attributed the desire to interfere with gender relations in France to Muslim immigrants. Notably, those who supported stricter abortion laws were often the same individuals who accused Muslims of attempting to 'impose' more conservative rules regarding gender and sexuality in France, thus drawing on the liberal Islamophobic discourse, which depicts Islam as hostile to European civil rights (Bobako 2018). This accusation was used to argue that Polish people were more deserving than other immigrants of living in France, precisely because they accepted – or at least did not seek to alter – the local gender dynamics.

It is telling, therefore, that the only example I found of someone advocating for some form of Polish anti-abortion activism in France involved a son of Polish immigrants – a person who must have held French citizenship (*Polskifr* 2022). The young man in question, interviewed by an online journal for Polish immigrants in France, participated in the 2022 anti-abortion march in Paris, carrying a Polish flag. He explained to the journalist that 'since the end of 2020 we [Poles] have been one of the main players in the game against the civilisation of death', criticised France for 'bemoaning the demographic crisis while killing its own children' and cited John Paul II: 'The nation which kills its own children has no future'. In so doing, he claimed multiple forms of belonging. He reaffirmed his ongoing connection to his parents' country while also participating in French civil society and taking a stance on French law. Additionally, he sought to position all Polish people within French political life, invoking a shared community of Catholic values – values which, he suggested, were better upheld in Poland than in France – and a common mission to restore them across Europe.

Nationalist and diasporic projects of belonging

Projects of belonging that evoke a sense of attachment to a national collectivity are often centred around parishes operated by the Polish Catholic Mission in France. The description of them provided in this section is based on the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Île-de-France. Polish Catholic Missions are religious organisations dependent on the Polish ecclesiastical hierarchy. They provide pastoral services to Polish migrants around the world, frequently operating their own churches and conducting Sunday Mass in Polish (Leszczyńska *et al.* 2020). The Polish Catholic Missions follow an ethnic model of religiosity, reinforcing the notion that being Polish is synonymous with being Catholic (Krotofil 2013).

The Polish Catholic Mission's parishes in France are particularly appealing to working-class, often right-leaning migrants, who tend to choose them either because they wish to pray in Polish or because they see religiosity as linked to their national identity (Kosiorowska-Le Rall 2025). The Mission's politics of belonging has a threefold impact. First, by creating Polish-speaking communities and spaces, it reinforces migrants' sense of connection to the Polish national identity. Pastoral care within the Mission's churches skilfully blends religious and national elements. For instance, on All Saints' Day – when people in Poland traditionally light candles on the graves of their deceased loved ones – the Mission invites migrants to collectively visit the graves of prominent Poles buried in Paris, such as Frédéric Chopin. This helps to mitigate the feeling of detachment from home that often accompanies years spent abroad. This pastoral role was especially significant in the 1980s, when vibrant communities of people who had fled Poland in the final decade of state socialism, many of whom had been cut off from their families by martial law, gathered around Polish churches. The rich social and cultural life fostered in these communities is still remembered today with nostalgia.

Secondly, the Mission fosters a new sense of diasporic identity – a sense of belonging to the Polonia or, more specifically, to the Polish diaspora in France. Through pastoral services, press organs (e.g. *Głos Katolicki*, *Polskifr*) and various books and writings by its priests, the Mission constructs a narrative of what it means to belong to the Polish diaspora. It draws on elements of Polish national memory, reminding migrants that they are following in the footsteps of famous figures and national heroes exiled during different historical periods, particularly after the November Uprising of 1830. By drawing parallels between past political exiles and contemporary economic migrants, the Mission offers a powerful narrative – especially appealing to men – which imbues the mundane struggles of migrant life with a taste of the tragic suffering of generations of Poles unable to live in their homeland.

Thirdly, by preserving the memory of the long history of Polish presence in France and through its ability to organise events – and even hold services – at significant historical sites in the city, the Mission provides migrants with an opportunity to feel at home in France. For example, for the 100th anniversary of Poland's independence, a reproduction of the painting of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa was installed in Notre Dame Cathedral. Its unveiling was marked by a Mass held in Polish by a bishop from Poland. On that day, the Cathedral was filled with Polish flags and the bishop spoke about the well-known history of Poland's independence, giving the faithful a sense of being at home in the heart of Paris.

The intensity of migrants' negotiations concerning various forms of belonging is reflected in the frequent use of discourses of non-belonging. Members of the Polish diaspora are often constructed as ethnically Polish, fluent Polish-speakers, white and Catholic, even though many individuals who identify with the diaspora – especially the children of migrants – do not fit this description. The boundaries of the community are maintained through a set of norms which emerge in stories of transgressions shared

during interviews. Polish migrants, particularly men, are expected to be hard-working, compensating for any linguistic deficiencies with their skills, wit and exceptional productivity.

For example, Andrzej, a 50-year-old locksmith and welder, framed his personal narrative around being a valuable, though unappreciated, employee. When he started his first job in France, he did not speak any French and was paid a very low salary, despite being able to work efficiently using technical drawings. Over the years, he learned to speak French but his requests for a pay rise were repeatedly denied. When his employer hired a French worker – whom Andrzej had to train – and paid him the same salary, Andrzej decided to leave the workshop. He later learned that, after he left, the boss had to hire three French workers to replace him. This is a typical working-class migrant's account, in which French workers are depicted as clumsy, unmotivated and unaccustomed to hardship. The work ethic and ingenuity of the Polish worker, who manages to do the work of three people despite language barriers and discrimination, are presented as the reasons why Polish migrants *deserve* to be in France. In the same interview, Andrzej juxtaposed Polish migrants to those from France's former colonies, whom he described as poor workers due to their supposed resentment of France. According to him, this resentment made them want to work inefficiently in order to harm their employers and the French economy.

While the ideal of the hard-working, resourceful Polish migrant embodies a certain model of masculinity – men spend much more time than women in interviews discussing their work ethic and the hardships they faced as migrants – women who migrate are held to similar standards of hard work and self-sufficiency despite the additional expectation that they will raise children, perform housework and reproduce ethnic culture – fulfilling the age-old ideal of the 'Mother Pole' (Bojarczuk 2024; Titkow 2012; Urbańska 2012). Women are more likely than men to face suspicion if they are successful, as many men believe that women can easily avoid the burdens of migrant life by profiting from their sexuality. Polish women are frequently accused of entering financially advantageous relationships with foreign men, who are sometimes described as French but more often as Muslim immigrants. For example, Paweł, a truck driver in his late 50s, believed that he had unique insight into the affairs of Polish migrants in Paris, having collected parcels in front of one of the Polish Catholic Mission churches during the 80s and 90s. He shared what he described as sad observations about the morality of Polish women – telling me of Polish 'prostitutes' allegedly standing in front of the church, offering their services for half a sandwich; of a mother who came to France solely to find a Turkish 'sugar daddy' and later helped her daughter to settle in France and find a Turkish man for herself; and of numerous Polish women parking expensive cars in front of the church, which he interpreted as a clear sign of their sexual arrangements with wealthy (and probably non-Polish) men. In some of the interlocutors' accounts, the woman's transgression seems even greater if her sexual partner is not white, as this could result in the birth of mixed-race children.

Seeing as women serve as symbolic border guards of the community, the intensity with which men attempt to police women's sexuality is a telling indicator of the identity crisis faced by conservative male working-class Poles, particularly as migration challenges the gender order to which they were accustomed. As I have argued elsewhere (Kosiorowska-Le Rall 2022, 2025), Polish migrant women tend to be more liberal than their male counterparts. They are more likely to learn French and attend a French church, thereby distancing themselves from their parish community if they experience excessive control. Moreover, they are more likely to marry French or other foreign men. In contrast, Polish men are more likely than women to remain single and socially isolated as a result of migration.

Possessing jobs that do not encourage them to learn French or form international friendships and, as Fiałkowska (2019) suggests, adhering to models of masculinity that are seen as unattractive, working-

class men find themselves in strong need of a cohesive migrant community – something that is harder to find today than in the 80s and 90s. As a result, they often turn to nationalism and discourses that blame women's immorality for their difficulties.

For the group described in this section, belonging in France is negotiated through gendered values and constructions of whiteness. Numerous interlocutors depicted French society as being in deep crisis, with the source often identified as the French model of secularity – *laïcité* – which they frequently define as the persecution of religion, particularly Christianity. French society is often portrayed as overly permissive in terms of gender and sexual norms, allowing premarital sex at a very young age and contraception even among teenagers. Widespread abortion, supposedly used by French women and some [immoral] Polish immigrants as a form of contraception, is depicted as an extreme example of France's moral decline. These phenomena are seen as contributing to the crisis of family values and psychological problems, especially among young people.

While these tales of moral decay, reportedly stemming from a lack of religious guidance, point to a sense of feeling estranged in France, they also serve 2 purposes. Firstly, they provide discursive resources with which to construct a normative image of a good Pole in opposition to this reported immorality. For example, Jadwiga, an involved Catholic and a high-school teacher currently in her early 60s, told me that, many years ago, she was considering getting an abortion because her husband did not want another child. She discussed the matter with a French doctor, who advised her against it, arguing that she would not be able to live with what she had done because she is Polish. I was surprised to learn that what, for some, would have sounded like a discriminatory comment from a medical professional, was taken by Jadwiga as a compliment and something that made her proud and helped her to resist pressure from her husband. Secondly, accounts of the moral decline of hedonistic French society serve as an argument that Polish people do, in fact, belong in France and are much needed there. Polish people – at least those who adhere to the normative moral code – are seen as bringing back the Catholic values lost by France, once called the eldest daughter of the Church, as some interlocutors remind me. The need to restore these lost Christian values is viewed as even more urgent due to the perceived threat of Islam. As one interlocutor explained, a society cannot exist in a religious void and, if children are not raised as Catholics, they supposedly risk being radicalised into Muslim religious extremism.

Therefore, Polish people's assumed Catholic identity and their belonging in France are often negotiated through racist and Islamophobic discourses. Some interlocutors constructed their Europeanness and, consequently, their right to be in France – in contrast to what they considered 'real' immigrants, people of colour and Muslims – through the lenses of religion and whiteness. In so doing, they both embraced and internalised anti-immigrant discourses that are widespread in French society, while simultaneously arguing that these discourses do not apply to them – Poles, Catholics, Europeans – but to the 'Others'.

These exclusionary discourses of belonging are also reproduced daily through gendered discourses about safety and security. As a young Polish woman living in Poland and only visiting France for my research, I was frequently warned to brace myself against the dangers of Paris. Interlocutors advised me to be cautious with my belongings and to avoid areas where I might find myself surrounded by men of colour. They suggested taking longer routes home to avoid the RER B suburban train line – which was reportedly filled with dangerous men – and tried to dissuade me from returning home alone after sundown. On one occasion, during an evening interview with a 60-year-old female domestic worker, I realised that she expected someone to pick me up and take me home and she was very concerned when I told her that I planned to walk the streets of Paris alone after 8 p.m.

As I observed in many situations, the notion that Paris was extremely dangerous for a young woman was implicitly or explicitly linked to the presence of people of colour, who seemed to imprint themselves on the city's landscape, making it *feel* alien and unwelcoming to some of my interlocutors. This perception simultaneously served to justify the presence of Polish people, who were constructed as fundamentally different from those 'dangerous' migrants. Polish people, it was argued, were hard-working and embraced traditional Christian gender norms, which led them to defend women rather than pose a threat to them. For example, when I attended a ball organised by one of the Polish parishes, a group of middle-aged married couples from working-class backgrounds, all involved members of a suburban Polish parish, took me under their wing as a single young woman. They explained that, while I should not return home alone, I was perfectly safe at the event and I need not worry about leaving my glass unattended because, as they assured me, the security guards were ensuring that everyone inside was Polish.

To summarise, conservative discourses of belonging are often related to national and diasporic identities. These are often closely tied to an ethnic model of religiosity and exploit Catholicism and whiteness in order to justify Polish people's belonging in France, which often requires the embracing of Islamophobic and anti-immigrant discourses. Belonging is also negotiated through gender norms; women's sexual and reproductive lives are discussed and policed in an effort to delineate the borders of the national and diasporic collectivity.

The 'stigmatised brother' revisited: cosmopolitan belonging

While some interlocutors were largely influenced by conservative discourses of belonging, others dismissed them in favour of more cosmopolitan identity models. Certain groups – particularly young people, those from major Polish cities and women – were more likely to express scepticism towards nationalism and ethnic forms of religiosity, though such attitudes were by no means exclusive to these demographics. University-educated young migrants of both genders from Warsaw, Poznań or Gdańsk typically did not get involved with any Polish parish. Women, including those in working-class jobs, often decided to shift to a local French parish after spending some years in France. For example, Barbara, a 70-year-old retired journalist who went to France in the 1980s, told me that she had attended Mass in a Polish church several years ago, during which the priest implied, as she put it, that 'Polish women are whores', referencing supposed non-normative sexual behaviours among Polish migrant women. My interlocutor simply never returned to a Polish church. As shown by Barbara's example, while communities gathered around Polish churches may attempt to impose normative moral codes related to gendered models of Polish identity, some individuals – mostly from the middle classes – find it easy to stay beyond their reach.

While, for the purposes of this text, I maintain the distinction between middle and working class, I acknowledge that class belonging is particularly complex for migrants. As suggested by Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich (2006), their class position is more accurately determined by their aspirations rather than by the job in which they are currently working. For instance, during the last decade of state socialism, many university-educated young women from privileged families managed to secure an invitation from someone in France, arriving penniless and working as *au pairs* for several years before transitioning to other jobs. Today, educated Polish women also come to France – often following marriage to a French man – and find it difficult to secure a job that aligns with their middle-class aspirations. On the other hand, middle-class men are more likely to migrate to France only if they are confident that they can work in accordance with their educational level (Kosiorowska-Le Rall 2022).

For middle-class Polish migrants, the politics of belonging mainly revolves around legitimising their presence in France or, more broadly, their right to feel at home anywhere they choose to live. They achieve this by relating to cosmopolitan identity models (Kosiorowska-Le Rall 2022; Stasińska 2019; Yuval-Davis 2011a), which are often constructed through the incorporation of French republican values. These interlocutors tend to distinguish themselves from working-class Polish migrants, whom they depict as more closely attached to their Polish identity. As demonstrated by Pawlak (2018), middle-class Polish migration is often accompanied by a sense of shame due to the possibility of being mistaken for a stereotypical Polish economic migrant. While cosmopolitan identity discourses are an important element of the middle-class politics of belonging, they are not always sufficient to provide migrants with the sense that they are in the right place. A subjective sense of belonging in Paris, France or, more broadly, in Western Europe among those aspiring to cosmopolitan identities tends to depend, first, on access to middle-class jobs and, second, on overcoming linguistic challenges (either through learning French or finding an English-speaking environment) and building a fulfilling social life. It is the limited access to a satisfying cosmopolitan life that makes the tensions around the politics of belonging particularly visible among middle-class interlocutors (Kosiorowska-Le Rall 2022).

In his article, 'The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother', Buchowski (2006) argues that the sudden rise in economic inequality after Poland's democratic transformation led to a surge in discourses that justified the acute disproportion in the distribution of wealth by constructing those who did not succeed in the new capitalist economy as orientalised 'Others' – the *homo sovieticus*, people unable to adapt to the new conditions. In migrant communities, discourses surrounding the Polish economic transformation often merge with Western European discourses of belonging and deservingness, leading some migrants to 'orientalise' their fellow nationals in response to their perceived inability to integrate into the host society. These migrants ascribe to those struggling to integrate the same kind of inflexibility once associated with the *homo sovieticus*. However, the migrant *homo sovieticus*, rather than being alien to capitalism, is alien to the universalist French identity due to exaggerated national traits: Catholic piety, conservatism in matters of gender and sexuality, racism (supposedly stemming from a lack of education and worldly experience) and, in the case of men, hypermasculine violence and alcoholism.

In 2023, I attended the Polish Film Festival in Paris, hoping to recruit potential interviewees. During the cocktail reception after the opening film, I approached several guests, many of whom were Polish women in their 50s and 60s who had lived in France for 20 to 30 years. I was surprised to find that the topic of my PhD thesis – Catholicism and family planning among Polish migrants in Île-de-France – was met with suspicion, especially from those who had lived in France for several decades and experienced upward social mobility. Several individuals informed me that I had arrived in a secular country and should not attempt to discuss religious matters in public. The term 'family planning', which I had selected in the hope of evoking positive connotations, regardless of my interlocutors' convictions, also sounded suspiciously conservative to this audience. One woman even assumed that I was referring to natural family-planning methods promoted by the Church; she informed me that, in France, this was '*passé*', a thing of the past. One group I approached adopted a different strategy to signal that, as a PhD student from Poland interested in migrants' religiosity, I did not belong in France. When I approached them in Polish, they responded in French, assuming that I would not understand.

Ultimately, it was through sharing some of my interlocutors' criticisms of the Church, as well as Poland's strict abortion law and right-wing government – often by declaring myself to be a non-believer and, in the last-mentioned case, by discussing these subjects in French – that I was able to recruit interlocutors from this group. During the interviews, I learned that some of my interview partners were,

in fact, deeply religious, although, in some cases, their religiosity was very individualised. Interlocutors from this group tended to appreciate French Catholicism, which they deemed more progressive (for religious transformations among Polish migrants in France, see Kosiorowska-Le Rall 2025). Moreover, while they tended to be very critical towards the far-right Polish government and Church's influence on state reproductive politics, their views on gender and sexuality were not always feminist. For example, Aleksandra, a recently retired bank employee and mother of 4, who was a particularly vocal critic of the 2020 abortion ban during our first encounter, later shared with me the story of her own abortion, which she had in Poland under state socialism. She believed herself to have done a terrible thing, which could only be justified by her difficult life circumstances at the time. However, before gaining access to these personal accounts, I had to first demonstrate that I was not the kind of Polish person one might want to avoid abroad – someone shamefully unable to embrace the public values deemed acceptable in French society. For this group of interlocutors, much like the working-class migrants described earlier in this article, negotiating their belonging in France involves adopting anti-immigrant discourses in order to present themselves as the opposite of the stereotypical undeserving migrant.

Interviews with middle-class migrants revealed a tendency to portray Poland and France in black-and-white terms. Poland was often depicted as backward and conservative, while France was seen as modern and progressive. Female interlocutors were particularly keen to emphasise the liberation of women in France, explaining that, upon arriving there, they had to unlearn the ideas which they had been taught in Poland in order to become as liberated as French women. For instance, in Poland, women were expected to spend hours cleaning and cooking for guests but, in France, they could simply serve store-bought pizza. In Poland, it was unthinkable to go out without makeup, while in France no one judged their appearance. In Poland, getting married and having children were societal expectations for every woman, but in France women had more freedom to pursue non-traditional paths. Most notably, while in France women were guaranteed a full range of reproductive rights, it seemed dangerous to live in Poland, where the lack of access to abortion was leading to women's deaths. Some interlocutors, particularly those who had lived in France for decades and observed Polish politics from afar, even expressed the belief that Poland had never changed before and would never be able to in the future.

Through such descriptions, my interlocutors conveyed that they no longer felt that they belonged in Poland and increasingly felt more at home in France, primarily because they identified with what they understood to be French, universal or cosmopolitan values. While it is undeniable that Poland's right-wing politics has significantly curtailed women's rights, the discourse portraying Poland as backward on feminist issues has been heavily critiqued in recent scholarship (Ghodsee 2019; Ghodsee and Lišková 2016). The notion that everyone living in Poland is homogeneously and unchangingly hostile to women's rights is, in part, rooted in the constructions of Europeanness central to femonationalism (Farris 2017). This discourse of differentiation from the 'non-cosmopolitan Other' is also evident in classic femonationalist narratives regarding non-European migrants living in France (Bobako 2018; Farris 2017). Some of the female middle-class interlocutors who expressed egalitarian views on gender also lamented the presence of non-European immigrants in France, who were seen as inherently hostile to French civil rights. They described these immigrants as making streets dangerous for women at night and as threatening to impose their non-egalitarian cultures on French society.

Therefore, for those who identified with more cosmopolitan identity models, negotiations surrounding belonging were by no means less intense, although they referred to different political discourses and aimed at different belongings than in the case of more-conservative migrants. For some people, justifying their belonging in France required them to embrace a set of values that they found to

be normative in French society, including anti-immigrant discourses as well as some progressive ideas concerning women's rights, which conflicted with some individuals' more personal narratives.

Conclusions

The ethnographic material analysed in this article illustrates the complexity of negotiations around belonging and the politics of belonging among migrants. Polish Catholics in Île-de-France differ considerably not only in how they construct their own belonging to various collectivities but also in the choices they make about which of their multiple possible belongings are worth negotiating and justifying. In this respect, I contribute to the observations of Pawlak and Goździak (2020), who discuss the multiple belongings of Polish migrants in Norway. Moreover, the ethnographic material demonstrates how migrants' positions *vis-à-vis* these various belongings, as well as their involvement in broader politics of belonging, are shaped by their positions within intersecting categories such as class, religion, gender, ethnicity and race (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011a, 2011b).

It was particularly significant for working-class respondents, especially men, that they belonged to both the national community of their home country and the diasporic community of Polish people in France. This group tended to shape the boundaries of these communities around gendered norms, particularly those related to work ethics and sexual morality. These interlocutors often embraced discourses of belonging that aimed to police women's sexuality, aligning with the traditional model of the 'Mother Pole'. This approach emphasised a moral code that upheld conservative gender roles – particularly for women – and reflected a broader desire to protect and maintain cultural and national values in the diaspora.

Conservative discourses of belonging, which are particularly characteristic of the working classes (as well as the clergy and those closely aligned with the Polish Catholic Mission), tended to negotiate belonging in France as a collective rather than on an individual basis. It was Poland's national characteristics and its position in Europe, particularly among Catholic countries, that were seen as justifying the presence of Polish people in France. The deservingness of Polish people to live and work in the host society was also constructed and negotiated in opposition to non-white, non-European, primarily Muslim, Others, who were perceived as hostile to European values.

Despite the fact that middle-class liberal and feminist activists also construct their goals within civic society in relation to Polish nationality and statehood (as well as notions of Europeanness and shared democratic values), state, national and diasporic identities played a far less significant role in the discourses of belonging popular among middle-class interlocutors, particularly women. Their politics of belonging aimed at justifying their presence in France as deserving individuals rather than as Poles or members of the Polonia. They also rarely made direct claims to belong to the French national and civic community. Instead, respondents from this group tended to value cosmopolitan projects of belonging, distancing themselves from organised forms of the Polish community in Paris and emphasising the importance of cultural skills that enabled individuals to live anywhere they chose. These skills were associated with the ability to integrate and adhere to a set of liberal, supposedly universal, values – which often meant supporting the secular state, women's rights and the condemnation of certain forms of racism, though the latter did not exclude sharing femonationalist views and liberal Islamophobia. This model of belonging tended to align with some French nationalist discourses, which also invoked universal values, civil rights and abstract citizens.

Despite the visible conflict between these two kinds of discourses of belonging, they shared remarkable similarities. Firstly, it was striking that both conservative and liberal individuals justified

their presence in France by embracing anti-immigrant discourses encountered in the host society and constructing themselves in opposition to 'Others', who were described as not belonging. Secondly, interlocutors from both groups negotiated their belonging through referring themselves to broader, often global, discourses and debates – and used norms and values related to race, religion, gender and sexuality in order to demarcate the borders of collectivities and to construct national and cosmopolitan identities.

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Changing Gender Norms among Polish Migrants in the Nordic Countries: A Scoping Review Analysis

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The article synthesises and reviews existing research on Polish migrants in the Nordic countries with a specific focus on gender identities and gender roles. The authors argue that migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) fall between the cracks in the current research on gender equality and migration in the Nordic countries. Being the trademarks of the Nordics, the ideals of gender equality and sexual rights play an important role in the debate about migration. However, the dominant focus of the current research is non-Western racialised migrant groups. While migrants from Poland are privileged as white and European, they come from the context with less egalitarian gender norms and the weaker state policies supporting gender equality. The article aims to understand how Polish migrants navigate this difference in gender values and norms between home and host societies. The article concludes that structural factors are important for migrants' ability to learn and adopt the gender norms of the host society. In line with the translocational approach, migrants navigate between home and host societies, choosing appropriate gender roles accordingly. The social status, the degree of integration and the sense of (non)belonging also play a crucial role in migrants' openness to the norms of the host society. The article also suggests several directions for further research.

Keywords: Poland, Nordic countries, gender equality, sexuality, racialisation, intersectionality

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to synthesise and review existing research on Polish migrants in countries defined by the EU Commission as Nordic countries – Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland (Eurostat 2025a) – with a specific focus on the changes in gender roles in the process of transnational mobility. The article aims to answer three research questions:

- What knowledge already exists about gender roles and practices among Polish migrants in the Nordic countries?
- Which factors does the existing literature consider as the most decisive for transgression or reinforcement of gender norms in the situation of migration from Poland to the Nordic countries?
- What gaps exist in this research and how can this field be developed further?

Gender equality has become the trademark of the Nordic countries, incorporated as it is into their state identity and nation branding (Jezierska and Towns 2018; Larsen, Moss and Skjelsbaek 2021). It has also shaped the discussion about migration. Being imagined as exceptionally progressive in terms of gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, the Nordic countries promote these values as the core of their national identity, which migrants are expected to learn and respect (Edenborg 2020; Hvenegård-Lassen and Mauer 2012; Keskinen 2012). Research on femo- (Farris 2017) and homonationalism (Puar 2007) in the Nordic context (Akin and Svendsen 2017; Kehl 2024; Sager and Mulinari 2018) reveals how various political actors instrumentalise gender equality and sexual rights for constructing racialised and orientalist discourses about non-Western migrants. Another strand of research explores how various groups of non-Western migrants construct their gendered and sexualised identities in the context of such politics of othering (e.g. Akin 2017; Farahani 2017).

Migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including Poland, fall between the cracks in this research. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the EU enlargement to CEE in 2004 and 2007 caused a wave of concern about mass migration from the former socialist countries in Europe (Zelano, Bucken-Knapp, Hinnfors and Spehar 2014). The Nordic countries have become one of the most desirable destinations for labour migration from CEE in the 2000s. According to estimations, 600,000 people from the CEE region, mainly from Lithuania and Poland, went as labour migrants to the Nordic countries between 2004 and 2011 and many of them settled in the host countries (Eldring and Friberg 2013: 12). Given Central and East Europeans' 'proximity to whiteness' (Zorko 2024), their status as EU citizens (in the case of nationals from the Baltic States, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) and their high level of involvement in the labour market in the Nordic countries (Eldring and Friberg 2013), the public and political concern about this migration has gradually dissipated, being replaced by a discourse about the 'refugee crisis' caused by mass migration from the Middle East and African countries in the 2010s.

Nonetheless, migration from Central and Eastern Europe, the region that is still ambivalently positioned as 'European internal Other' – being 'Europe' and 'non-Europe' at the same time (Dzenovska 2016) – represents an interesting case in terms of understanding how migration experience makes people reimagine and reconstruct their gendered identities and daily life practices. On the one hand, the gender regimes in postsocialist CEE still carry the legacy of the socialist gender equality project, with women's mass mobilisation into the labour force and state paternalism at its core (Gal and Kligman 2000). On the other hand, scholars have also observed the re-traditionalisation of gender relations in

CEE after the fall of the Iron Curtain (Steinbach and Maslauskaitė 2022). Moreover, since the 2010s, countries like Hungary and Poland have become the cradles of anti-gender politics and related policies propagating the heterosexual nuclear family and complementary gender roles as the national norm (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Kováts 2020). With this background, the article argues, moving from CEE to Nordic countries can provoke a shift in gender norms and practices among migrants.

Polish migrants, as the largest group of CEE migrants in the Nordic countries (Eurostat 2025b; OECD 2024) are selected as the case study for the understanding of cross-regional mobility between Central and Eastern Europe and the Nordic countries. The theoretical basis of the article is the translocational approach to migration (Anthias 2012). The methodology follows the scoping review approach. Scoping reviews map the available evidence and identify knowledge gaps, as will be observed in this study. This approach also allows themes to be explored that are yet to be researched (Munn, Peters, Stern, Tufanaru, McArthur and Aromataris 2018: 2). The article is structured as follows. In the first section, the chosen theoretical approach to gender and migration is discussed. The methodology and the research stages are then presented, before the findings provide answers to the posed research questions and suggest directions for further research.

Gender and migration: The translocational approach

The article builds on Floya Anthias' (2012) translocational frame in migration research. This frame problematises 'the idea of people emanating from discrete national or indeed ethnic origins… as all people, whatever the legal/national borders, inhabit transnational spaces in the modern world' (Anthias 2012: 103). The translocational approach allows us to consider the migrants from Poland as representatives of a broader migration wave from CEE, the region with a particular history, including that of gender relations. The translocational frame does not deny the importance of the national but it attends to the multi-layeredness of migrant experiences recognising 'interconnectedness of different identities and hierarchical structures relating to gender, ethnicity, "race", class, and other social divisions at local, national, transnational and global levels' (Anthias 2012: 102). In the translocational approach, 'space' is understood as both physical and social and mobility as a movement between physical places but also across social hierarchies and identities.

While the translocational approach is intersectional, gender is its central category (Anthias 2012). Traditionally, research on migration assigned a passive role to women. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was common to use the phrase 'migrants and their families', meaning migrating men with their wives and children – and 'men were the prototype migrants' (Anthias 2012: 105; see also Amelina and Lutz 2018: 13). The narrative of women's presence was mainly attributed to studies on family (Herzberg 2015: 176–177). However, by the 1980s, this pattern had already begun shifting when migration scholarship started recognising women as autonomous migrating subjects and analysing women's experience of migration within a system of gender relations (Morokvašić 1984; Nawyn 2010). Since then, gender has become an established analytical lens in migration research (Kofman and Raghuram 2022; Morokvašić 1984), covering a range of topics from the feminisation of transnational migration and the gendered division of productive and reproductive migration labour (e.g. Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Parreñas 2001, 2005) to the influence of migration experiences on intimate relations, sexuality and renegotiations of feminine and masculine norms (e.g. Christou 2016; Dávalos 2020; Luibhéid 2025; Parreñas 2005; Wojnicka, Priori, Mellström and Henriksson 2025).

One important question streaming through the gender and migration literature focuses on how 'gender relations shift as a consequence of migration and settlement' and how gendered practices are

maintained or renegotiated in the process of migration (Nawyn 2010: 751). Understanding gender power relations as fluid and negotiable under the influence of changing socio-political circumstances challenges *both* the assumption that migrants stick to their gendered preferences even upon arrival in the new destination *and* the expectation that they can just learn anew gender norms in the new cultural circumstances. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas' (2001, 2005) pioneering research on the subject formation of Filipino migrants shows that the constitution of gender among transnational migrants happens 'in-between' multiple physical and social spaces – at the intersection of national cultures, public and private expectations on normative gender behaviour and individual agency. Transnational migration can simultaneously transgress and reinforce gender relations and gender norms (Morokvašić 2014; Parreñas 2005).

The gender analysis of migration examines 'how gendered institutions and gender relations are reconstituted and transformed following migration through interactions of micro- and macro-level processes' (Nawyn 2010: 750). According to Amelina and Lutz (2018: 20), the gender analysis of migration includes three dimensions: 1) an analysis of feminised and masculinised occupational fields; 2) the distribution of domestic and care responsibilities among migrants; and 3) the changes in welfare regimes in host and home countries. In line with the results of our research, we unite these three dimensions into one theme – namely, structural factors influencing the difference in migration experience along the gender line. In our review we focus on how gendered structures influence gender norms, roles and identities among migrants. The Nordic gender value system acts in this research as a point of departure to understand how gender norms are negotiated depending on the migrants' experience of structural opportunities and emancipation. This is relevant since gendered sectoral and hierarchical segregation often divides people or groups into different ranks within a system, where higher ranks experience more privilege. As an example, when looking strictly from a gender perspective, women tend to be over-represented in certain sectors – including the public sector – and under-represented in male-dominated occupations such as construction or finance. In addition to under-representation, women are also often employed in non-managerial roles with lower salaries (Napierała and Wojtyńska 2017). As a result of this segregation, qualification patterns influence the gender composition among migrant inflows and how their integration with Nordic gender values are impacted on by occupational opportunities (2017). The conducted literature review is meant to analyse the existing literature on the underlying reasoning behind how migration and the discourse on gender roles are continuously shifting.

Gender as social differentiation 'involving (…) the organisation and reproduction of sexual difference' (Anthias 2012: 105) is more than the binary analysis of female and male experiences of migration. Along with other scholars of gender and migration (Anthias 2012; Amelina and Lutz 2018; Kofman and Raghuram 2022; Morokvašić 2014; Nawyn 2010; Parreñas 2001), we strive for the intersectional analysis of gendered migration which is attentive to the overlap between gender, ethnicity/race, class and sexuality. Here we attend to another prominent dimension of the translocational approach to migration – the intersectional analysis of belonging beyond the overemphasis on ethnic identities which migration studies used to be known for (Anthias 2012). Anthias (2012: 104) argues that the analytical primacy of ethnic identity in understanding migrants' experiences overshadows 'the crosscutting influence of other dimensions of their location, such as how ethnic categorisations, which produce the idea of ethnic groups, crosscut with gender, generation, class, political values, experience, opportunities and very importantly agency'. The differentiated social positions that migrants occupy in host and home countries impact on the ways in which national and ethnic boundaries of (non)belonging are produced and maintained. The intersectional translocational analysis reveals how migrants' embeddedness in multiple social milieus (home country or local community of origin, family, workspace, transnational

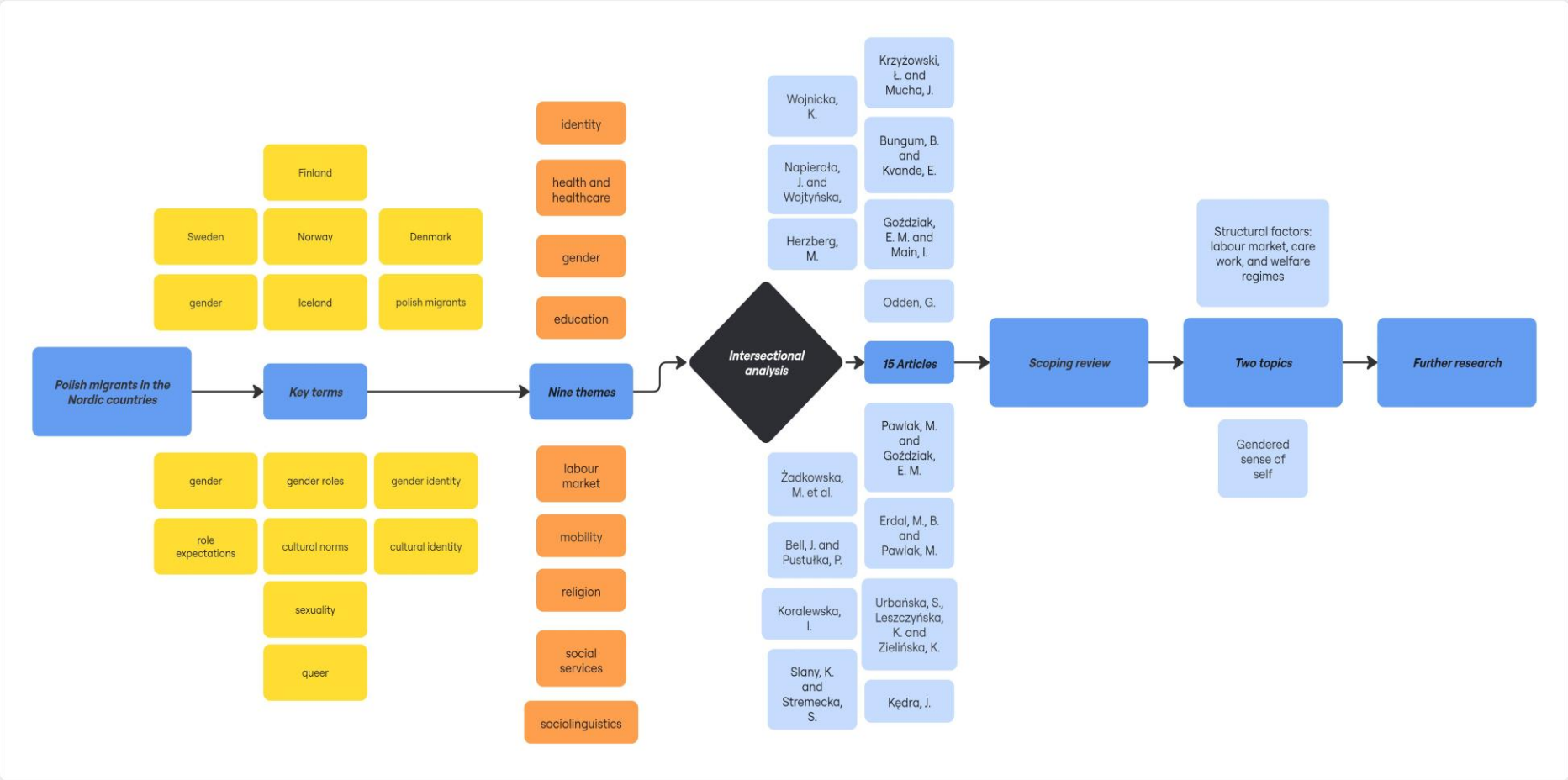
migratory networks) with different and, at times, conflicting normative systems and expectations contributes to a complex sense of gendered, ethnicised and classed self (Parreñas 2001, 2005). The translocational framework challenges the assimilation approach which expects migrants to passively adopt the normative order of the host country (Gordon 1964); however, it also undermines the culturalist stance suggesting that migrants from culturally different contexts can never approximate the norms of the new society. The translocational approach emphasises the agency of migrants in adapting, reinterpreting and reinscribing the norms in home and host societies depending on their position in multiple social hierarchies rather than simply on where they originate from (Anthias 2012; Morokvašić 2014).

Methodology

This study employs a scoping review approach, understood as a systematic and structured form of literature review. Given the purpose of this study – to map the available knowledge and identify research gaps – the scoping review provides a framework to constructively examine existing research. Following Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) definition, a scoping review is undertaken for four main reasons: a) to examine the broader nature of research activity; b) to determine whether a full systematic review might be of value; c) to summarise research findings; d) to draw conclusions from existing literature and identify possible research gaps (Arksey and O'Malley 2005: 21). For this particular study on gender and migration among Polish migrants in the Nordic countries, the scoping review was used to categorise the available evidence, with the emphasis on areas not reviewed comprehensively before. This approach allowed us to identify recurring themes and trends across studies.

The scoping review for this article was conducted in the following steps. Initially, a preliminary article search was conducted in two languages – Polish and English. The databases used for this process included Springer Open, Political Geography (Elsevier), Google Scholar, Centre of Migration Research and the library database of Gothenburg University. Database searches were performed in both languages. The key terms employed were: 'gender', 'religion', 'Polish migrants', 'Sweden', 'Norway', "Denmark", 'Finland', 'Iceland', 'gender roles', 'gender identity', 'role expectations', 'cultural norms', 'cultural identity', 'sexuality' and 'queer'. The data search according to the employed key terms has shown that most research tends to adopt a binary perspective. Sexuality or queerness as concepts are rarely used as an analytical lens, meaning that most studies focus on how context and circumstances impact on the understanding of gender roles rather than how sexuality would shift the discourse on Polish migration in the Nordic countries. The choice of religion as a key term is due to statistics that indicate that Poland is one of the most religious countries in CEE, with the highest percentage of religiosity (Evans and Baronavski 2018). Given the religious influence, particularly the role of the church, it is likely to impact on Polish migrants' experience of sexuality and family dynamics. Through combining the employed key terms, databases revealed relevant articles that relate to the purpose of this study – namely, to understand the changing gender norms among Polish migrants in the Nordic countries. The scope includes both single-country articles and comparative articles in which a Nordic country is one of the national cases. To understand the more recent experiences of Polish migrants, the articles published between 2015 and 2022 are chosen for the analysis. Moreover, this study attends to experiences of migrants who reside in the Nordic countries long term.

Figure 1. The scoping review proces



In the initial search, 198 articles were found. They were then screened through abstracts and conclusions. The screening allowed researchers to exclude from the database articles which did not explicitly address questions of gender identity and gender norms and to preliminarily divide all articles into several research topics. To triangulate this division, a word analysis using the *ATLAS.ti* software was conducted. As a result, all articles were divided into 9 general topics – education, gender, health and healthcare, identity, labour market, mobility, religion, social services and sociolinguistics. Then one of the co-authors (Dominique Keizer) went through articles in each topic and identified their main research focus. A visual mind map with the main ideas and concepts was created to analyse the connections between articles. Through this, 15 articles explicitly addressing the intersection between gender and other categories of differentiation were selected for closer analysis. The theoretically informed analysis of selected articles is structured around 2 main topics: 1) the structural conditions enabling or preventing the transgression of gender norms in the context of migration; and 2) the role of migrants' sense of self and (non)belonging in reconsidering the existing gender norms. Figure 1 illustrates the analytical process undertaken to conduct the scoping review.

Findings

In this section we present the findings from the scoping review based on the close reading of 15 selected articles. In accordance with the theoretical approach to gender and migration presented above, we divide this section into 3 parts. The first part contains the analysis of how structural factors – the gender segregation of the labour market, the division between productive labour and care work and the difference in welfare regimes between Poland and the Nordic countries – influence the process of reimagining gender norms and gender roles among Polish migrants in the Nordic countries. The second part covers how migrants' sense of (non)belonging to home and host societies is constructed along gender lines. In the third part we attend to the gaps in the current research and suggest themes for further inquiry.

Structural challenges and gender norms: labour market, care work and welfare regimes

Labour mobility for improved working conditions or higher incomes is a prominent reason why Polish migrants move to the Nordic countries. Gender and the experience of employment play an important role in how and whether gender roles are being questioned. Magdalena Herzberg conducted several interviews with Polish women living in Norway. Her research shows that migration leads to several changes in how one sees oneself and one's relationships with others. Due to migrating, the lifestyle tends to change, leading women to question how society works and also the different standards of femininity (Herzberg 2015). In particular, facing more emancipatory standards can lead to redefining culturally appropriate gender norms when migrant women start reshaping their needs and ways of thinking on gender roles. Yet potentially emancipatory changes depend on structural opportunities (Herzberg 2015). For instance, in a context of better career opportunities, Polish women may question traditional expectations of domesticity and motherhood by looking for growth within professional spheres. Also, exposure to a more gender-equal society encourages the advocation for shared domestic responsibilities. The same applies to men who, with the Nordic policies such as inclusive parental leave, become differently engaged in fatherhood and have the opportunity to question traditional roles of fathers in child-rearing (Bungum and Kvande 2022). At the same time, if career opportunities for

women are hindered due to the gendered sectoral segregation, the male privilege tends to be maintained, creating a barrier to approximate the gender norms of the Nordic countries.

The labour market is an important resource for integration and exposure to different gender norms in the new society. However, Polish migrants who experience limited structural opportunities, such as precarious working arrangements in the host country, are hindered from successful integration. Elżbieta M. Goździak and Izabella Main have researched the working arrangements of Polish female nurses in Norway. Their research suggests that, even though the nurses enjoyed more financial prosperity than in their country of origin, their precarious working environment included short-term assignments without the potential for upward mobility. The precarity arises from policies that channel the hiring of foreign-born nurses through private agencies without an oversight by the Norwegian Health Directorate. These private recruitment agencies operate without adherence to the World Health Organization's ethical recruitment guidelines (Goździak and Main 2022: 248). Short-term assignments combined with the perceived or real reluctance of Norwegian nurses to form social connections with foreign-born nurses – like sharing casual conversations or organising trips – obstruct Polish nurses from feeling integrated into the team. As a result, the space to acquire knowledge about gender roles and patterns in the Norwegian society also shrinks (2022).

In the Nordic countries, the state policies encourage the inclusion of men in parental and domestic duties. As a result, countries like Norway ranked 2nd on the Global Gender Gap report (GGGR). In comparison, Poland ranked 51st on the GGGR (Żadkowska, Kosakowska-Berezecka, Szlendak and Besta 2022). European Union reports and existing research suggest that increased male participation in domestic and childcare responsibilities benefits women's career development and positively impacts on men's health. Żadkowska *et al.* (2022) offer a comparative analysis of values and practices among Polish couples living in Norway and those living in Poland. The authors' starting point is that gender relations in Poland are less egalitarian than in Norway due to the difference in state-driven family policies, something which the authors consider as a crucial factor in the establishment of egalitarian norms in European societies. Norway has a well-developed family policy promoting a family-friendly working life and equal parenting. There is a high rate of working women in Norway combined with men's substantial engagement in domestic work. The situation is different in Poland. Polish women also actively participate in the labour market due to the legacy of communist gender-equality policies. However, Polish men 'only assist women in childcare and household duties rather than take full responsibility in these areas' (Żadkowska *et al.* 2022: 405). The article analyses to which extent the relocation from Poland – a country with a lower level of gender equality – to Norway – a country with more egalitarian values and policies – incites Polish couples to rethink their domestic responsibilities and adopt more egalitarian practices. Importantly, people with higher education dominate in this research. The study concludes that Polish couples in Norway appreciate Norwegian welfare and accept the more egalitarian gender norms facilitated by Norwegian family policies. The study also convincingly shows that inclusion and acceptance by Norwegian society are essential conditions for Polish migrants to adopt the egalitarian practices and advocate them further within the Polish community (Żadkowska *et al.* 2022: 416).

Thus, structural factors play an important role in adopting the gender norms and values of the host society. Even in a situation of limited integration, Polish migrants appreciate the Nordic welfare system – including the availability of subsidised kindergartens, shared parental leave and other social benefits. This creates the possibility to start questioning the gender role structure from their country of origin, at least to some extent (Pawlak and Goździak 2020: 86). Yet favourable structural conditions are not sufficient to explain why some migrants are more prone to changing their gender values and practices

than others. Research on Polish migrants proves that integration – or the lack of it – and a sense of (non) belonging related to it is another important factor that can affect whether or not Polish migrants adopt the egalitarian values propagated in the Nordic countries. As Justyna Bell and Paula Pustułka (2017) suggest, Polish men rely on traditional gender roles and hypermasculinity to compensate for their lower social status as a foreigner and a sense of nonbelonging related to this. As Bell and Pustułka conclude, by strengthening the masculinity traits associated with the home country, Polish men choose to reproduce familiar contexts, in this case what is understood as Polishness.

(Non)belonging and gender norms

As mentioned above, integration is an important precondition for discussing socially structured gender roles. Without the sense of belonging, migrants tend to revert to culturally familiar patterns from the country of origin to reclaim their agency. In the case of Polish migrants, religion, in particular the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), plays an important role in how migrants maintain their sense of belonging to Polishness, including gender patterns. The RCC in Poland has prominently formed itself as being against gender equality, questioning it as foreign ideology and, instead, promoting traditional gender values (Urbańska, Leszczyńska and Zielińska 2023: 1327). As a result, the RCC in Poland remains homogenous and conservative. This is the case, in part, due to the country's lack of ethnic and religious diversity, which leads to a limited exposure to alternative viewpoints and cultural influences. In their research, Urbańska *et al*. (2023) provide insights into how men's feeling of exclusion in countries of migration tends to be compensated with increased power in the sacred places. Authors (*ibidem*: 1329–1330) employ the concept of 'compensatory patriarchy' referring to it as: '(…) an impulse to somehow balance the sense of migrants' deprivation of power in the secular world by exercising such power in the religious sphere'. The priest power in the transnational context is a form of bargaining with egalitarian elements in countries such as Sweden. The priest, also known as the 'brother guardian', portrays this contradictory paradigm. This specific priesthood is mainly practiced outside Poland by migrant Polish priests who are inclined to shift from the authoritarian and closed RCC towards a more inclusive and egalitarian community space. For Polish migrants, the church serves as a space for both religious expression and community-building, compensating, especially for men, for a sense of exclusion and nonbelonging in the post-migration environment (Urbańska *et al*. 2023: 1338). On the one hand, the 'brother guardian' form of priesthood reproduces inclusive relationships, particularly among male migrants who are integrated in religious power structures. However, it simultaneously maintains the hierarchical *status quo*. The 'brother guardian' embodies hybrid masculinity combining emotional openness and orientation towards community with the conservative understanding of gender roles. While women are actively participating in church activities, their access to leadership roles, such as the priesthood, remains contested (*ibidem*: 1338). This research is a relevant contribution to the understanding of how patriarchal power can also adapt to a more egalitarian context.

At the same time, migrants' exposure to more egalitarian gender norms may lead to a decrease in their religiosity due to several factors, such as integration in a more secular society, questioning the institution of the RCC or seeking another kind of spirituality that transcends the traditional understanding of religion. Some Polish migrants also consciously disassociate from the patriarchal culture that the RCC represents for them. The research by Koralewska (2016) is particularly interesting here. It explores the relationship between the process of religious emancipation and the perception of gender roles by Polish women who emigrated to Iceland (Koralewska 2016: 23). The findings show that migration to Iceland encourages Polish women to realise that it is possible to bypass the institution of

the RCC in the experience of their own religiosity. They also start reflecting on the roles of women and men in society. Rejecting religious institutions during the migratory process plays an important role in how gender roles are negotiated. The construction of the world and value systems are then not institutionally established but based on individually negotiated spirituality. Just like religiosity, the perception of social roles is a subject of reflection and negotiation. The respondents in Koralewska's study negotiate their roles as women and the roles of religious people and thus facilitate the process of cultural adaptation, the necessity of which was, in turn, the impulse to start negotiations (Koralewska 2016: 31).

The research also suggests that migrants' agency in renegotiating gender norms and rethinking gender expectations established in their home country is tied to their social status. In the case of religious practices, as the number of studies suggests (Bell and Pustułka 2017; Erdal and Pawlak 2018), migrants who experience a decrease in their social status due to migration tend to reproduce familiar contexts from their country of origin in a bid to regain agency. This can increase religiosity among migrants, who consider the church as a space of community-building and inclusion (Koralewska 2016). In that case, as Mălina Voicu (2019) has demonstrated, many individuals often 'do gender' in order to 'do religion'. Traditional gender roles become a way of internalising religious belonging. Within Catholicism this might be visible through underlining the importance of maternal caregiving (Voicu 2019). The 'brother guardian' creates the sense of emotional availability and a form of family outside the home country (Urbańska *et al.* 2023). This experience remains attractive also for women who, in spite of the hierarchical and patriarchal forms of power in the church, may return to familiar institutionalised religiosity due to structural exclusion (Koralewska 2016; Voicu 2019). The tension between the Catholic-influenced traditional roles and the Nordic gender-equal norms has led to welfare debates in topics such as integration or childcare practices (Voicu 2019). The report by PRIO Oslo, *Trust across Borders: A Review of the Literature on Trust, Migration and Child Welfare Services*, by Korzeniewska *et al.* (2019) shows how trust is a key factor in how migrant families decide to interact with the authorities and child welfare services. The beforementioned sense of nonbelonging quite often stems from power imbalances between migrant families and institutions. Mistrust deepens when families feel judged or not heard, leading Polish families to reorient themselves to religious traditions that offer understanding. This cycle reinforces conventional gender roles which continue to impede integration (Korzeniewska *et al.* 2019).

However, in line with the translocational approach, migrants often form transnational belongings – they may simultaneously maintain connections with multiple locations and contexts, choosing appropriate gender roles accordingly (Anthias 2012; Parreñas 2001, 2005). In the process of adjusting to the host country, migrants negotiate their understanding of gender identity between the familiar home-country context and the unfamiliar host-country context (Erdal and Pawlak 2018). Research by Gunhild Odden (2016) suggests that Polish women tend to negotiate 3 social roles, namely as migrants, mothers and employees. As parents in the Nordic context, Polish women are exposed to a more egalitarian understanding of parenthood established in the Nordic countries. At the same time, migrant women often take more responsibility for maintaining the family's cultural connection to the home country through supervising the linguistic development of their children and maintaining contacts with family back in Poland (Odden 2016). Joanna Kędra's (2021) research shows that the feeling of obligation to family communication and support stems from the cultural idea of the '*Matka Polka*' (Mother Pole). This concept portrays a self-sacrificing woman who prioritises the family and the house, embodying Polishness even in challenging circumstances (Kędra 2021). '*Matka Polka*' in migration – the Migrant Mother – '(…) brings together the traditional characteristic of a Polish woman – resourcefulness, caring,

dedication (…) – with entrepreneurship, bravery, and ingeniousness abroad' (Slany and Strzemecka 2015: 170).

Besides parenthood, Polish women remain integrated in the gendered structure of the home society through their responsibility for elderly parents who remained in Poland. The intergenerational care of daughters for parents is characteristic of the Polish family contract (Krzyżowski and Mucha 2014: 33–34), therefore Polish women are expected to make additional efforts to guarantee the financial and social security of their elderly parents. Their financial remittances compensate for the lack of direct help in the household. The male members of the family who do not migrate rarely take up the obligations performed by women. In a situation where a daughter works abroad, it is instead another woman – such as a daughter-in-law – who provides the necessary personal care to ageing relatives. According to the same research, female Polish migrants support their parents financially more often than do their male counterparts. Yet greater financial responsibility for the extended family at home does not give women more power; rather, this transnational family constellation strengthens traditional gender roles (Krzyżowski and Mucha 2014: 28), as migration research in other contexts also shows (Parreñas 2005).

Further research

In line with the translocational approach, current research on Polish migrants in the Nordic countries focuses on the complexity of positionalities of migrants, leading to a gendered difference in their experience of adapting to the new social context – including new gender patterns. While this research is intersectional, it mostly highlights the hierarchies along the lines of nationality, gender and social status omitting aspects of sexuality and gender identity. The binary understanding of gender as a social division between men and women dominates this research field. Therefore, further research about Polish and, more broadly, CEE migrants in the Nordic countries needs to include sexuality and gender identities as an important category of analysis, given the increased level of politically motivated homo- and transphobia in the region related to the anti-gender mobilisation of the 2010s. As research about Polish queer migrants in London (Mole 2024) suggests, LGBTQI+ people from Poland move to countries like the UK in pursuit of what they imagine as 'a greater freedom to perform their sexuality in line with their own desires'. Since the Nordic countries have long promoted themselves as particularly tolerant in terms of sexual rights, it would be interesting to research whether this makes them a popular destination for queer migration from CEE countries and to what extent the idealised image of the Nordic countries is attainable through the lived experiences of CEE migrants (Dima and Dumitriu 2023). Sexuality as an analytical category may also shed different light on the process of constructing belonging. In the context where, in particular, Polishness is linked to heteronormativity and traditional gender roles, the ways of maintaining connection with the home nation for queer migrants may differ from those on which heterosexual migrants rely.

Another growing field of research on CEE migration to Western and Northern Europe is that concerning racialisation and whiteness (Krivonos 2023; Lapiņa and Vertelytė 2020; Loftsdóttir 2017; Parutis 2011). While the role of gender in reproducing whiteness among CEE migrants is less pronounced, there exist some important studies – such as Lapina's (2020) autoethnographic research on the sexualised perception of East European women in Denmark or Krivonos and Diatlova's (2020) article on the construction of whiteness by Russian-speaking women in Finland. A study by Wojnicka (2023) covers the intersection between masculinity and whiteness. According to Wojnicka's study, Polish migrant men in Sweden benefit from the privilege associated with their whiteness and Europeanness, which allows them to uphold traditional, patriarchal forms of masculinity (Wojnicka

2023). Their masculine status remains intact because they are not racialised in the same way as non-white, non-European migrants (Wojnicka 2023: 166). At the same time, their whiteness as East Europeans is ambivalent and their status in relation to local men is lower within the racialised hierarchies of Western or Nordic European societies. This is foremost manifested through the difficulties which these men encounter in creating intimate relations in the new country. Further research could investigate, among other things, how the experience of the racialisation of CEE migrants varies along gender lines.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore what strategies CEE migrants use to approximate whiteness and what role narratives of gender equality and sexual rights play in this process. For example, Krivonos and Diatlova (2020) explore how Russian-speaking women in Finland 'redo' their femininity and sexuality in order to pass as white when they discover that East European women in the Nordic countries are perceived as excessively feminine and sexualised and, consequently, 'not emancipated enough and hence not quite white' (Krivonos and Diatlova: 116). In turn, Wojnicka (2020: 54) argues that the debate about masculinity and migration in Western Europe is based on 'the unspoken assumption that white, European, Christian/non-religious men are more progressive than Muslim, non-white men'. However, given the rise of anti-gender sentiments and state homophobia in CEE countries (Graff 2010; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Hanley 2017), this assumption needs to be scrutinised. Previous research on Polish migrant men suggests that they are often more racist and homophobic than migrant women (see, e.g. Gawlewicz 2016, cited in Wojnicka 2020), although such attitudes prevail among older-generation migrants (Wojnicka 2020). Simultaneously, the appeal to gender equality is an important strategy for Polish migrant men who wish to distinguish themselves from 'Muslims', as studies in the German context show (Wojnicka and Nowicka 2022). By depicting Muslim men as those who 'do not accept equality of women and men, and treat women in a disrespectful way' (Wojnicka and Nowicka 2022: 241), Polish migrant men draw a civilisation line between themselves and non-European others, (re)claiming their Europeanness and whiteness.

Finally, it is also little known what political and cultural remittances Polish migrants contribute to their home country. Scholars of migration define remittances as 'the act of transferring political, [social and cultural] principles, vocabulary and practices between two or more places, which migrants and their descendants share a connection with' (Krawatzek and Muller-Funk 2020: 1004). An important line of inquiry would be to study whether Polish and other CEE migrants communicate new gender values and norms back home through their social networks or upon their remigration. Given the fact that Poland itself is increasingly becoming the receiving destination for migrants from non-EU Eastern European countries (mainly, Belarus and Ukraine) (Andrejuk 2018; Homel 2022), the Polish case is instrumental for studies of the transnational circulation of gender norms and values within and beyond CEE. The migration from Belarus and Ukraine to Poland is significantly feminised (Homel 2022). This trend has been intensified since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Switzer 2025). Research suggests that Ukrainian women in Poland experience economic marginalisation emerging at the intersection of age, ethnicity, gender and migration status (Andrejuk 2018). As in the case of Lapina's (2020) and Krivonos' and Diatlova's (2020) research about the perception of East European women in the Nordic countries, Ukrainian women in Poland are also often sexualised (Andrejuk 2018). However, despite the cultural proximity between Ukraine and Poland, Ukrainian women perceive their migration experience to Poland as emancipatory because they encounter less sexism in the Polish labour market (Andrejuk 2018: 36). At the same time, this emancipation is 'not quite' complete (Kaminska 2025) since many Ukrainian women, especially those who came to Poland due to forcible displacement in 2022, find

themselves in the context of significantly worsened sexual and reproductive rights in comparison to their home country (Switzer 2025).

Conclusion

This scoping review analysis intended to answer the following research questions: a) What knowledge already exists about gender identities and gender roles among Polish migrants in the Nordic countries?; b) Which factors does the existing literature consider as the most decisive for the transgression or reinforcement of gender norms in the situation of migration from Poland to the Nordic countries?; c) What gaps are identified in the existing research and how can this field be developed further?

Starting with the first research question, we conclude that the research on the Polish migrants in the Nordic countries is attentive to the issues of gender identity and gender norms. However, the binary (women and men) and heteronormative understanding of gender identities and gender practices prevail in existing studies. Research on gender norms covers the large range of topics identified in the scoping review such as education, gender, health and healthcare, identity, labour market, mobility, religion, social services and sociolinguistics. The existing research is intersectional, with the focus on gender, nationality, class and professional belonging.

In line with the prevalent theoretical approach to gender and migration, the reviewed literature acknowledges the importance of analysing macro- and micro-level processes for the understanding of how gendered relations and norms are transgressed or reinforced in the process of transnational migration (Morokvašić 2014; Nawyn 2010). The existing research shows that structural factors play a significant role in whether and how migrants start questioning gender regimes and roles inherited from their home countries. The gender segregation of the labour market – when migrant women are employed in lower-paid sectors with limited leadership opportunities and when men dominate higher-paying fields like construction, thus upholding their breadwinner status – reinforces traditional gender norms. Nordic welfare policies, such as shared parental leave and subsidised childcare, may encourage more egalitarian domestic roles and enhance women's career opportunities. However, limited labour options for migrants segregating them in precarious and short-term jobs is a perceptible hindrance for meaningful engagement with the gender norms of the host society.

On the micro level, the sense of belonging (or the lack of it) is another important factor influencing Polish migrants' openness to rethinking gender identities and gender roles. Migrants with a greater feeling of nonbelonging in the host society tend to resort to familiar gender patterns which often imply a more traditional division of gender roles. Simultaneously, the existing research confirms what the translocational frame in migration studies argues for – migrants tend to belong to multiple locations geographically, culturally and socially. This means that migration and adjustment to a new context do not automatically entail migration into a new gendered order. Rather, as this review shows, migrants navigate between gender structures in the host society and the society back home.

The scoping review analysis has distinguished directions for further research. As we mentioned before, most studies focus on binary gender roles and heterosexual families without attending to sexuality and gender identity. Further research could focus on the experiences of LGBTQI+ Polish migrants in the Nordic countries. Another direction is related to the racialisation and whiteness of CEE migrants in the Nordic countries and how these processes intersect with gender and class. Related to this is research on how CEE migrants use the Nordic ideas of gender equality and sexual rights to (re)claim their whiteness *vis-à-vis* non-European migrants, whom the anti-migration discourse often portrays as homophobic and patriarchal. Finally, more research on the social and cultural remittances

of CEE migrants is required. Currently, little is known about whether migration into more egalitarian gender orders facilitates the process of communicating values of gender equality and sexual rights back home. Since Poland emerges as the host destination for migrants from other, non-EU, Eastern European countries, it becomes an important case study for research on migration and the transnational circulation of gender norms.

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Authorship

Dominique Keizer developed and implemented the methodology of this study; she also wrote the first draft of research results. Olga Sasunkevich provided the contextualisation of this research by writing an introduction and a theoretical section. She revised the research results to ensure the coherence between theory and analysis in the article and developed the section Further research.

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Values and Beliefs of Young Georgian Migrants in Germany: Do These Change and How?

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This paper explores the values and beliefs of young Georgian migrants (aged 18 to 29) who emigrated from Georgia to Berlin. Based on 30 qualitative in-depth interviews, the study examines how migration experiences have influenced and potentially reshaped the values and beliefs of young Georgians. Reflecting on their lives and experiences post-migration and the differences they observed between living in Georgia and living in Germany, the participants revealed which values are important to them and which have changed following migration. Based on the inductive thematic coding of qualitative interviews using NVivo software, the study findings suggest that young Georgian migrants tend to adopt more individualistic values associated with personal independence and space, freedom, self-exploration and a deeper understanding of their identities and preferences. Empathy, tolerance towards diverse groups and openness to new opportunities and ideas also emerged as significant values. The findings raise an important question: Did young migrants already possess these individualistic values before migrating, which then flourished in a more supportive environment, or are we witnessing a transformation from a more collectivistic value system to a relatively individualistic one, as reported by the study participants?

Keywords: youth values, value change, value disclosure, young migrants, Georgian migrants

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Introduction

This paper explores the values of young Georgian migrants aged 18 to 29 who left Georgia and have been living in Berlin, Germany, for more than six months. The findings presented here are part of a larger study that aimed to explore the values and beliefs of young Georgian migrants. Based on 30 qualitative face-to-face in-depth interviews conducted with young respondents in Berlin, the study covers a number of topics, asking participants to reflect on their values in relation to family, parenting, marriage and intimate relations, friendships and interpersonal relations, professional life and work, education, leisure, spirituality, self-care and citizenship. This paper presents part of this broader study and addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the values and beliefs of young Georgians who emigrated from Georgia to Berlin?

RQ2. How, if at all, does the experience of migration influence and change the values and beliefs of young Georgians?

To answer these questions, the study focuses on data from qualitative interviews in which participants discussed their lives in Berlin, what they like and dislike there, the differences they observe between living in Georgia and Germany and the changes they experience in their attitudes, values and beliefs. In addition, the paper raises the question of whether migration leads to value change or, rather, reveals previously held or suppressed values. By moving beyond the discussion on change in values or adaptation to new values, the paper develops the concept of 'value disclosure' as opposed to 'value transformation'. It suggests that moving abroad might give people the freedom to express beliefs which they had to suppress in their home country, rather than simply triggering the passive adoption of new host-country values. This distinction is important for understanding whether migration acts as a driver of value transformation or as a context that enables the expression of latent value orientations. Overall, this study contributes to broader debates on value change and individualisation among young migrants from post-socialist societies.

In order to conceptualise values, the study uses a simple definition, portraying values as 'the beliefs people have, especially about what is right and wrong and what is most important in life, that control their behaviour'[1] or, more broadly, as beliefs, norms, principles or standards of behaviour concerning what individuals consider most important in life.

The interviews were conducted during the summer of 2023, the year when the number of Georgian citizens who left Georgia was the highest (163,480) compared to previous years (100,000 or less), according to the National Statistics Office of Georgia (GeoStat). Young people aged 15–29 constituted 28 per cent of the total number of emigrants (GeoStat 2024). Given the high number of young Georgians leaving the country, there is a gap in the social sciences concerning the values, attitudes and perceptions of young Georgians living abroad. This paper contributes to filling this gap by presenting qualitative findings based on interviews with young migrants who talk about their experiences and impressions and are self-assessing the changes in their value orientations.

The paper starts with the theoretical background, followed by a detailed description of the methodology and presentation of the findings, describing the experiences and assessments of young migrants in Berlin. It concludes with a discussion in which the results are interpreted in relation to the existing literature and theoretical perspectives.

Theoretical background

The main and most recent positions and theoretical approaches in the field of value changes following migration have developed significantly in recent decades, integrating insights from sociology, psychology, anthropology and economics. These newer approaches tend to challenge classic assimilation theory (Gordon 1964), which posits that migrants gradually forget about the values and norms of their home culture and become more assimilated into the host culture. This approach, with its seven stages of assimilation (cultural/acculturation, structural, marital, identificational, attitude receptional, behaviour receptional and civic assimilation) has been criticised for being too linear and assuming that all immigrant groups follow the same path. Classic assimilation theory, which talks about the disappearance of ethnic differences and immigrants' full integration into the mainstream society, has also been criticised for ignoring racial and economic barriers, as well as migrants' links with home cultures, which often prevent their full assimilation. While traditional classic assimilation theory provides a useful historical benchmark for understanding structural integration, in the context of Georgian youth in Germany this theory can be criticised for its normative bias. It assumes a 'disappearance of ethnic differences' that rarely occurs in the modern era of hyper-connectivity. For young Georgians, migration can rarely be a 'one-way street' of forgetting; rather, it is a negotiation between old and new 'homes'.

In contrast, segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993) presents a more complex model, stating that the process of integration has different paths, which could result in (1) the successful integration of migrants into the host society (so-called upward assimilation, where an immigrant integrates into the white middle class and adopts its values), (2) integration into low-income groups (so-called downward assimilation with limited economic opportunities) and (3) partially keeping the traditional values while also adapting to the values of the host culture (so-called selective acculturation). However, here the focus is mostly on second-generation immigrants and their economic assimilation, which is not directly relevant for the Georgian–German migration corridor. Many young Georgians in Germany arrive as educational migrants (students or *au pairs*) rather than as permanent settlers (Bogishvili 2025). Thus, the 'segments' they navigate are not just economic but are also defined by legal status and the 'temporariness' of their residence permits.

A more relevant framework for the given study could be transnationalism, which views migration as a two-way process whereby migrants bond with the host society but, at the same time, maintain strong ties with their home society. The authors of this theory, Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton (1992: 19), argue that 'this approach will enable us to observe the migrant experience in process, analyse its origins, monitor changes within it, and see how it affects both country of origin and countries of residence'. Transnationalism claims that migrants have dual belongings and that they affiliate with the home as well as the host cultures and values, living life between two worlds. Many have economic ties with their home societies, sending remittances and influencing economic development in this manner. Others engage in the political and social lives of home cultures. For young Georgians, this is not just about economic remittances but about 'social remittances' (Levitt 1998) – the transfer of ideas, values, and social norms back to Georgia. Bogishvili's (2025) study with Georgian migrants in Germany and their family members left in Georgia shows how migration changes the values and practices of migrants in the destination country and how these changes are transferred to the country of origin to generate new cultural practices. Young Georgian migrants often live 'between two worlds', using technology to remain active in Georgian civil society and political life while navigating German social structures (Khoshtaria 2023). This 'dual belonging' makes cultural frame switching (CFS) (Hong, Morris, Chiu and Benet-

Martínez 2000) particularly relevant, as migrants adjust their behaviour and values depending on whether they are in a German or a Georgian cultural environment.

Among the psychological approaches, John W. Berry's (1997) acculturation theory remains the most operative for this study, though it requires critical updating. Berry's bidimensional acculturation framework brings forward an idea of hybrid identities, when migrants try to keep values from both their home and host cultures. This theory originally explored how migrants adjust to a new culture through different strategies that could result in integration, assimilation, separation or marginalisation, depending on how individuals and communities respond to cultural adaptation. 'Integration' balances keeping the home culture and participating in the host environment, 'assimilation' leans more towards prioritising the host culture and leaving the home culture behind, 'separation' leans more towards keeping the home culture and avoiding the host society, while 'marginalisation' rejects both cultures (Berry 1997). Berry's distinctions provide a useful way to categorise how young Georgians balance heritage and host values.

However, Berry's framework has been critiqued for presenting acculturation as a relatively fixed outcome. Expanding on this, Vladimer Lado Gamsakhurdia (2019) introduces the concept of proculturation, which emphasises that cultural adaptation is a dynamic and creative process. Rather than simply preserving or adopting cultures, migrants actively reconstruct their identities by combining and transforming elements from both contexts. This highlights that hybrid identities are continuously evolving through everyday experiences and social interactions.

Recent studies of Georgian migrants in Germany show that, for youth, integration is not a final state but a daily practice of navigation**.** Adaptation is influenced by demographic factors such as age and gender (Pirtskhalava 2026), where 'younger respondents often perceive migration as an opportunity and a space for personal growth' (p. 157). Other research on Georgian migrants in Germany suggests that value changes often involve a shift from collective, community-oriented norms toward more individualistic German values, including personal freedom, social justice and attitudes toward gender roles and LGBTQ+ rights (Bogishvili 2024).

Keeping these theories and studies in mind, this paper presents findings from a study in which young migrants talk about their observations and experiences, highlighting their self-perceptions on how their values changed after they migrated.

Methodology

In order to study the values and beliefs of young Georgian migrants, 30 qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with migrants aged 18 to 29 in Berlin. Berlin was selected as the research site because it is one of the main destinations for young Georgian migrants in Germany and provides a diverse social and cultural environment. During the interviews, respondents discussed their experiences, talked about their lives in the city, what they like and value there, the differences and similarities they observe compared to Georgia and whether (and how) they feel that their views, values and beliefs have changed after spending time in Germany. In contrast to quantitative surveys, which provide brief answers, qualitative interviews generate in-depth information and reveal 'an event or development that we weren't there to see' (Weiss 1995: 9). Therefore, qualitative in-depth interviewing was the most appropriate method for gaining detailed insights into migrants' experiences, their views and whether they observe any changes in their values and beliefs.

While there are different ways to measure values – and scholars such as Milton Rokeach (1973), Geert Hofstede (1984) and Shalom Schwartz (2003) have developed sophisticated tools to capture core

values – this study partially uses a slightly modified version of the Valued Living Questionnaire (VLQ) (Wilson and Groom 2002), which asks about values related to family, parenting, marriage and intimate relations, friendships and interpersonal relations, professional life and work, education, leisure, spirituality, self-care and citizenship. While the original VLQ measures the importance of these main values and evaluates the consistency between values and actions (Wilson, Sandoz, Kitchens and Roberts 2010), this study employs a modified approach in which participants were asked to assess the importance of each value, talk about their potential change in attitudes and discuss the differences observed between Georgia and Germany in relation to these values. Respondents were also asked to summarise their observations and reflect on which of their values, attitudes and beliefs had changed after migrating.

The 30 study participants were selected using the non-probability sampling technique known as the snowball method, in which 'the researcher collects data on the few members of the target population he or she can locate, then asks those individuals to provide the information needed to allocate other members of that population whom they happen to know' (Babbie 2008: 205). In addition, some participants were recruited through Georgian restaurants in Berlin where they worked. During sampling, in order to avoid a homogeneous sample, efforts were made to include respondents with diverse socio-demographic characteristics.

Of the 30 participants, 9 were male and 21 female. Respondents reported having moved to Berlin between 2015 and 2022 and, at the time of the interviews, all had lived in Berlin for more than nine months. In almost all cases, the respondents were not living with their parents, who remained in Georgia. Half of the participants were single at the time of the interview, 13 reported being in a relationship and two were married. For most participants, the primary reason for migration was education. Consequently, almost all had legal residence status, with many enrolled in BA (11) or MA (6) programmes; some had already obtained a degree and/or were working (9) and others were undertaking an '*Ausbildung*' (4), a German vocational training programme that combines practical work in a company with classroom instruction at a vocational school, leading to a recognised professional qualification. The average length of the interviews was 50 minutes, with the shortest being 28 and the longest 85 minutes. More-detailed demographic information about the respondents can be found in Appendix in Table A1.

It is important to note several sampling limitations. Women are over-represented in the sample, all participants are concentrated in a single city (Berlin) and the education-related migration pathways may indicate a potential class bias toward more highly educated and socio-economically advantaged young migrants. However, this does not undermine the value of the data, as qualitative research does not aim for statistical representativeness but, rather, for in-depth insights; the sample provides rich and meaningful perspectives on the experiences of this specific migrant group.

This study was conducted in accordance with recognised ethical standards. Prior to the interviews, all participants were provided with full information about the study and were asked to fully familiarise themselves with the information sheet and consent form. The information sheet contained detailed information about the purpose of the research project, its goals and funding – and about the respondent's confidentiality and rights to withdraw without consequences. All respondents provided verbal or written consent for the interviews to be audio-recorded. All interviews were conducted by the author in Georgian. These were then transcribed and anonymised, removing any information about the respondents that could potentially identify them. The audio files were stored on a password-protected computer and were deleted once the transcriptions were finalised.

The transcripts were coded using NVivo software, which is used for qualitative data analysis. When coding the data, an inductive method was used, focusing on the information collected during fieldwork,

rather than on theoretical paradigms. This made it possible to first look at the content and, at a later stage, to draw parallels with the theories or consult the literature (Charmaz 2006). The study followed an interpretivist qualitative research approach, aiming to understand how migrants themselves interpret and make sense of their values and experiences. Coding was conducted at two levels, where first the 'level 1' codes were generated based on respondents' statements and quotes reflecting attitudes, viewpoints or assessments. At the second stage, the 'level 1' codes were grouped into broader 'level 2' codes representing overarching themes. This paper primarily analyses two 'level 2' themes which relate to, firstly, what young people like and value in Berlin and, secondly, how respondents feel that they and their values changed after their migration.

Results and findings

In order to explore which values are important for young Georgian migrants and which have changed after migration, the study examined their narratives about life in Berlin. While talking about first impressions –everyday experiences, what they like and dislike in Berlin, the differences they observe between living in Georgia and Germany, the specific experiences they have with friends, family, at educational institutions or at work – they revealed the values which are important for them and which they observe to have transformed after migrating.

Values and beliefs that are important for young Georgian migrants in Berlin

The most important aspect that young Georgian migrants love about Berlin is the sense of being free and independent. Although the initial period of migration was challenging, many participants viewed these difficulties as opportunities for personal growth and self-development. As Respondent 14 (female, 27 years old) explained, 'Independence is the biggest reward you have here. Making decisions independently and then being responsible for those decisions'. Living without parental supervision is particularly valued, even by those who had previously lived independently in Georgia, because they report never having experienced the same degree of independence and freedom which they now enjoy in Berlin. Respondent 25 (female, 22) noted that, in Tbilisi, she was never alone, as family or friends were always around. After moving to Berlin, she was 'suddenly left alone, which was very hard', yet this enabled her to start thinking about things she had never thought about before, such as 'who I was and what I wanted'. Thus, solitude becomes not only a challenge but also a space for self-reflection.

At the same time, almost everyone emphasised that, in Berlin, they can be whoever they want without being constantly observed or judged by society. As Respondent 26 (female, 25) highlighted:

> *I like the fact that I am free and no one controls me. No one is watching me, neighbours won't discuss what I am wearing or what time I get home. In Georgia, neighbours, relatives, everyone interferes in your life and the first thing which I liked here was that feeling of freedom and the feeling that it is my decision and I am responsible for myself… and in Georgia I was so much dependent on others, I could not even go to the bank alone…*

In addition, the respondents enjoy the freedom of choice which they have. Even though not everything happening in Berlin is acceptable or valuable for them, they appreciate being able to choose between what they call 'good' or 'bad'. According to them, Berlin offers a wide range of possibilities: one can choose to go to bars, clubs or 'dark rooms' but, on the other hand, one can also attend lectures, go to

the cinema, museums, exhibitions, readings and live concerts and have a 'cultural life'. Many pointed out that Berlin offers a variety of social and cultural activities and that everyone can find something they enjoy. In contrast to Tbilisi, where the number of activities and places to go is limited, Berlin is described as an epicentre of new, diverse events:

> *What I like is that there is always a lot going on and you can be part of many cultural and social events, so you can never get bored. From Monday to Sunday, you can plan your week so that it is very diverse, meet many interesting people. You can see new exhibitions, museums, attend events and you are at the epicentre of everything* (Respondent 4, female, 27).

However, Berlin is not just a city where one has the freedom and possibility to do whatever one wants but is also a place where people can first find and then reveal themselves, their identity. Respondent 30 (male, 25) explained that only in Berlin did he realise 'what freedom really is', meaning that he could talk openly about who he is in reality and what he wants to do in life much more than in his own country.

Similarly, other respondents described Berlin as a place where one can get to know oneself better:

> *It's a very diverse place and you have the opportunity to express yourself… to show your interests and to get to know yourself better – with what kind of people you like to interact and what you like – and I love that about Berlin, that you always have the opportunity to do something new and, in doing something new, get to know yourself better* (Respondent 14, female, 27).

Furthermore, respondents noted that, in Berlin one can change one's identity whenever and as many times as one wants – and become whoever they want – as there are fewer or no limitations. Many stated that, after moving to Berlin, they changed their self-perception and lost certain 'complexes' and 'frames' that prevented them from becoming who they really are. This is not only true for sexual or other minorities – who are oppressed in Georgia – but also for individuals who felt rather 'tied up' and 'controlled' by their surrounding society in their country of origin.

Georgian society, including family members, is described as having certain expectations about what a person should do. For example, respondents noted that there is pressure to start university immediately after school and, later, to be successful, to achieve something in life. However, some participants questioned this expectation, saying that not everyone has to be special, not everyone has to achieve something but, rather, should be free to do what makes them happy:

> *You have pressure from the entire society that you have to be very successful. In Tbilisi, no one, not a single family, allows their child to live a normal life and have a normal job. Everyone has to be special, everyone has to be very successful and everyone has to be 'number one'. Not everyone can do that, right? But for some reason, society puts so much pressure on you that you have to shine, you have to do this and that – but maybe I don't want to shine and maybe I want to sit by myself and quietly do what I want* (Respondent 19, female, 24).

In other words, finding one's own path in life and getting to know oneself without being pressured by society is what makes young people feel happy in Berlin. Some noted that, without the pressure and expectations, they managed to grow personally and discover new passions.

Having seemingly *endless possibilities and opportunities* is another aspect which young people love and value in Berlin. Respondents mentioned that, regardless of age, a person can start things over, begin

a new study programme or hobby and that there are fewer or no limits on what one can do in life. In addition, they expressed the feeling that their efforts – whether in studying or working – are valued and appreciated.

In addition to the points stated above, when talking about the things they love about Berlin, many respondents mentioned the *multicultural environment of the city.* The idea and fact that people with different skin colours, orientations, opinions, tastes, styles of dressing and lifestyles can live together, coexist in harmony or sit together in a bar and enjoy life, gives the respondents a sense that they can be whomever they want without being criticised or rejected. Meeting people with different cultural backgrounds makes life more interesting. Respondent 9 (female, 27), spoke of enjoying the international environment:

> *I really like that I meet people with very different cultural backgrounds… In my class, I don't think there are any Germans but I really enjoy the international environment… I like that I find out different things after communicating with them, that they have completely different interests and that is good because, in Tbilisi, there is a closed circle, a little bubble, because the community where one is active is very small. Especially if you are interested in art, there is a bubble of 50 people whom you see at every exhibition opening – it's boring/tiring. And in Berlin, you see all kinds of people, with different interests.*

Respondents noted that, in contrast to Tbilisi, which they perceive as socially homogeneous and tightly connected and where everyone knows everyone, Berlin allows them to meet new people with completely different backgrounds and experiences. Interestingly, some stated that they feel more relaxed with strangers in Berlin than with close friends in Georgia, as there is less judgement and more openness towards different opinions.

Another interesting finding from the qualitative interviews which, according to some respondents, makes life more comfortable in Berlin, concerns attitudes toward physical appearance. In Berlin, they claim to have *no pressure to 'look good'* or '*fabulous*'. Participants noted that, in Georgia, much attention is paid to how a person dresses or what their hair or make-up looks like. People feel pressure to always 'stay in form' and to never go out unshaved or without looking 'tidy'. In contrast, in Berlin, people pay less attention to appearance and are often more 'natural'. In addition, according to respondents, in Georgia it is considered beautiful to be skinny and everyone is constantly encouraging each other and themselves to lose weight. Male respondents also noted that women as well as men take less care of themselves and their appearance in Europe:

> *In Tbilisi it was the biggest shame to have a sweat stain in the armpit and* [here] *they might know they have it and don't care… It has nothing to do with being unhygienic… Some girls also grow their hair* [in certain places]. *In Tbilisi, I would find it very weird but, here, it is OK, I mean who am I to judge?* (Respondent 2, male, 29).

This last quote illustrates that, while some participants initially found the differences between Georgia and Berlin unusual, over time many came to accept and even appreciate the more-relaxed norms. This shift reinforces the broader theme identified throughout the interviews: the value placed on freedom, autonomy and reduced social control.

How young migrants and their values changed after migration

The things that young Georgian migrants love in Berlin are closely linked with their standards, approaches, principles, beliefs and lifestyles – in other words, with the values that have changed or become more important after migration. The qualitative analysis shows that these are the most common aspects in which respondents say they changed.

- 'I became more independent and in control'

As already stated in the previous section, young migrants value the feeling of being independent in Berlin. Independence, in this case, mostly means being detached from family members, living independently and being able to take care of oneself. Respondent 29 (female, 28) described the 'greatest change' as independence, explaining that, in Georgia, 'your mother, father, grandmother and everyone else is taking care of you and does your chores'. She claimed that having the family as a 'shield' is great; however, she reported encountering a lot of obstacles after moving, as her family had helped out a lot before. In Berlin she was suddenly alone and had to find her own way, which was difficult but 'a very good experience'. She concluded that 'there is nothing more valuable than independence and the feeling of being proud and satisfied that you did something on your own, without anyone's help'. This proves that becoming independent is also linked with other changes which respondents see in themselves after migration, e.g., enjoying living and making decisions on their own.

Participants also reported that they 'became more organised, learned how to manage time and started planning ahead', in contrast to their previous life in Georgia, which they described as chaotic or organised by family members: As one participant noted: 'I discovered that, without planning, I have chaos and big discomfort. Now that I have everything in my calendar, I am calmer and no longer worry that I will be late and make others worry. These kinds of things make me happy' (Respondent 12, female, 26).

- 'I started to think things over'

During the interviews, some respondents noted that migration forced them to rethink many aspects of their lives. Many described this as a process whereby they 'zoomed-out' and looked at their lives from a different perspective. One participant explained that she 'started to think differently', contrasting this with what she perceived as a tendency in Georgia to 'go with the flow' without analysing daily events or updating one's opinions over time:

> *The worst thing is that, when people in Georgia reach a conclusion about something, about anything, they never update it. If, three years ago, I thought that this building is beautiful, it cannot be that I have the same attitude now, because I have grown in these three years and a lot has changed for me, right? But no one does this kind of update in Georgia* (Respondent 19, female, 24).

For this respondent, personal growth requires continuous reflection and revision of earlier conclusions. Others similarly described realising that they had previously been living on 'autopilot', doing many things automatically, without putting much thought into it. One respondent stated that, in Georgia, she used to get up, go to work and return home without questioning much but, following migration, she understood that she wanted to 'live consciously'. She began observing her feelings and asking herself

'Who am I without others? What do I really like?' (Respondent 25, female, 22). This kind of 'self-study' or 'self-exploration' is closely linked with the next aspect which changed for the migrants.

- 'I started to get to know myself better and to accept myself the way I am'

Another area of change relates to self-identification and self-knowledge. Young respondents noted that they became closer to themselves, partly because they spent more time alone. In this process, many realised that, in Georgia, society had largely defined who they were and what they liked. After migration, they began new lives as independent individuals and started to see themselves as different personalities. Respondents claimed that the opinions of others no longer have the same impact as before. Many emphasised that they became who they wanted to be and not what others expected of them: 'The others should not tell you who you are, it is you who should determine that' (Respondent 22, female, 20). This respondent also introduced an example of body image, claiming that, within a short period, her self-perception had shifted significantly in Berlin:

> [In Georgia] *they tell you how to be all the time… This is true even for body image. You have to lose weight. When I came back from Germany, I remember being very happy with myself, my weight and then they mentioned to me that it would be great if I lost 2, 3, 4 kilos…if they had told me the same thing one year earlier, I would have agreed. Maybe one year is not a big period of time but it made a huge difference* (Respondent 22, female, 20).

Other respondents also pointed out that, in Georgia, there is this approach whereby people 'have to' do certain things a certain way, which is directed by society. These can be small things – like getting good grades at school or eating or behaving in a certain way – or bigger life decisions, like attending university right after finishing school or getting married. One of the respondents mentioned that, after moving to Germany, her German friends told her '*Du musst nichts machen*' ('You do not have to do anything'), which prompted her to reconsider what she truly wanted rather than what society expected. As she explained, she now chooses to study and develop 'consciously', not because her family demands it:

> *There is nothing you must do. The most important thing is to do what you like and feel good about it. This is what this city taught me… In Georgia, I was saying that I will go to Germany, do my BA, then MA and then PhD, which was stemming from societal pressure, because a BA was not enough for them. Now it is me who wants the MA consciously and not because my Mum and others told me* (Respondent 20, female, 23).

In this regard, for young migrants Berlin became a place where they first started to realise – and then to accept – who they are, what they want, which interests they have, how they look, what they like and how they want to live. For at least some of the respondents, their self-perception and self-image changed noticeably. However, a few of the respondents noted that, when they return to Georgia, they temporarily become their 'old' selves again:

> *Every time I return to Tbilisi, I still become the same as I was before I left. I'm different when I'm here… I am much more confident and I also notice that I dress differently here and pay a lot of attention to look the way I want* (Respondent 8, female, 22).

This relates to the Cultural Frame Switching (CFS) (Hong *et al.* 2000) concept, which describes how bicultural or multicultural individuals shift between different cultural meaning systems depending on context. In addition, the young participants reported becoming less self-critical and demanding of themselves:

> *I started to appreciate little things more and stopped criticising myself. In Tbilisi, there was so much negativity, so much self-critique,* [questioning] *how could I not achieve this or that… What I enjoy here is that I do not have to act, I am what I am in reality* (Respondent 4, female, 27).

- 'I make more time to do the things I enjoy'

In the process of self-exploration, many respondents realised the importance of cherishing life and allocating time for activities they enjoy. Some pointed out that life can consist of more than studying, working or fulfilling social obligations. One participant explained that she is calmer and has more time outside of work, which led her to start a hobby – working with clay – something she described as 'unimaginable' after work in Tbilisi. She emphasised [the importance of] learning to take care of herself and make time for herself 'without a boyfriend or anyone else', concluding that these are the things that changed for her (Respondent 12, female, 26).

Respondents also say that they stopped constantly thinking about the future and began living more in the present, enjoying every day of life. Instead of stressing about life goals and everything they 'have to' achieve, young migrants choose to love every moment of life, freeing up time for leisure activities:

> *I changed my attitude a little and started to value my personal time more. I am working but, whenever I need time for myself, I take it and that is more important... In Tbilisi, postponing work was unimaginable and I used to think that, if I rested a little, it was a bad thing to do* (Respondent 7, female, 29).

Overall, findings show that young migrants began paying more attention to their personal well-being, something which is lacking in Georgia. According to participants, in Georgia people are so pressured to achieve something or to become someone important that they forget to simply live and to enjoy life. In contrast, Germany offered them more opportunities and possibilities to spend time in ways that bring personal satisfaction and harmony. Some also mentioned learning to say 'No' to others and to prioritise themselves:

> *Now I take care of myself much more because I realised that my brain and my body need to relax and forget about things. I go to clubs, have fun but, if I am tired and they ask me to go, I no longer force myself but say 'No' because I will not feel well the next day and 'I' became more important* [than doing things others want] (Respondent 29, female, 28).

- 'I became more empathetic and open-minded'

Another significant change concerns becoming more understanding of and empathetic towards others. This shift is partly linked to participants' changed social status after migration. In their hometowns in Georgia, respondents had an established social position, family network and recognition. After migrating to Berlin, they felt like 'no one' in this new society, where they had to rebuild social

relationships from scratch. This experience encourages or even 'forces' young people to be more open towards new friendships and relationships. Respondents noted that, while they were still living in Georgia, they might have been holding back from interacting much with immigrants from countries such as India or African states. However, after moving to Berlin and becoming immigrants themselves, they re-evaluated these attitudes, which made them more open and tolerant towards all kinds of people.

> *I was not thinking much about it in Georgia but now I have the opportunity to analyse my attitude towards ethnic minorities, for example. It was not fully pleasant for me to see so many Indians in the subway but, now, after the Berlin experience, it has become a normal everyday thing… I now live outside my country and I changed, my attitude has changed. I realise that everyone can find themselves in such a situation – and that being intolerant* [towards ethnic minorities/immigrants] *is a sign of illiteracy and closed-mindedness* (Respondent 24, male, 28).

Becoming more empathetic and open toward people who are different might also be caused by the fact that, after migration, young people interact with more heterogeneous and diverse groups, which leads to greater tolerance. Respondents noted that increased exposure to diverse people and their stories has made them more understanding and open towards new people and experiences. One respondent, for example, explained that she became more open in social relationships, more willing to meet new people and more comfortable interacting with those who are different from her. She contrasted her relatively homogeneous friendship circle in Tbilisi with her more diverse social circle in Berlin, noting that exposure to different perspectives broadened her understanding (Respondent 15, female, 22). These findings align with earlier sections, where the multicultural environment of Berlin was described as one of the main reasons why young Georgians enjoy living there.

Finally, some respondents also noted changes in their attitudes toward sexual minorities. Although many stated that they were never homophobic and that the LGBTQI+ community never bothered them, respondents reported becoming significantly more open-minded and supportive toward sexual and any other minorities after moving to Berlin. Furthermore, some respondents reported becoming more active in supporting the rights of sexual minorities and criticising homophobic attitudes in Georgia. As one participant explained, after moving to Berlin and forming friendships with LGBT individuals, she realised how normalised their public presence is there compared to Georgia. This experience made her more sensitive to the issue and more vocal in arguing that genuine normalisation requires everyday acceptance, not mere tolerance (Respondent 15, female, 22).

Overall, the findings indicate that migration operates as a context in which young people renegotiate who they are and what they value. Rather than a simple cultural replacement, the process appears to be one of re-evaluation and recalibration, where previously taken-for-granted norms are questioned and new value hierarchies emerge. Freedom, autonomy and reduced social control stand out as the central axis around which these transformations unfold.

Conclusions and discussion

This study examines how young Georgian migrants in Berlin negotiate their values and beliefs after migration. While the existing literature on migration often focuses on the economic (Borjas 1995), health (Davies, Basten and Frattini 2009), criminal or illegal activities (Hall and Greenman 2015) or migrants' adaptation to the new environment (Sam and Berry 2010), less attention has been paid to the transformation of values and identities following migration (Berry, Phinney, Sam and Vedder 2006;

Hong *et al.* 2000; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind and Vedder 2001). There is also relatively little focus specifically on migrants' values and beliefs (Williams, Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2013), especially regarding the adaptation and integration processes of Georgian migrants in the West (Pirtskhalava 2017; Pirtskhalava and Badashvili 2022; Zurabishvili 2023). Only a few recent studies have examined Georgian migrants in Germany and their values (Bogishvili 2025; Pirtskhalava 2026). While hardly any studies specifically focus on young Georgian migrants, this study addresses an important gap in understanding how migration shapes the values of youth from relatively collectivistic societies by examining young people aged 18 to 29 who emigrated from Georgia to Berlin and have lived there for six months or longer. In so doing, it contributes to broader debates on migration, youth transitions and value change by demonstrating how migration functions as a space for active value negotiation, identity reconstruction and the development of hybrid cultural orientations, thus supporting theoretical perspectives that view migration as an active and agentic process rather than a passive adjustment.

The findings show that participants prioritise individualistic values such as independence, a sense of freedom, freedom of choice and having both personal and physical space to act as they desire without feeling observed or judged by society. The continuous possibilities and opportunities that Berlin offers give young people a chance to discover themselves, to explore who they are and what they value and, most importantly, to accept themselves without pretending to be someone else. Without external pressure to achieve socially prescribed standards of success or perfection, which participants described as common in Georgia, they reported freeing themselves from internal constraints, reducing self-pressure and developing greater self-acceptance. These findings are consistent with other recent studies on Georgian migrants in Germany. Bogishvili (2024), for example, shows that migration enabled young migrants to free themselves from social constraints and strengthened their sense of autonomy and confidence. Similarly, Pirtskhalava describes migration as a 'journey or space for freedom and self-development' (2026: 147) for younger migrants. This confirms broader arguments in the migration and youth transition literature that migration can function as a pathway to individualisation and self-realisation, particularly for young people from more collectivistic contexts.

The experiences gained in Germany are often perceived as a form of liberation from traditional social norms and expectations, which weaken or fade as young migrants become more independent. As study participants gained autonomy and engaged in self-reflection, they learned to make more time for activities they enjoy and began paying greater attention to their psychological well-being and prioritising themselves. They started to feel that they actually *can* achieve something, as they feel more appreciated in Berlin, in contrast to Georgia, where their efforts were not valued properly. This suggests that migration not only exposes young people to new values but also creates social conditions that enable the expression and legitimisation of previously constrained identities.

These findings suggest that individualistic values, as opposed to collectivistic ones, became more important for young Georgian migrants after migration. At the same time, however, relationships with family members and friends, as well as certain cultural traditions from Georgia, still remain an important part of their lives. This pattern is consistent with Berry's (1997) acculturation theory, particularly the integration strategy, in which migrants maintain aspects of their home culture while adopting elements of the host culture. At the same time, these processes illustrate Gamsakhurdia's (2019) concept of proculturation**,** in which migrants actively reconstruct hybrid identities, creatively combining values from both home and host contexts rather than simply assimilating into the host society.

These individual-level changes can also be understood within *transnational frameworks* (Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992). Young Georgian migrants maintain connections with their home country, both socially and politically (Khoshtaria 2023). Digital communication allows them to engage

in political, cultural and civil life in Georgia, while simultaneously navigating German social structures, reflecting forms of dual belonging rather than cultural replacement. This supports transnational perspectives by demonstrating that value change does not require detachment from the home country but can occur alongside continued emotional and social embeddedness.

From the perspective of Schwartz's (2012) theory of basic human values, the values emphasised by participants of the study presented in this paper correspond to 'self-direction' (independent thought and action-choosing, creating, exploring), 'stimulation' (excitement, novelty and challenge in life), 'hedonism' (pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself) and 'achievement' (personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards). All of the values of young Georgian migrants are under Schwartz's higher-order value orientations of 'openness to change' and 'self-enhancement', which oppose the 'self-transcendence' and 'conservation' value orientations that are somewhat collectivistic, conservative or traditional and still prevalent in Georgia (Khoshtaria 2017). Similarly, if we analyse the results from Hofstede's (2011) 'individualism/collectivism' dimension, we can again assume that young Georgian migrants carry somewhat individualistic values and rarely link to collectivistic ones. However, this study adds a critical nuance to these classical frameworks: for Georgian youth, 'individualism' is not an abandonment of the home culture but a liberation of the self within a transnational framework. While family relationships remain emotionally central, their meaning and expectations are renegotiated.

As for other values related to empathy and tolerance which, according to the study participants, also become more important after migration, these could instead be linked to their exposure to Berlin's multicultural environment. As other studies also confirm, out-group contact or interactions with individuals who are different or represent other groups, can promote intergroup understanding (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). The intergroup contact theory (Allport 1954), suggesting that bringing people from different groups together can help to break down stereotypes and foster more positive attitudes, provided that the contact occurs under specific conditions, is confirmed by current findings as well, as the young participants claim to become more empathetic, tolerant and open towards different groups, including sexual minorities – which are heavily condemned in Georgia (CRRC-Georgia 2024). This suggests that migration can facilitate not only personal individualisation but also broader value shifts toward inclusivity and diversity.

The study findings demonstrate how new social environments can encourage inclusive values, particularly toward marginalised groups such as sexual minorities, the shift in attitudes towards whom is also evident in Bogishvili's (2025) study, in which she demonstrates cases where attitudes towards sexual minorities changed and became more tolerant after migration.

Even though we cannot generalise the results of a qualitative study, the findings presented in this paper raise the question as to whether we are witnessing value transformations from somewhat collectivistic to relatively individualistic dimensions – as observed and stated by the study participants – or whether the young migrants already carried those individualistic values before they migrated and they just flourished in an environment where they were more acknowledged by society. In other words, the study raises important questions for future research about whether the observed value changes are truly transformations induced by migration or whether they represent pre-existing orientations that flourish in supportive Western contexts. In case of value transformation, the study finding could be discussed in the framework of acculturation or even transnationalism theories, demonstrating how young people adjust to the new culture, while keeping some values of the home society. Alternatively, if we assume that these somewhat individualistic values of young Georgian migrants are not necessarily gained but are, instead, 'revealed' and 'flourished' with migration, the findings could suggest that young

people, who always carried more individualistic values, tend to migrate more to Western societies, where their value orientations are being supported. In the latter case, instead of 'value transformation', we can talk about 'value disclosure', when migration provides an environment in which migrants' existing value orientations are validated and reinforced.

Ultimately, this research goes beyond simply discussing value change. It introduces the new concept of 'value disclosure', arguing that migration could provide an environment for pre-existing, constrained values to flourish rather than simply triggering the passive adoption of new host-country norms. Therefore, while, in some cases, values can shift or change with migration, in others the hidden values can simply be disclosed.

Building on this distinction, whether a person experiences 'change' or 'disclosure' depends on their specific circumstances. It can be argued/assumed that value disclosure is the most likely when a migrant already felt disconnected from the mindset of his or her home country and suddenly gains freedom in a tolerant, anonymous city like Berlin. In these cases, the new environment does not create the person's values; it just provides the freedom to express them. Value transformation, on the other hand, is more likely when migrants become deeply involved in their new society and form meaningful relationships with locals over time. When migrants actively engage with different worldviews, this exposure does not just reveal hidden traits – it actively reshapes their core beliefs, particularly regarding tolerance and inclusivity.

Whether newly acquired or newly expressed, the findings demonstrate that migration creates conditions for identity reconstruction, value renegotiation and psychological development. In this sense, migration functions not only as geographic mobility but also as a developmental space in which young people actively shape their identities and values.

Note

1. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/values.

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No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

AI use disclosure

During the preparation of this work, I used Google Gemini to translate specific quotes from Georgian into English and to improve the overall language and readability of the paper. After using this tool, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the text to ensure accuracy. I take full responsibility for the final content, arguments, and findings presented in this publication.

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Appendix

Table A1. Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants

Respondent #	Gender	Age	Relationship status	Education	Lives in Berlin since	Interview length (minutes)
1	Female	27	In a relationship	MA degree	2015	61
2	Male	29	In a relationship	MA student	2021	47
3	Female	19	In a relationship	BA student	2021	45
4	Female	27	Married	BA degree	2021	52
5	Female	26	Single	BA degree	2022	63
6	Male	27	In a relationship	MA student	2020	43
7	Female	29	In a relationship	MA degree	2020	37
8	Female	22	Single	BA student	2020	51
9	Female	27	Married	MA student	2022	55
10	Female	23	Single	MA student	2019	64
11	Male	25	Single	MA student	2021	49
12	Female	26	In a relationship	BA degree	2022	60
13	Male	22	In a relationship	BA student	2019	50
14	Female	27	In a relationship	BA degree	2017	85
15	Female	22	In a relationship	BA student	2021	48
16	Female	19	Single	BA student	2022	41
17	Female	20	Single	BA student	2021	40
18	Male	27	Single	MA student	2022	43
19	Female	24	Single	BA student	2022	54
20	Female	23	Single	BA degree	2017	49
21	Male	25	In a relationship	BA degree	2019	46
22	Female	20	Single	BA student	2021	46
23	Male	22	Single	BA student	2020	32
24	Male	28	Single	*Ausbildung*	2022	80
25	Female	22	In a relationship	BA student	2021	51
26	Female	25	Single	*Ausbildung*	2017	60
27	Female	22	Single	*Ausbildung*	2022	47
28	Female	20	In a relationship	BA student	2021	28
29	Female	28	Single	Working	2021	44
30	Male	25	In a relationship	*Ausbildung*	2022	62

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All By Myself? The Self-Responsibilisation of Young Migrants for Integration: Insights from Poland

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In migration studies, integration is predominantly conceptualised by scholars as a 'two-way' process. In practice, however, migrants are increasingly being held responsible for integration. In this article, grounded in qualitative data from Poland – collected between 2021–2022 from young migrants and representatives of NGOs and public institutions supporting migrants – we explore how they perceive and experience this process. We argue that, influenced by neoliberal discourses of individuality, migrants often view the challenge of integration as their personal responsibility – a phenomenon we refer to as self-responsibilisation. Thus, we identify and analyse three intersecting and mutually reinforcing processes: 1) the shift of responsibility for integration onto young migrants as a consequence of state negligence, 2) the asymmetry of responsibility as a result of the host society's othering of migrants and 3) self-responsibilisation as a consequence of migrants' internalisation of responsibility for integration. Together, they form what we call the self-perpetuating mechanism of (self)responsibilisation of young migrants for integration. Our analysis indicates that this mechanism may lead to the empowerment of young migrants although it can also foster the normalisation of structural constraints, hinder the migrants' access to available support, increase stress and may even contribute to deteriorating mental and physical health.

Keywords: young migrants, integration, shifting of responsibility, asymmetry of responsibility, internalisation of responsibility, self-responsibilisation for integration

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Introduction

A growing body of scholarship recognises the importance of conceptualising integration with migrants as a 'two-way' process involving not only the migrants' own efforts but also the active engagement of the host society and the state (Kehoe, Alisic and Heilinger 2019; Klarenbeek 2021). Similar calls have emerged in the rapidly changing Polish migratory context (Podgórska, Grzymała-Kazłowska, Łukasiewicz and Pachocka 2024). However, while public discourse and opinion polls in Poland reveal a strong expectation for migrants to integrate into the host country, for instance by learning the Polish language and adopting local rules and values (Karaś and Traczyk 2025), the responsibility of the host society, along with the institutional frameworks that enable integration, remains largely unfulfilled.

Poland's integration policies remain fragmented and underdeveloped (Łodziński and Szonert 2023), despite a substantial increase in immigration since the country's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004 (Okólski 2021). This increase has been driven not only by rapid economic development – and the resulting demand for labour – but also by the continued emigration of Polish citizens and the accelerating ageing of the population. At the time that our research was conducted – prior to the forced migration from Ukraine to Poland following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 – the number of migrants in Poland stood at 2,106,101, including 1,351,418 Ukrainian nationals (Cope, Keryk and Kyliushyk 2021). A significant proportion (38 per cent) of these were young people aged 21–30. After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, around 1 million forced migrants from Ukraine found temporary protection in Poland.

Despite the rapid growth of the migrant population, especially after 2022, Poland still lacks a coherent, long-term integration policy. Although a migration strategy for 2025–2030 was adopted in late 2024, it has not resulted in the development of a comprehensive integration framework. Poland also has no official state-level definition of integration. The current Migration Strategy (2024) frames integration mainly as migrants' adaptation to majority norms and values. Its emphasis on 'avoiding the mistakes of other states' and preventing 'alternative social structures' in this process reinforces a narrative of risk and control. The role of the state is outlined only in general terms, centred on security and institutional efficiency, with no specific instruments, sectoral responsibilities or service standards. As a result, integration is presented primarily as a tool for avoiding social tensions rather than supporting equitable participation. The strategy further defines successful integration as 'when a migrant communicates in Polish, respects the law and prevailing norms and values and actively participates in local community life', without clarifying the roles of the state or society in enabling this.

In effect, the strategy reflects an assimilationist perspective that places the burden of integration primarily on migrants – a tendency repeatedly highlighted in expert assessments by migrant-support organisations. As stated in the Position of the Polish Migration Consortium[1] on the government's migration strategy, the approach adopted in the governmental document 'violates the right of migrants to preserve their own cultural identity and is at odds with the principles of equality and respect for diversity' (Konsorcjum Migracyjne 2024). Witold Klaus (2025) describes the state's approach to integration in a similar way: 'The state abdicates when it comes to integration. It has no ideas on how to do it and allocates no resources for this purpose. (…) When we talk about the definition of integration, we most often refer to it as a two-way process. Therefore, it is not only people with migration experience who integrate but society also changes and integrates with them. This latter aspect is completely absent from the Polish debate, as well as from the Polish migration strategy'.

Researchers describe this kind of situation as an example of an 'integration policy without policy' (Łodziński and Szonert 2023). Consequently, the limited measures that have been implemented focus

almost exclusively on the labour market, while many other areas relevant to integration – such as assistance in legalising residence, the adaptation of public services to migrants' needs, language acquisition, cultural orientation and, crucially, efforts to foster host-society integration – remain neglected (Migdał, Sułkowski and Zając 2020).

This situation is rooted in the fact that Polish migration law and practice prioritise temporary employment and residence – responding to the demands of the labour market, while simultaneously hindering migrants' prospects for long-term settlement (Cope *et al*. 2021). In response, local authorities – particularly in urban areas – have assumed a degree of responsibility, often in collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to provide various forms of support aimed at facilitating integration with migrants (Migdał *et al.* 2020). However, their capacity to do so has been constrained, primarily due to a lack of stable and continuous funding for integration initiatives. Insufficient state support is increasingly being replaced by support from the private sector, which has commercialised, for instance, assistance in legalising stay (Kindler and Wójcikowska-Baniak 2018). This shift also transfers responsibility onto migrants, as they must pay for such services.

Moreover, research indicates that Polish society faces significant challenges in the integration of migrants, with the latter experiencing widespread discrimination and social exclusion – particularly of individuals from non-EU countries (Jaskulowski and Pawlak 2019; Thérová 2023). Migrants in Poland encounter racism, prejudice, stereotyping and a range of social barriers to integration. These social attitudes towards migrants are both a cause and a consequence of negative governmental narratives. Official government discourse has been dominated by hostility towards migrants (Arendas, Trąbka, Messing, Pietrusińska and Winogrodzka 2023), contributing to the stigmatisation of the term 'migrant' in public debate (Janicki and Świętek 2025). This occurs even though the number of migrants legally working and residing in Poland continues to grow steadily. The lack of a coherent integration policy results in migrants being at a higher risk of marginalisation or exposure to multiple forms of exclusion and vulnerability (Oliveira, Nienaber, Bissinger, Gilodi, Richard and Albert 2024).

As a result, we observe a mechanism whereby the burden of integration is shifted onto individual migrants, rather than addressing systemic barriers and collective responsibilities (Kehoe *et al*. 2019). Migrants often internalise this expectation, perceiving integration as their personal task. This is particularly evident among young migrants entering adulthood (Oliveira *et al.* 2024), who face additional pressures tied to individual success, amplified by neoliberal narratives of productivity and self-betterment (Binkley 2014; Ikonen and Nikunen 2019; Kelly 2006; Sultana 2024). In this article, through the in-depth qualitative analyses of interviews with young migrants and representatives of NGOs and other public institutions – primarily those supporting migrants – we demonstrate both the multifaceted causes and complex consequences of the processes of responsibilisation and self-responsibilisation for integration.

Firstly, we situate the concept of responsibilisation within broader debates on integration in migration studies and propose our understanding of the process of self-responsibilisation. Following the discussion of our methodology, we present the results of our empirical analysis, structured around a cause-and-effect model, focusing on three key dimensions: the state's legislative framework, host-society relations with migrants and migrants' individual perspectives. We conclude by developing and discussing a model of the self-perpetuating mechanism of (self)responsibilisation, which helps to explain how the task of integration is shifted onto and internalised by migrants.

Integration and (self)responsibilisation in the context of migration studies

At the outset of the article, we want to briefly discuss three concepts crucial to our further reasoning, namely integration, responsibilisation and self-responsibilisation. To begin with, we acknowledge that 'migrant integration' has been a widely debated and contested concept in migration studies (Favell 2003; Grzymala-Kazlowska and Phillimore 2017) with significant policy-relevant implications (Dodevska 2024). It has been criticised as normative and assuming that there is a natural path of progression, which migrants need to follow to become part of host societies. The shift in integration policies from welfare-state models to a neoliberal approach in many Western countries has introduced a discourse of migrant individualisation, activation and responsibilisation for their broadly understood integration (Uehling 2015).

More-recent theorising has recognised that integration, to be successful, needs to be a 'two-way process' and involve the effort undertaken not only by migrants (Kehoe *et al.* 2019; Klarenbeek 2021; cf. Grabowska, Hansen, Jastrzebowska, Lind, Manafi, Nienaber, Powell and Shahrokh 2025) but also by the state and host society. The state, at all levels of government, establishes the legal, political and institutional frameworks that regulate access to employment and to social and political rights; it ensures inclusive public services by removing administrative barriers and strengthening institutional capacities through regular staff training. The state also shapes evidence-based public opinion about migrants, helping to counter misinformation and negative stereotypes. The host society, through everyday interactions, social norms and civic organisations, co-creates the space and conditions for integration with migrants. In a two-way process, residents' attitudes, willingness to engage and recognition of diversity underpin trust-building, reduced social distance and migrants' improved sense of inclusion. Research shows that societal attitudes are among the strongest determinants of the integration process, meaning that society's role extends beyond passive acceptance to the active collective shaping of an equitable and participatory environment (Atalay, Korkut, Nicolson, Scholten and Laidlaw 2023).

Other researchers have described integration as 'liquid', driven by multi-directional processes and multifaceted dimensions (Skrobanek and Jobst 2022). Most recently, Adrian Favell (2022) argued that the concept of 'migrant integration' derives from the desire rooted in colonial history for the nation states to uphold (racial) hierarchies. Some scholars propose rethinking the entire concept of integration by situating it in the broader dynamics of societal inequality and the efforts to reduce it (cf. Klarenbeek 2024).

If there is one thing about integration that the vast majority of authors agree on is that it is a very broad and multidimensional – even 'fuzzy' – concept (Ager and Strang 2008; Grzymala-Kazlowska and Phillimore 2017). Thus, instead of attempts to elaborate one definition of integration that would cover its different meanings, numerous concepts or 'operational definitions' – as Ager and Strang (2008) call them – were formulated. What is worth highlighting is the broad understanding of integration in these concepts. For instance, Ager and Strang's framework is composed of 10 domains, including not only employment, citizenship/legal status or social bonds but also health, sense of safety and stability etc. Another promising stream of research on integration is aimed at grasping migrants' own understanding of this notion and what it means to be integrated (Biaback Anong, Skrobanek, Wagner and Nienaber 2023; Erdal 2013). It appears that migrants apply a broad definition of integration that is (or, rather, should be) a two-way process which does not exclude transnational practices and, moreover, is connected with notions of wellbeing. The latter is particularly notable in the case of young migrants. As Regalia, Giulani, Carones and Matuella (2022: 79) put it: 'Overall, they seem to think of being integrated as feeling at home, delving into the cultural and historical aspects of the host country and feeling good'.

For the purposes of this article, we operationalise the definition of integration in line with the proposal of the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2017), which defines integration as:

> *The two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and host societies, in which migrants are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural and political life of the receiving community. Such integration entails a set of shared responsibilities for both migrants and host communities (...). Integration is a cross-cutting and multi-sectoral issue that relates to policy areas addressing the economic, social, legal, cultural and civic spheres and affects all aspects of migrants' lives.*

We adopt this broad approach to integration, as it proves useful for understanding young migrants' experiences of the 'double transition' (Oliveira *et al.* 2024). This concept refers to the simultaneous engagement in two major life processes: (1) the transition to adulthood, including micro-transitions such as completing education, entering the labour market and potentially forming an independent household or family; and (2) integration with a new socio-cultural environment. For young migrants, these two processes intersect, creating a compounded set of challenges which they must navigate.

Moving beyond this broad understanding of integration, responsibilisation emerges as a second pivotal theoretical concept for this article, a term rooted in the field of governmentality (Juhila and Raitakari 2016). It describes the process of making the private sector and civic society, as well as individuals, responsible for public tasks where, previously, public institutions played an active role. The term responsibilisation is strongly associated with neoliberal discourses (O'Malley 2009). While, in the welfare-state approach, citizens, including migrants, were supported (Joppke 2024), in the neoliberal approach it is the citizens and migrants who are made responsible, meaning that they are expected to manage their own risks and demonstrate self-care (Liebenberg, Ungar and Ikeda 2015; Pyysiäinen, Halpin and Guilfoyle 2017).

Some authors link this process with practising one's autonomy, choice, self-governance (Barnett 2003) and self-entrepreneurship (Juhila and Raitakari 2016), which is a consequence of the requirements of an individualised society (Bauman 2005). Other authors associate responsibilisation with the process of shifting societal problems onto individuals (Uehling 2015) and the privatisation of risk (Miller and Rose 2008). Citizens who fail to manage their own lives and demonstrate self-governance may be marginalised or excluded from society. Moreover, governmental organisations and NGOs implementing projects that foster responsibilisation may, through their institutional practices and evaluative framework, contribute to the production of divisions among their clients into those 'deserving' and those 'undeserving' of support (Juhila and Raitakari 2016). This means that they define who is expected to become a responsible citizen after receiving support and who will fail to become one. This approach is also evident in the migration discourse, which categorises migrants into groups according to their perceived deservingness (Ratzman and Sahraoui 2021).

Beyond prevailing societal attitudes and discourses surrounding migrants in the host society (Kehoe *et al.* 2019), several other factors have been identified in migration studies as contributing to the responsibilisation of migrants for their integration. The first factor is the way in which national and local policies are designed, along with the integration frameworks they establish, which define both what integration entails and how it should be achieved (Pettrachin, Caponio and Borgna 2024). These policies, often influenced by a broader neoliberal discourse, frequently frame integration predominantly in terms of economic participation and self-reliance (Suvarierol 2015). Secondly, another source of responsibilisation of migrants is the criminalisation of migration. Due to this process, migrants who chose an undocumented path of entry or stay in the country are held responsible for their

marginalisation and lack of access to integration tools (Innes 2013). Finally, transnational connections and the expectations and hopes of migrants' families who remain in their home countries further contribute to this burden of responsibilisation (Castles 2013).

When connecting the themes of integration with young migrants and the responsibilisation for this process, a clear pattern emerges: when examining the attitudes of young migrants towards their 'integration task', we often observe an internalisation of responsibility. This fosters the preconception that it is primarily the young migrants' duty to become 'integrated' and active members of the host society. We refer to this process as 'self-responsibilisation'. This concept entails the belief that everyone is the architect of their own destiny and that success or failure depends solely on one's actions and efforts (Juhila and Raitakari 2016; Sofritti, Benozzo, Carey and Pizzorno 2020). Migrants internalise this view, which motivates or forces them to exert effort in adapting to the new socio-political environment (Blachnicka-Ciacek, Trąbka, Budginaite-Mackine, Parutis and Pustulka 2021; Winogrodzka, Trąbka and Pietrusińska 2024). Such an attitude is strongly influenced by neoliberalism (Sultana 2024) and its related discourses of the entrepreneurial self and employability (Juhila and Raitakari 2016; Sofritti *et al*. 2020). Although these discourses are nowadays increasingly contested by the younger generation, as evidenced in recent studies (Mind the Gap 2024), they remain prevalent. We can assume that instability on the labour market, associated with migratory experiences, reinforces these attitudes (Winogrodzka 2025).

Neoliberal discourses shape the way of thinking, behaving and, in consequence, experiences of young migrants as they navigate the integration process in host countries. These discourses, rooted in the principles of extreme individualism and self-reliance, promote a view of the individual as a self-managing subject, fully and utterly responsible for his or her own success and well-being but also for their failures. In line with the requirements of the modern world, young people should be ambitious, calculating, goal-defining, resilient, adaptable and action-taking (Bröckling 2015; Kelly 2006). They also should embody the 'right mindset' characterised by openness, positive thinking, happiness, gratefulness and growth orientation (Binkley 2014; Ikonen and Nikunen 2019). These attributes collectively foster their ability to adapt, develop and thrive in a new socio-economic context, laying the foundation for a 'successful' integration experience.

Methods and data

This article draws on empirical material collected between 2021 and 2022 for the Horizon 2020 research project 'MIMY: Empowerment through Liquid Integration of Migrant Youth in Vulnerable Conditions', which focuses on the integration processes of young migrants living in nine European countries: England (UK), Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Romania and Sweden. The qualitative part of the research was conducted with the involvement of peer researchers at different stages of the project (Blachnicka-Ciacek, Winogrodzka and Trąbka 2025). The article addresses several research questions: How do the processes of responsibilisation and self-responsibilisation of young migrants for integration manifest? What are their underlying causes and what consequences do they have for young people? During the following analysis, we offer a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted (self)responsibilisation phenomena and their impact on the lives of young migrants.

We draw on the results of the complementary parts of qualitative research with two groups. The first group consisted of 65 young migrants (18–30 years old) who had lived in Poland for a minimum of one year and had different migration experiences (see Table 1). In this group there were three sub-groups – forced, educational as well as economic migrants – who experience a particular kind of vulnerability.[2]

The purpose of delineating these three subgroups in the study was to ensure that a range of trajectories and migration experiences were covered. While we acknowledge the fundamental differences in the life situations and legal statuses of forced and voluntary migrants, our analysis does not treat these categories as analytically isolated from one another. Rather than assuming shared experiences, we focus on recurring themes related to integration and responsibility. Most interviewees were Ukrainian or Belarusian, as migrants from these two countries make up most migrants in Poland (Górny and Kindler 2023). In our study, we also conducted 39 interviews with 45 representatives of NGOs and other public institutions who were mainly those supporting migrants – like the employment office, schools, integration centres, social welfare and cultural centres.

We conducted most of our interviews in two main locations: Warsaw (capital city) and a small town near Gdańsk. However, some interviews were also carried out with migrants residing in other Polish cities, such as Poznań, Kraków and others. In the first stage of the project, we recruited representatives of NGOs and selected public institutions with the aim of having a diversified sample of institutional actors supporting migrants. Interviews with them were held in the first part of 2021 while interviews with young migrants took place between March 2021 and February 2022. Thus, forced migrants who arrived after the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine were not included in our study. Participants were recruited mainly through peer researchers' networks, complemented by occasional NGO/institutional contacts and snowball sampling.

The interviews with young migrants included questions about their migratory experiences and, more specifically, the various factors which they perceive as opportunities and constraints along their integration journey. With NGOs' and public institutions' representatives, we talked about their activities and services available for and problems faced by migrants, as well as about the challenges and facilitators of integration processes.

Table 1. Sample characteristics in the four parts of the study

	Participants	**Country of origin and number of participants**	**Methods and gender of participants**	**Research period**
Part 1	Young migrants (forced, educational, economic) 18–30 years old	Ukraine (8), Belarus (1), other countries (7): Turkey, Colombia, Thailand	3 FGIs (16: 8 - F, 8 - M)	March–July 2021
Part 2		Ukraine (22), Belarus (11), other countries (16): Tadjikistan, Russia, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan, Georgia, Chechnya, Turkey, Sierra Leone, Brazil	49 IDIs (30 - F, 19 - M)	June 2021–February 2022
Part 3	Representatives of NGOs and public institutions	Mainly Poland (36), 9 people with migration background	39 IDIs (6 in dyad: 45: 32 - F, 13 - M)	January–April 2021

Source: Authors' elaboration.

The MIMY project adhered to ethical standards regarding interviewing, data handling and the preservation of anonymity, which are characteristic of research with migrants experiencing vulnerable conditions (Happ 2021). The Research Ethics Committee at the implementing institution (SWPS University) approved the research design. All individual and group interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants' permission – or detailed notes were made. To analyse the research material, we used thematic analysis (Nowell, Norris, White and Moules 2017) supported by MAXQDA software.

Findings: the (self)responsibilisation of young migrants for integration

In this section, we explore the mechanisms which lead to young migrants' (self-)responsibilisation for integration in Poland, by presenting an empirical analysis structured around three interconnected phenomena that collectively drive this process: 1) the shift of responsibility for integration onto young migrants as a consequence of state negligence, 2) the asymmetry of responsibility as a consequence of othering by host society and 3) self-responsibilisation as a consequence of migrants' internalisation of responsibility enhanced by neoliberal discourse.

'You ask questions but no one gives you answers'. The shift of responsibility for integration onto migrants as a consequence of state negligence

The primary driver behind the responsibilisation of migrants for their integration in Poland is the protracted lack of a comprehensive and supporting integration policy at the national level (Arendas *et al*. 2023; Klaus 2025; Łodziński and Szonert 2023). As representatives of NGOs and other institutions supporting migrants pointed out, this situation stems from a persistent trope that migrants are merely a temporary solution to labour-market needs (Cope *et al.* 2021). As a result, this area of policy has long suffered from governmental negligence: 'We [as a state] do nothing, so that the system was up to date with what is going on right now, we should have prepared 10 years ago, and now the system is stuck' (P3, F, NGO).[3] This expert perspective highlights the disconnect between the evolving migration reality and the state's outdated national policy framework (Janicki and Świętek 2025). As a result, migrants, a majority of whom are young individuals, are treated as an 'elephant in the room' – whose integration needs are consciously disregarded by the Polish government. This non-engagement effectively absolves the state of its obligation to facilitate a two-way process of integration (Kehoe *et al.* 2019; Klarenbeek 2021), shifting the onus of adaptation onto the shoulders of the migrant population (Uehling 2015).

As a result, migrants are forced to navigate the system and manage all formalities connected with their stay in Poland on their own. The existing infrastructure does not facilitate it. For instance, both migrant interviewees and stakeholders complained about lack of information in languages other than Polish and about the necessity to ask Polish-speaking persons for assistance as interpreters in contacts with Polish public institutions, as well illustrated by Martin's (P2, M, 31, Brazil) statement:

> *I had difficulties with documents because everything was in Polish and I didn't really understand what I was doing. I had to ask a friend to go with me to the migration office. I asked a guy there if he spoke English and he replied that 'Here in Poland we speak Polish'. (...) So, every time I needed to go to a public place here, I felt I wanted to cry. I need to speak Polish but I'm not able to.*

As the Polish state offers little support to migrants in the process of legalising their stay – nor further contacts with public services – the migrants become 'responsibilised' for dealing with bureaucracy in Polish and without sufficient support on the part of offices: 'It's difficult with documents, you stay in long, long lines, you ask questions but no one gives you answers; there is a lack of centres that could inform and coordinate migrants' (P2, Anzelika F, 27, Belarus).

Moreover, the system for obtaining residence permits in Poland is regarded as dysfunctional because the procedures are chronically protracted and may take up to several years (NIK 2019), forcing migrants to submit new documents, because those previously submitted expired during the procedure. Such prolonged legal uncertainty forces migrants to repeatedly legalise their stay under unstable and unpredictable conditions rather than progressing through a clear and predictable legal process. This inefficacy of the system – causing a lot of stress and frustration – was often mentioned by migrant interviewees:

> *The downside of a migrant's life is instability. When it comes to legalisation, you're never sure – even if you've submitted everything, you don't know whether the decision will be positive or negative. They might not receive a letter or might not send it at all. Small things like that can determine the outcome. You feel discomfort. They keep checking you. It's all connected to stress. That's why I apply for visas – because I don't want to feel like a slave. While my application is being processed, I can't go anywhere. I can't visit my relatives. Many foreigners complain about this. I know people who have waited even two years for a decision* (P2, Larysa, F, 29, Ukraine).

The necessity of being able to cope with systemic inefficiency illustrates the shifting of responsibility for integration onto migrants (Uehling 2015): it is the individual, not the government, who must deal with institutional unpreparedness and dysfunction (Cope *et al.* 2021). The burden of handling administrative matters has been placed on the young migrants to whom we spoke – they are expected to know their rights and obligations on their own and, moreover, to inform and prove to officials that they are entitled to a given public service. As Larysa continued: 'I think that, in all administrative institutions, you have to prove that you have the right to something. (...) They're constantly unhappy about something, even though they're wrong – they simply don't know. However, if you know your rights, you feel a bit more comfortable – though it's still stressful'.

Even in cases where migrants are already familiar with bureaucratic procedures and know about their rights, once they enter the Polish system, their knowledge often proves insufficient in the face of the institutional chaos and lack of support. Even a thorough understanding of the legalisation process does not protect them from receiving a negative decision, as is well illustrated by Katia's (P2, F, 28, Ukraine) experience:

> *It was hard. You could cry – try to do whatever. I submitted documents for a temporary residence permit and received a refusal. The refusal was issued due to the insurance. However, I know these kinds of things – even from back in Ukraine. It was very unpleasant for me. I thought: 'How can this be?' (...) I never thought I'd get a refusal in a neighbouring country. I thought: 'Well then, I'll just go home and stay in Ukraine'. However, I filed an appeal.*

Stakeholders suggested that the above-described practices in offices and other public institutions reflect a certain attitude towards migrants: that it is they who should try hard, they who should take care, stand in lines and visit countless offices – in short, they who are responsible for integration: 'Such a nonchalant

attitude: if they don't like it, let them go, another two will be ready to take this place' (P3, F, NGO). Thus, when we look at systemic solutions, there are few to no signs of understanding integration as a two-way process (Kehoe *et al.* 2019; Klarenbeek 2021). This is particularly challenging for young migrants, who often experience separation from their families and social networks as a consequence of migration (Oliveira *et al.* 2024).

To a certain extent, NGOs, including those created by migrants themselves, step into the gap left by state authorities by offering services: they assist migrants in offices or help to deal with paperwork connected to the legalisation of stay, work, taxes or education (Migdał *et al.* 2020). However, this strategy cannot replace a long-term, comprehensive policy, as 'NGOs are patching holes in the big dam with band-aids' (P3, F, NGO). Another NGO stakeholder complained that, without a national integration policy, they 'lack framework' and stable funding in their work, they are forced to jump from one project to another: 'Especially migrant organisations, pro-migrant... we're a bit like dogs on a leash, little poodles following wherever money is thrown at' (P3, M, NGO). Although the role of NGOs and local governments is to fill the gaps left by the lack of integration policies, their efforts are often insufficient, making integration largely a one-way process (Kehoe *et al.* 2019; Klarenbeek 2021).

The above-described consequences of the lack of a supportive integration policy at national level fosters a deep-seated sense of temporariness among young migrants. Despite building their lives in Poland – entering adulthood, taking their first steps on the labour market and forming new relationships – their ability to stay there is uncertain. With these circumstances of state negligence, young migrants are striving to meet the basic needs essential for their stability and security and, as a consequence, their well-being, which are indispensable elements in their definition of integration (Ager and Strang 2008; Biaback Anong *et al.* 2023; Erdal 2013; Regalia *et al.* 2022).

> *Until someone gives me a paper saying I'm here permanently and securely, I will continue to feel discomfort. I will feel like I'm on the border – that I'm non-European, not from the EU. I'll always fear questions that could affect my stability here. Whenever I'm at the border, I feel fear, even if all my documents are in order – I still feel afraid. Even though I live in Poland and this is my home, if someone doesn't like something, they can take it all away from me. You feel like a stranger, like someone inferior* (P2, Larysa, F, 29, Ukraine).

'Migrants are solely responsible for their life from A to Z'. The asymmetry of responsibility as a result of othering by the host society

Despite the theoretical understanding and empirical evidence highlighting integration as a mutual, reciprocal two-sided process in which the host society plays a crucial role (Biaback Anong *et al.* 2023; Grabowska *et al.* 2025; Klarenbeek 2021), Polish stakeholders indicated that implementing these assumptions in practice remains difficult. Drawing upon their extensive experience, several NGO representatives highlighted a prevailing narrative that absolves the host society of its responsibilities, placing the entire burden on newcomers and thus creating a distinct asymmetry in these relationships: 'There's a shifting of responsibility, arguing that, since someone comes to a particular country, it's their conscious decision, so they're solely responsible for their well-being from A to Z (...). Meanwhile, everyone, each of us as residents, has responsibility – individual responsibility' (P3, F, NGO). Thus, in this part of the article, we refer to the society's perception of migrants as positioned outside of the host society – a phenomenon we term as othering – which, in turn, legitimises asymmetric expectations and responsibilities placed upon migrants.

Stakeholders highlighted the absence of effective programmes involving both migrants and members of the host society. This imbalance was underscored by an NGO representative who noted that projects are almost exclusively addressed to migrants, overlooking the crucial role of the host society – 'Meanwhile, the host society has a huge impact on the daily lives of migrants, so if we don't prepare them [Poles], their [migrants'] stay in Poland won't be pleasant and may be full of challenges' (P3, F, public cultural institution). In fact, one of the challenges often mentioned by young migrants was the actual difficulty of developing more meaningful connections with members of Polish society (Atalay *et al.* 2023). While day-to-day, mundane contact is possible, several of our interviewees noted that developing deeper contacts with Poles is challenging, as they are not particularly interested in meeting migrants or learning about their experiences:

> *I am trying to learn Polish but, when you move to a new country, you want to see that someone else is also interested in it, not only you. We live in a selfish world but still, it would be great to see that at least someone is interested in this too, that you won't have obstacles with it* (P2, Ivan, M, Belarus, 22).

One stakeholder, who himself has a migration background, echoed Ivan's opinions, emphasising that meaningful integration necessitates reciprocal effort from the host society. He recounted his experience organising an annual event designed to foster interaction between individuals with migration backgrounds and the local Polish community. Despite his persistent efforts to engage the broader community, the number of Polish participants consistently remains low. He stated: 'This terrifies me. Whatever we do, we invite Poles – but Poles rarely come over and join us. I'm not saying that all Poles are bad but that there's not enough openness' (P3, F, NGO). This observation highlights a perceived lack of proactive engagement and openness on the part of the host society, which directly impedes the development of the mutual relationships essential for integration as a truly two-way process (Kehoe *et al.* 2019; Klarenbeek 2021).

What emerges from these discussions with both NGO representatives and young migrants is a pattern of asymmetric responsibility for integration, disproportionately burdening newcomers while the host society's engagement remains limited (Atalay *at al.* 2023). This means that, in practice, the discussions about integration are one-sided, focused solely on the expected efforts of migrants and not mentioning other aspects of this complex process. One of the interviewees refers to this bias when she contrasts her understanding of integration with the one she encounters in public discussions:

> *For me, integration is precisely about getting to know another culture, other rules in society, adapting to these rules but also not forgetting about myself, about who I am and about the fact that I am and can be different and have the right to my own culture. This is precisely why we very often talk about the fact that, unfortunately, integration is often confused with assimilation* (P2, Oksana, F, 26, Ukraine).

Compounding this issue, NGO interlocutors frequently mentioned a scarcity of initiatives that would allow for more substantive encounters and true reciprocity between the host society and migrant populations. They suggest that the programmes, which are relatively easy to obtain funding for, are often limited to events like ethnic festivals. At such events, migrant groups are expected to present essentialist notions of their culture. In these cases, they bear the responsibility for preparing the event, while members of the host community remain passive recipients. According to some stakeholders, these types of events do not facilitate a deeper exchange and, in fact, often reinforce stereotypical views of migrant cultures.

Crucially, political attitudes and narratives play a significant role in shaping societal sentiment towards migrants and in reproducing processes of othering (Janicki and Świętek 2025; Łodziński and Szonert 2023). These political and media discourses often amplify prejudices and discriminatory practices (Thérová 2023), creating an unwelcoming environment (Arendas *et al.* 2023) that directly impacts on the behaviour and well-being of young migrants, for whom successful integration is often intrinsically linked to a sense of belonging and acceptance (cf. Biaback Anong *et al.* 2023; Regalia *et al.* 2022). As one young Belarusian migrant expressed it, integration means 'feeling at home that means to me that you don't feel unwanted' (P2, Anzelika, F, 27, Belarus). Similarly, another interviewee highlighted that being integrated signifies a state 'when you are fully accepted, when you are not prejudiced, when you are just accepted without even paying attention to what you are like, where you are from, when you are treated like a person' (P2, Alyona, F, 18 Russia). However, our research demonstrates that young migrants rarely feel this kind of acceptance stemming from their contacts with the receiving society, thus directly hindering the integration process. This is clearly illustrated by the accounts of young migrants facing discrimination and racism (Jaskulowski and Pawlak 2019), as apparent in the quote below:

> *The first two months everything looked great, we thought that the grass is greener in Poland, tomatoes are tastier, we didn't notice many things. Later we started to have lots of problems and difficulties and there was a moment of not accepting yourself inside the country, not accepting foreign culture. I was annoyed with the language, nationalists, people who are not polite. Some people, when they heard my accent, they considered me a person of third quality* (P2, Anzelika, F, 27, Belarus).

Thus, young migrants' experiences with Polish society often contrast sharply with their own visions of integration, which are predicated on 'coexistence' and symmetrical relationships between themselves and representatives of the host country. This inherent disparity creates significant challenges for their successful settlement and sense of belonging. The migrants' perspective emphasises mutual support and an inclusive environment, regardless of linguistic proficiency or cultural background. As Teodor (P2, M, 26, Ukraine) articulated: 'Being integrated means supporting someone regardless of whether they understand you in that language, whether they make mistakes and cannot communicate. For me, integration is about certain tools that enable us to create a space for everyone, where people will laugh, talk, drink tea, and learn to coexist'.

Meanwhile, Polish society tends to perceive migrants through one simple lens, viewing them through the prism of their 'foreignness' and 'otherness'. This essentialist perception reduces individuals to a single, defining characteristic, disregarding the multifaceted identities and rich experiences that shape them. As a result, migrants frequently feel a need to present themselves in ways that transcend their newcomer status, constantly compelled to prove they are more than just 'migrants'. This pressure to constantly legitimise their worth is acutely felt, leading to a deep sense of being perpetually underestimated. A young Belarusian woman vividly articulated this struggle:

> *I feel a certain nationalism, when you are underestimated. You can't prove anything to anyone, that you are great, you know so many things, you have some professional experience, how many books you've read etc. It's difficult. Not only because you take 10 steps behind in your career path, you leave everything behind: friends, family, comfort, you survive on enthusiasm, young people have this adventure spirit – then it turns out to be super hard and it strikes you so heavily* (P2, Anzelika, F, 27, Belarus).

The cumulative effect of the factors described above leads to a deep-seated disillusionment among young migrants. Despite their earnest efforts to adapt, learn the language and contribute, many are left with the disheartening realisation that true integration, as they define it, may remain unattainable. The socially assigned status of 'foreigner' – rooted in broader mechanisms of social exclusion – can never be fully exchanged for the status of a permanent, integral part of society, as well illustrated by one Ukrainian migrant statement: 'I think that, no matter what, for the rest of my life, I will always remain a foreigner, a stranger. No matter how hard I try, what I do, even if I knew Polish, even if there was no accent, it won't matter – I still won't be "one of them"' (P2, Lana, F, 26, Ukraine).

'I can't rely on anyone else, only on myself' and 'When you believe in yourself, it's enough for fulfilling something'. Self-responsibilisation a consequence of the internalisation of responsibility

Finally, the last important driver of migrants' responsibilisation for integration is a process influenced by broader neoliberal discourse (Binkley 2014; Bröckling 2015; Ikonen and Nikunen 2019; Juhila and Raitakari 2016; Kelly 2006; Sofritti *et al.* 2020; Sultana 2024). This phenomenon arises from young newcomers' internalisation of responsibility for this domain, leading to self-responsibilisation. Self-responsibilisation also occurs as a consequence of the broader demands of an individualised society (Bauman 2005), a dynamic that is particularly relevant for young migrants entering adulthood (Oliveira *et al.* 2024).

Under the influence of these expectations, even though young migrants face difficulties during integration and speak openly about them, they continue to take further steps to address these challenges, believing it is their responsibility to do so. Despite the obstacles they face, they keep trying to integrate, convinced that they themselves must work harder to overcome the problems. It is also evident that young migrants take responsibility for their own 'fate' and 'success' in the process of finding their way in a new country, internalising the demands imposed on them by the system (cf. Juhila and Raitakari 2016). Our interviewees emphasised their need to exert effort and take action to achieve their integration goals: 'First of all, don't be afraid of this integration, be open to what is unknown, take some risks but try and cooperate, communicate with more and more people and knock on every door. One won't open, the other will open' (P2, Habriela, F, 29, Ukraine). This is associated with migrants considering that they need to step out of their comfort zone.

Migrant interviewees, talking about their integration in Poland, emphasised the importance of personal resources for this process in the first place (Winogrodzka *et al.* 2024), resources such as determination, rather than support from the state or host society. This involves setting goals and striving to achieve them: 'You should always keep in mind your purpose in coming here' (P2, Simon, M, 26, Bangladesh). Additionally, perseverance and a determination not to give up were essential for them: 'I'm stubborn in life in general and it has helped me a lot because I keep going to the end, to victory – and, most importantly, a person should know what he wants' (P2, Maria, F, 23, Ukraine). These traits were often described as crucial for achieving success in the integration process.

The imperative of development and risk-taking within the neoliberal discourse indoctrinates young migrants into an 'entrepreneurial mindset', relying on constant self-enhancement and a proactive approach to challenges, thus also perceiving themselves as human beings in categories of 'success' and 'failure' (Bröckling 2015; Kelly 2006). As Maria (P2, F, 23, Ukraine) said, 'The most important thing is the desire to develop'. This perspective fosters a self-improvement culture whereby migrants and, generally, young people, are encouraged to constantly invest in themselves through education and

professional development (Winogrodzka 2025). The attitude of trial and error, the capacity to overcome setbacks and the ability to draw life lessons from them are highly valued (Ikonen and Nikunen 2019).

Responsible self-management of oneself, one's migration and integration path require a change of not only one's attitudes and behaviour but also one's mindset (Binkley 2014). Features such as resilience, flexibility and adaptability, even to situations of societal injustice and institutional discrimination, are key. As Katia (P2, F, 28, Ukraine) said: 'I understood that you have to adapt to the situation'. This forces upon the migrants an essentially conformist attitude which, in addition, forces them to internalise all the hardships they have to go through. After all, as the neoliberal discourse taught them, everyone is the architect of his/her own (mis)fortune (Sultana 2024). As Anzelika (P2, F, 27, Belarus) said: 'When you believe in yourself, it's enough for fulfilling something'. Young people feel social pressure to easily adapt and navigate efficiently in the new socio-economic and cultural environment, even when this environment is hostile to them. In the context of the 'right mindset', no less important is a positive attitude towards the things (which are sometimes not positive at all) that migrants encounter – 'The person should not feel bad but realise that it is not that bad. See the positive side in every situation' (P2, Katia, F, 28, Ukraine).

This attitude of resilience and optimism aligns with the neoliberal discourse, which promotes the idea that success is attainable for anyone who works hard enough – yet still experiences difficulties and suffering – but who maintains the 'right' attitude, thus persevering towards their goal (Ikonen and Nikunen 2019). Fatih told us about the need for strong mental health to cope with challenges in the new country:

> *I think it's about mindset. (...) I have to survive in a very different place. (...) Those who are really weak in a mental way, those who are not very strong mentally, it's hard for them to survive in a new environment. In the beginning you have to be very smart, your mental health should be very good, otherwise you won't be able to adapt to everything fast* (P2, Fatih, M, 27, Bangladesh).

The neoliberal discourse promises 'equal opportunities for all', leading young migrants to believe that those who fall behind can only blame themselves and are perceived by society as 'losers'. Migrants who go to a foreign country fear returning for this reason, which reinforces the pressure to not give up in difficult moments and to view them as positive experiences that build resilience: 'I would advise new migrants not to give up, not to pack their luggage to go back; many people are tempted to do that when difficulties start. This experience, even if it's not pleasant, it's very useful. Give yourself time' (P2, Anzelika, F, 27, Belarus). Such an approach by migrants is sometimes compounded by parental attitudes (Castles 2013). In instances where parents withhold support for their child's migration decision, the young migrants often feel compelled to be entirely self-reliant, because they want to prove to their parents that they made the right decision. Conversely, if the migration was initiated by the parents, they may exert considerable pressure, because they have already put effort and investment into it and, in some cases, even expect their child to facilitate their subsequent relocation to Europe (Trąbka, Pietrusińska and Winogrodzka 2023).

Regardless of the challenges experienced, young migrants, especially those in vulnerable conditions, stated that difficulties in the integration process have their temporal dimension and therefore will, sooner or later, ultimately end with a positive outcome: 'In the integration programme they also said that it's the psychology of a migrant – you have a downfall but later it gets better and better, you can't stay on the bottom' (P2, Anzelika, F, 27, Belarus). Therefore, it is not worth throwing everything at the

'half way' point. This becomes evident in situations when migrants have been waiting for their residence permit for such a long time already that their only feasible option becomes even more waiting.

Additional pressure comes from the investments already made in self-development to 'stand out from the crowd' and be competitive, which prevents one then stepping back. Habriela's experience indicated that, once you are on this path, no matter what difficulties you encounter, you must continue the efforts to pursue your goal, according to the principle that investments made have to pay off. She saw no other scenario, saying 'Because that's just how it is'. She emphasised that the social world is shaped this way and she will not change it. Therefore, the only way out is 'to keep moving forward'.

> *What motivates me? It's the fact that I've already put so much effort into this that I simply can't give it up. I've worked so hard, I've done so much, I have to keep moving forward, so there's no turning back. (...) I don't really have much of a choice, I'm moving forward because that's just how it is. (...) Sometimes, when I'm at such a low point in this journey, when things aren't working out, I'm feeling down, whether emotionally or financially, I tell myself: 'Just pull yourself together, keep going, you've already done so much, you can keep going'* (P2, Habriela, F, 29, Ukraine).

In line with 'no pain, no gain' philosophy, neoliberalism creates social expectations that young migrants should persistently strive and persevere, despite encountering adversity and hardship over which they have no influence. Furthermore, it causes them to express appreciation and gratitude for their challenging experiences, on the assumption that all difficulties are crucial learning moments that pave the way for future success (Ikonen and Nikunen 2019). Consequently, the best strategy is to turn all experiences into an educational opportunity, as exemplified in the statement cited above by Anzelika:

> *They say that a person grows in uncomfortable moments, that's how you get experience, and any experience will give an easier road later. Once you overcome something with difficulties, you know you can do it again. You probably need to treat difficulties that they will pass, that's a growing point* (P2, Anzelika, F, 27, Belarus).

This process is marked by a high level of acceptance for the lack of external support: 'I can't rely on anyone else, only on myself' (P2, Eleonora, F, 18, Belarus). Taking for granted the need to deal with integration challenges on their own limits migrants' inclination to seek and ask for institutional help. This aligns with the general tendency of the host society to abdicate their share of responsibility for migrant integration, which we have described in the previous empirical sections of the article. In addition, while emphasising that 'If someone doesn't want to help you, they have a right to this' (P2, Anzelika, F, 27, Belarus), migrants simultaneously forget and diminish their right to receive help in the integration process.

Influenced by the neoliberal discourses of self-responsibilisation, young migrants construct their narratives around a 'self-governing, surviving, and happy self' (Ikonen and Nikunen 2019: 833). They expressed a sense of gratitude towards the host country for the opportunities received, thus sometimes not giving themselves the right to talk about the oppressive situations which they go through (Jaskulowski and Pawlak 2019; Thérová 2023) – such as racism, xenophobia and other types of discrimination. 'Poland is a country that opens various possibilities related to what you want to do. [Here] you can try; if you fail, you can keep trying. Poland doesn't trap you in one field for the rest of your life' (P2, Olga, F, 28, Belarus).

Additionally, perceiving the host country through the lens of a place that offers numerous opportunities, compared to their country of origin, leads to the conviction among young migrants that, as a result, they should strive to be useful citizens, workers and, more broadly, valuable individuals to the host society (Ratzman and Sahraoui 2021). This results in migrants being hesitant to talk about the difficulties they encounter and this inhibits them from criticising the host society.

Young migrants, in their pursuit of self-fulfilment, independence and self-reliance, at the same time expressed a strong belief in their agency and capability to shape their destinies. For instance, one interviewee emphasised that the realisation of plans depends mainly on individual efforts and ambitions, disregarding the structural and contextual factors that may hinder the implementation of individual plans – '100 per cent depends on me, (...) depends on your ambitions, abilities, using what you know' (P2, Luka, M, 22, Ukraine). Another study participant said: 'I felt my power during these events and I've realised that nothing is coming out of nowhere – you have to work for everything; if you want to have something, you really need to deserve it' (P2, Natali, F, 26, Georgia).

However, what needs to be emphasised is that young people's attitude based on courage, independence and perseverance may have negative consequences:

> *The neoliberal mechanisms enforcing (self)development, showing initiative, unleashing one's potential, competing, being resilient to stressful situations, and the need to make rational and economically viable choices (...) often lead* [young adults] *to life's traps, increasing disorder in everyday reality, and a sense of perpetual uncertainty'* (Waniek 2023: 34, own translation).

The overlapping challenges of being young and a migrant result in the feeling of being left to sink or swim, as in this metaphor used by one of the study participants:

> *Beside the list of things you need to know – language, finding a job, and so on and so on, not to be late with deadlines for your university, you also need to learn how to integrate. So basically, you need to keep up all areas of your life at a high level. (...) When you are a young student and you are a young person, you feel like you are in the middle of the ocean and you don't know which way to swim, because you don't know who you want to be or which path you want to choose* (P1, Ulyana, F, 21, Belarus).

The neoliberal mindset demands perseverance from migrants and the mobilisation of all their resources towards achieving goals in the host country. In this process, there is no room for weakness. Over time, however, this pressure can contribute to physical or mental health issues and life burnout.

It is worth noting that those who felt integrated – after putting significant effort into the process – were more willing to critique the practices described above of shifting responsibility for integration and the pressures of neoliberalism, as exemplified by Marta (P2, F, 26, Ukraine): 'Before, (...) I always thought that you will never reach perfection and you always run for more and more. But in some parts of my life, I just stopped running and I'm starting to enjoy my life and live just like a human'. Openness to such criticism of societal demands may stem from a higher degree of economic and cultural capital and the length of stay in Poland, contributing to a sense of greater stability and readiness to challenge the status quo. For example, Margo (P2, F, 27, Ukraine) publicly draws attention to the issue of migrant inclusion in Poland through various artistic projects, an ability she attributes to her social position: 'What we call symbolic capital, such as education, various competitions, recognition, participation in different projects'.

Self-perpetuating mechanism of (self)responsibilisation of young migrants for integration

To summarise and systematise the findings of our analysis, this section introduces a theoretical model which we refer to as the 'self-perpetuating mechanism of (self)responsibilisation of young migrants for integration' (see Figure 1). The model captures a self-reinforcing mechanism, rooted in inefficient integration policy, societal attitudes and individual experiences, through which the responsibility for integration is shifted – from state institutions and host society to the migrants themselves.

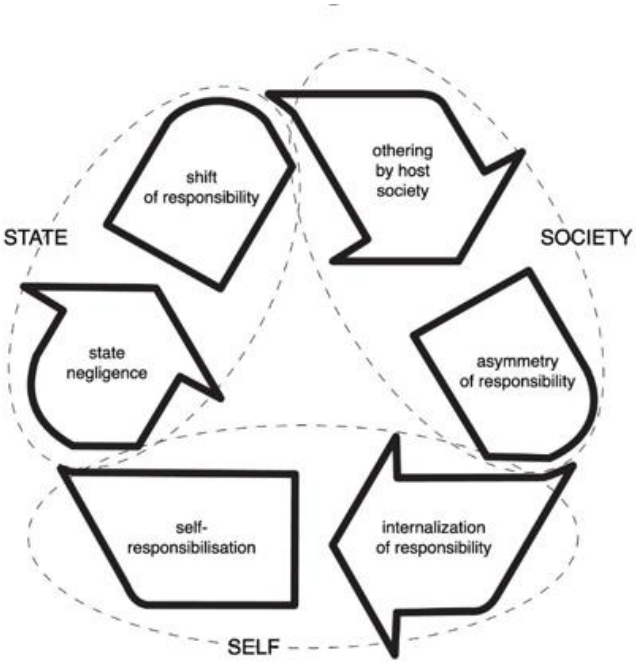
The first component of this mechanism is state negligence – the withdrawal of the state from an active role in integration. This attitude is not new: for years, when Poland was not a popular destination country, it was driven by the belief that migrants constitute merely a temporary labour force and therefore do not require long-term integration. Contemporarily, taking into account how migration trends have changed, this attitude should also be transformed. Unfortunately, political elites, guided by electoral considerations, tend to avoid actions that could be perceived as 'too pro-immigration' in the face of prevailing public attitudes. As a result, the state fails to develop comprehensive integration policies, effectively leaving migrants to navigate the process on their own and shifting the responsibility for integration onto their shoulders. Migrants are thus forced to deal by themselves, relying on their own resources and immediate surroundings but without institutional support from the state. Without a comprehensive integration policy framework – one that requires proper funding and institutional support – local governments and NGOs assisting migrants tend to merely mitigate the symptoms of the situation rather than address its root causes, which remains insufficient given the scale of the problem. At this point, the first paradox related to integration becomes evident: the state, while failing to provide structural conditions conducive to integration, simultaneously imposes expectations of swift and effective adaptation on migrants. This reveals a profound discrepancy between the structural barriers – such as institutional opacity, bureaucratic chaos and symbolic exclusion – and the integration demands placed upon migrants. As a result, the responsibility for integration is shifted onto the individual, while the system remains ineffective or even hostile. Paradoxically, the less the state does, the more it demands – not of itself but of migrants.

The state's lack of engagement is reflected in the way in which migrants are socially perceived as an external group – expected to adjust or even assimilate yet not recognised as an integral part of society. In the social sphere, the anti-migrant discourse strengthens stereotypes and discriminatory practices, while the dominant reaction from the majority of society is one of indifference or distance – often stemming from a lack of meaningful contact with migrants or their visibility solely in the context of labour and services. Expectations placed on young migrants are markedly one-sided: they are expected to integrate, learn the language and culture and refrain from causing any 'problems', despite the fact that integration is not supported as a reciprocal process. This reveals the second paradox, rooted in a profound asymmetry of expectations and involvement: the receiving society shows little openness or willingness to participate in the integration process, while simultaneously expecting migrants to integrate on their own. As a result, integration becomes a one-directional process – demanded of those who possess the fewest tools to achieve it – while the majority population remains passive or even resistant to any form of change. This form of othering constitutes the second element of the (self)responsibilisation mechanism – the asymmetry of responsibility between migrants and the host society.

The third component of our model illustrates how young migrants – operating in conditions of systemic neglect and othering – internalise dominant narratives under the influence of neoliberal discourses and the broader process of transition to adulthood, often marked by separation from family and increasing individualisation. In this context, they adopt the belief that it is the individual – not

institutions or society – who is responsible for integration. As a result, they assume full responsibility for their own well-being 'from A to Z'. This does not mean that they lack agency – on the contrary, it is precisely their agency that enables them to persevere, overcome certain barriers, continue making efforts and pursue personal development and a sense of stability and security in the host country. However, this often comes at the cost of their physical and mental health. Nor does this mean that they refrain from criticising the system – but such criticism typically emerges only after their most basic integration needs have been met. The third paradox lies precisely in the fact that public criticism of state negligence and social othering in the field of integration is the most commonly voiced by those migrants who already felt integrated (cf. 'integration paradox' – Schaeffer and Kas 2023). These are individuals with relatively high levels of capital – particularly cultural capital that is specific to the host country – as well as a more stable residence status and a secured social position. It is their knowledge, competence and higher expectations of the state and host society that allow them to more clearly perceive structural inconsistencies and symbolic boundaries that continue to block full recognition and belonging, even when all formal requirements have been met. Their criticism exposes that even a high degree of adaptation does not protect against systemic exclusion.

Figure 1. Self-perpetuating mechanism of the (self)responsibilisation of young migrants for integration



Source: Authors' elaboration.

Paradoxically, the resourcefulness of young migrants in navigating integration reinforces the perception – both within institutions and society – that no support is needed. If they are managing on their own, the assumption follows that the system is functioning effectively. In this way, the mechanism closes in on itself and begins anew, giving rise to a self-perpetuating circle. The state remains inactive, guided by public opinion and the perception of migrants as temporary newcomers; witnessing their apparent self-sufficiency, it becomes further convinced that comprehensive, supportive integration policies are

unnecessary. Society, in turn, influenced by political narratives and relying on stereotypes, shows little engagement – failing to feel responsible for or to recognise migrants as equal members of the community – while simultaneously expecting them to undertake all the efforts required for integration. Young migrants engage in integration efforts as they attempt to establish their lives in the new country, largely because they have limited alternatives. This, in turn, strengthens both institutional and societal withdrawal, reproducing the entire mechanism. The result is a multidimensional and self-reinforcing model that creates a persistent imbalance: integration becomes a one-sided process, carried out by young migrants under structural constraints and conditions of social exclusion – rather than a shared social and institutional responsibility.

Discussion and conclusion

Entering adulthood involves navigating complex roles and expectations. For young migrants, this transition is further complicated by the uncertainties of adapting to a socio-political context in a new country of residence (Oliveira *et al.* 2024). Their integration (Ager and Strang 2008; Biaback Anong *et al.* 2023; Erdal 2013; Regalia *et al.* 2022) is therefore highly dependent on institutional and social support. Yet, particularly in contexts like Poland, such support is often lacking, leaving migrants to navigate the process on their own.

While researchers have examined how neoliberal states shift responsibility for integration onto migrants (Kehoe *et al.* 2019; Uehling 2015), in this article we go further by exploring how young migrants experience this responsibilisation as well as internalise this burden – a process we term 'self-responsibilisation'. Our main contribution to the existing literature lies in elucidating how responsibilisation and self-responsibilisation for integration among young migrants are manifest, as well as the underlying causes and consequences of these processes. First, responsibilisation refers to the shift of responsibility onto migrants, where state withdrawal, inefficient infrastructure and exclusionary attitudes of the host society make integration an individual task. This reflects broader neoliberal trends of transferring responsibility for social outcomes onto individuals (Liebenberg *et al.* 2015; Pyysiäinen *et al.* 2017). Second, self-responsibilisation involves the internalisation of these expectations. Migrants come to see integration as a personal obligation, shaped by neoliberal discourses of extreme individualism, self-reliance and the pursuit of self-made success (Juhila and Raitakari 2016; Sofritti *et al.* 2020). Thirdly, we argue that responsibilisation and self-responsibilisation are intertwined and mutually reinforcing processes. As shown in the self-perpetuating mechanism of (self)responsibilisation, the external imposition of responsibility by the state and society strengthens migrants' internalised belief that integration is their own task. The outlined paradoxes help to explain how and why the entire mechanism functions and reproduces itself. This dynamic diverts attention away from structural shortcomings and normalises the expectation that migrants themselves should overcome integration barriers. Consequently, young migrants face a dual burden: navigating external obstacles while managing internalised pressure to adapt independently. While some may achieve empowerment through resource mobilisation, many in vulnerable positions face frustration, withdrawal or internalised failure that has an effect on their well-being. Even seemingly integrated migrants remain exposed to exclusion and systemic precarity.

Although grounded in the Polish context, the proposed model of (self)responsibilisation may also be relevant in other countries influenced by neoliberal and populist narratives, which are increasingly gaining traction across many Western societies. In such contexts, integration is increasingly framed as an individual task across all migrant groups. This presents an urgent challenge for policymakers,

researchers, activists and migrants themselves: how to reimagine integration as a shared societal responsibility – without undermining migrants' agency. Addressing this challenge requires further research.

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Notes

1. The Polish Migration Consortium (Polish: *Konsorcjum Migracyjne*) is a cooperation platform of nine social organisations working on behalf of migrants and refugees. The Consortium coordinates the activities of its member organisations so as to make better use of available resources and share them effectively. Its work includes counselling and support (legal, psychological, social, vocational) for migrants, integration and information activities for Polish citizens and migrants, Polish-language courses and the monitoring of the social and political situation of migration. Link: https://konsorcjum.org.pl/en/about-us/.

2. The ultimate goal of the MIMY project was to derive evidence-based policy recommendations, after examining the effectiveness of integration policies and investigating the integration processes of young non-EU migrants who find themselves in vulnerable situations. In the project we used a broad concept of vulnerability 'including dimensions like negative life events, adverse childhood experiences, illness, injuries and disabilities, as well as social, cultural and economic exclusion' (Trąbka, Pietrusińska and Winogrodzka 2023: 20). In the research we gave space to the young migrants to define themselves in which aspects related to integration they felt vulnerable (e.g. health, the labour market, education, political participation etc.).
3. Each quote was signed, providing information about the part of the study it comes from (P1–P3); the nickname of the research participant, their age and country of origin (regarding young migrants), gender (F – female, M – male) or the sector represented (in the case of stakeholders).

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Migratory Readiness and Experiences of Mobility in Polish Emerging Adults

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This paper focuses on a relatively under-researched group of emerging adults. The main goal was to see whether gendered patterns, inherited cultural capital, economic situation and domicile specifics – as well as available mobility strategies reproduced in internationally mobile families and mobile peer networks – correlate with the current and future mobility of emerging adults. The survey was based on a random sample of 302 Poles aged between 18 and 29. The level of migratory readiness and mobility experiences is higher than in older cohorts. The logistic regression models show that migratory readiness diminishes with age and increases with a higher level of inherited cultural capital and in respondents who socialise in transnational families. Respondents from internationally mobile families were also more mobile. Interestingly, while gender is not associated with migratory readiness, it correlates with past mobility, with a higher level of mobility among males. The transition to adulthood, requiring entering new social roles, reduces the readiness but not the actual mobility. The only factor associated with both migratory readiness and past mobility was socialisation in internationally mobile families. This underlines the role of reproduction of the migratory culture.

Keywords: emerging adults, migratory readiness, internationally mobile family, migratory culture

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Introduction

In this paper, we want to explore emerging adults' migratory readiness and international mobility experiences. Mobility is a part of the contemporary social world (Castles and Miller 2011), especially for the youngest generations (Frändberg 2014; Robertson, Harris and Baldassar 2018); however, youths' and emerging adults' mobility is located on the margins of migratory studies (Geisen 2010). The inclusion of the mobility plans, apart from the actual migration, brings insights into future-oriented data, which can reveal additional aspects (Kaufmann, Bergman and Joye 2004). Following Cuzzocrea and Mandich (2016), we assume that it allows for the investigation of the way in which emerging adults anticipate their life strategies and thus constitute their subjectivities (Appadurai 2005).

We test associations between mobility experiences and migratory readiness with micro-level characteristics, such as gender, domicile sizes, father's educational level and economic situation. We assume that, apart from typical push-out factors, such as the economic situation and available life strategies dependent on the domicile specifics, the inherited cultural capital and gender patterns may be associated with emerging adults' mobility. We also want to see whether the local migration cultures play a role in current and planned mobility. The reproduction of the cultures of migration are explored in relation to two networks: family and peers. Our hypothesis is that the patterns of mobility in the familial and peer networks should be associated with emerging adults' individual mobility strategies. The empirical basis is a survey on a random sample of 302 Poles aged 18–29. We used cross-tab analysis and logistic regression models to address the research questions.

Research on emerging adults' mobility is scarce, as this group is usually not distinguished from other age cohorts. In our paper, we want to fill the gap in the literature. We assume that mobility in the transition from adolescence to adulthood can give insights into the role of migration – as an experience and a cultural concept – in the *rite de passage*. Following this anthropological metaphor, emerging adulthood can be seen as a liminal period. The decisions the emerging adults make are crucial for their future biography (Tanner 2006: 21–24), therefore the research on this specific age cohort can bring predictions for future generations' mobility strategies.

Emerging adults

Global North societies are characterised by the enlarging gap between adolescence and adulthood. It results from the following changes: the technological revolution, the sexual revolution and women and youth emancipation which started in the 1960s and 1970s (Arnett 2024: 3). The increasing role of knowledge and skills in the job market raised educational requirements for the new labour force, prolonging the educational trajectories. Simultaneously, the sexual revolution and women's engagement in the job market delayed the average matrimonial and reproduction decisions (Castells 2013). Young adults did not prioritise starting their own families. They still assumed that it was an important goal associated with stability but that it was also the end of independence and spontaneity (Arnett 2024). The socially constructed definition of adulthood has changed. Out of the traditional 'Big Five' markers – completing one's education, obtaining a job, leaving the parental home, getting married and having children, which indicate social roles and responsibilities obtained (Settersten, Ottusch and Schneider 2015) – the significance of the last two diminished and the length of necessary education was prolonged (Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Carroll, Madsen, McNamara Barry and Badger 2007).

The term 'emerging adults', describing the distinctive life stage, was introduced into the literature by Jeffrey Arnett (2000). Arnett was initially referreing to 18–24 year olds but, considering their prolonged

educational trajectories, he finally established the upper margin at 29 years (Arnett 2000). The stage of emerging adulthood is characterised by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, a feeling of 'in-betweenness' in adolescence and adulthood, a sense of possibility or optimism (Arnett 1998, 2000: 200; Nelson *et al.* 2007) and control over life markers (Grob, Krings and Bangerter 2001: 182). As a transition period, it is inevitably coined with a feeling of insecurity but, when we add mobility to this equation, the challenge increases. Mobile emerging adults have not only to face changes in their societal and familial roles – passing through adulthood markers – but also to position themselves in a different societal and cultural environment (Geisen 2010).

Migration, migration cultures and internationally mobile families

In this paper, we understand migration as any transnational mobility undertaken due to goals other than leisure or tourism (Kaczmarczyk, Kępińska and Napierała 2008; Kawczyńska-Butrym 2009; Napierała 2008). This understanding of migration, independent of the time frames assumed in advance, aligns with the understanding of migration as a (permanent) life strategy and (temporary) settlement in the receiving country (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011; Morokvasic-Muller 2004). We want to research both experienced and planned mobility. Although the latter is more volatile and changes with age (Zaiceva 2014), it reveals individual attitudes towards mobility (Blynova, Popovych, Bokshan, Tsilmak and Zavatska 2019) and can show to what extent migration is normalised in the culture as a normative strategy (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011).

Migratory decisions and strategies are not developed in a vacuum. The role of the closest networks is crucial to understanding the mobility patterns (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011). They are a key part of the complex called migration culture (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011; Kandel and Massey 2002), which is a mechanism of the intra-community and inter-generational transfer of socially shared assumptions about mobility (Cohen 2004). When migration is socially accepted as a life strategy (Geisen 2010), it becomes normalised and forms a part of the symbolic transition between adolescence and adulthood (Bagnoli 2009; Madianou and Miller 2012; Robertson *et al*. 2018; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2002). Migratory culture shapes the identities not only of mobile individuals but also of immobile individuals too (Chan 2017).

We decided to focus on two sites of reproduction (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011) of the migratory culture: internationally mobile families and peers' networks. The internationally mobile family is understood here as a modified extended family temporally divided by the administrative borders created by national states (cf. Chavez 1992; Parreñas 2001a, 2001b, 2005). Previous research proved that socialisation in transnational settings increases the willingness for mobility. This association can be theorised not only as the development of particular life strategies and modelling through socialisation but also as delivering the resources necessary for mobility (Walczak 2016). The available literature shows the significant role of attitudes to migration as a strategy among peers and the availability of mobile peer networks as a crucial factor shaping individual mobility trajectories (Herz, Díaz-Chorne, Díaz-Catalán, Altissimo and Carignani 2018; Mani and Riley 2019; Ogden and Mazzucato 2022).

Methods

Participants

The results presented below come from a survey on a random sample of Polish citizens aged 18–29, stratified by gender and locality type. Respondents were recruited from the Norstat Poland internet panel, therefore the sample, albeit random, cannot be considered representative. Norstat's panel consists of over 257,000 respondents who registered voluntarily, which may be a source of bias. The online questionnaires were distributed via email in October 2022 and 303 complete answers were obtained. The average completion time was 12 minutes, with a maximum of 49 minutes and a minimum of 3. The structure of the final sample does not differ from the census data (Statistics Poland 2023) in terms of gender ($chi^2(1, n=302)=0.013$; $p=0.908$), age ($chi^2(11, n=303)=17.585$; $p=0.092$) and regional distribution ($chi^2(15, n=303)=14.644$; $p=0.66$). The maximum error of proportion for the 95 per cent confidence level was +/-5.8 per cent. The study received positive feedback from the ethical commission of the Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw.

Table 1. Sample descriptives

Category	Number	%
Gender		
Male	153	50.7
Female	149	49.3
Total	302	100.0
Age	M = 23.98	SD = 3.40
Education		
Completed education	170	56.3
Continuing to study	132	43.7
Total	302	100.0
Financial dependency/independence		
Total financial independence from parents	143	47.4
Occasional financial support	74	24.5
Regular financial support from parents	26	8.6
Total financial dependency on parents	59	19.5
Total	302	100.0
Employment status		
Full-time job	154	51.0
Part-time job	89	29.5
Professionally inactive	59	19.5
Total	302	100.0
Housing status		
Living with parents	156	51.7
Living in an independent household	146	48.3
Total	302	100.0

Some 50.5 per cent of the respondents were males, 49.2 per cent were females and 0.3 per cent declared a non-binary gender identification. As a non-binary gender was declared by one respondent

only, we had to exclude it from further analysis. It reduced the gross sample size in the results section to 302.

The mean age was 23.9 years (SD=3.41). Some 56.1 per cent had already finished their education, while 43.9 per cent continued studying at post-secondary school or at university. Furthermore, 47.2 per cent declared total financial independence and 24.4 per cent occasional independence, while 8.6 per cent received regular support from their parents. Of the sample, 19.8 per cent were completely financially dependent on their parents, slightly more than half (50.8 per cent) had a full-time job and fewer than one-fifth (19.5 per cent) were not active on the job market. Just over half (51.8 per cent) lived with their parents. The detailed descriptives are enclosed in Table 1.

Measures

- Internationally mobile family

To measure the experience of being raised in a family of mobile parents, we asked about the total length of international economic migration of the respondent's mother and father or legal caregivers. If at least one parent/legal caregiver has spent over one month working abroad, the family is classified as applying an international mobility strategy. It resulted in 41.3 per cent of emerging adults in the study experienced temporary separation from at least one parent due to labour migration (see Table 2).

- Mobile peers' network

Through a dichotomous question about having close friends living abroad, we found that slightly over 47 per cent of our respondents declared having mobile peers in their network (see Table 2).

- Migration readiness

We measured migration readiness with a 4-item question about future settlement plans. Respondents could declare staying in Poland (42.6 per cent), permanent migration to another country (14.5 per cent), temporary migration to another country (16.8 per cent) or a lack of plans (26.1 per cent). We use a recoded version of this variable in subsequent models. Both permanent and temporary plans are coded as a declaration of mobility or of non-mobility – staying in Poland – while the missing answers are excluded.

- Past mobility

We asked the respondents about their experiences of working abroad. Almost 17 per cent (16.8) spent less than one month working abroad and 8.9 per cent more than one month (16 months on average). Almost three-quarters (74.3 per cent) had not experienced labour migration (see Table 2). In the subsequent models, we use two combinations of these values as outcome variables: any past mobility (respondents declaring any length of migration) and mobility exceeding one month.

Table 2. Measures

	Number	%
Mobile parents (Did one of your parents/legal caregivers work abroad for longer than a month but less/longer than a year in total?)		
At least one mobile parent/caregiver	124	41.1
Resident parents/caregivers	178	58.9
Total	302	100.0
Mobile peers network (Do you have any close friends living abroad?)		
Yes	142	47.0
Not	160	53.0
Total	302	100.0
Migration readiness (Do you plan in the future to…)		
Stay in Poland	129	42.7
Migrate permanently to another country	43	14.2
Migrate temporarily to another country	51	16.9
I don't know	79	26.2
Total	302	100.0
Past mobility (Have you worked abroad in the past?)		
No	225	74.5
Yes, less than one month	50	16.6
Yes, longer than one month	27	8.9
Total	302	100.0
Length of migration (How long have you been working abroad?) (n=27)	M = 16.3	SD = 19.8

Data analysis

The analysis is divided into two sections: on respondents' migratory readiness and on their migratory experience. In each section, we start by presenting descriptive statistics, followed by the cross-tab analysis with the use of a non-parametric test. The section on migratory readiness includes two logistic regression models, the first covering sociodemographic predictors and the second adding the role of internationally mobile families and mobile peer networks. In the migratory experience section, we use two logistic models with the same set of predictors but with two outcome variables: experience of mobility without any time limits and mobility exceeding one month. All the analysis was performed with an SPSS package v. 29.

Results

Migration readiness

As mentioned above, less than one-third (31.3 per cent) of emerging adults foresee their mobility: 42.6 per cent plan to live in Poland, while 16.8 per cent intend to move permanently to another country and 14.5 per cent to move temporarily. Over a quarter (26.1 per cent) reported a lack of plans.

The mobility plans are not associated with gender ($chi^2(2, n=302)=2.617$; $p>0.05$), size of domicile ($chi^2(9, n=302)=14.020$; $p>0.05$), father's education ($chi^2(6, n=279)=12.186$; $p=0.058$) or evaluation of the economic situation ($chi^2(3, n=302)=0.500$; $p>0.05$). The significance of association with the father's educational level is only 0.8 percentage points lower than the assumed 95 per cent confidence level. The only significant association is age: the younger the respondents are, the more of them voice plans for permanent or temporary migration abroad ($chi^2(9, n=302)=23.142$; $p=0.006$). After excluding respondents who did not have a plan at the time, the difference between the 18–20 cohort (36.4 per cent) and the 27–29 (69.1 per cent) group is almost double (see Table 3).

Table 3. Associations between migration readiness and demographic and social status

		Mobility plans (number and percentage)				
		Stay in Poland	**Migrate permanently**	**Migrate temporarily**	**I don't know**	**Total**
Gender	Male	68 (44.4)	24 (15.7)	27 (17.6)	34 (22.2)	153 (100.0)
	Female	61 (40.9)	19 (12.8)	24 (16.1)	45 (30.2)	149 100.0)
Age in years*	18–20	16 (27.1)	8 (13.6)	20 (33.9)	15 (25.4)	59 (100.0)
	21–23	34 (43.0)	16 (20.3)	12 (15.2)	17 (21.5)	79 (100.0)
	24–26	32 (44.4)	7 (9.7)	11 (15.3)	22 (30.6)	72 (100.0)
	27–29	47 (50.5)	13 (14.0)	8 (8.6)	25 (26.9)	93 (100.0)
Domicile	Village	55 (45.8)	7 (5.8)	21 (17.5)	37 (30.8)	120 (100.0)
	City <50k	26 (40.0)	15 (23.1)	9 (13.8)	15 (23.1)	65 (100.0)
	City 50–100k	13 (40.6)	7 (21.9)	5 (15.6)	7 (21.9)	32 (100.0)
	City >100k	35 (40.7)	15 (17.4)	16 (18.6)	20 (23.3)	86 (100.0)
Father's education level	Primary or secondary	76 (47.8)	15 (9.4)	27 (17.0)	41 (25.8)	169 (100.0)
	High	27 (44.3)	9 (14.8)	11 (18.0)	14 (23.0)	61 (100.0)
	BA or higher	19 (32.2)	16 (27.1)	11 (18.6)	13 (22.0)	59 (100.0)
Economic situation	Bad	29 (39.7)	12 (16.4)	23 (16.4)	20 (27.4)	73 (100.0)
	Good	100 (43.5)	32 (13.9)	39 (17.0)	59 (25.7)	230 (100.0)

* $p<0.05$.

In the first logistic regression model (Table 4), we used gender, age, domicile size and respondent's father's educational level as predictors. Migratory readiness was recoded to the dichotomous variable: 0 – plan to stay in Poland, 1 – plan to move temporarily or permanently. We excluded respondents who were not able to declare their plans. The model fit the data ($p>0.05$ in H-L test) and explained 13.8 per cent of the probability of changes in a respondent's migratory readiness ($R^2_N=0.136$). Two predictors

showed significant results. Being in the youngest, 18–20, cohort increased the probability of declaring future mobility by 4.5 times (OR=4.491, p=0.001, 95 per cent CI [1.827 4.934]) and having a father with a university diploma increased it more than two times (OR=2.193, p=0.041 95 per cent CI [1.034 4.652]).

Table 4. Sociodemographic associations of migration readiness

		B	SD	OR	[95%CI]
Gender (1-M)		0.101	0.308	1.106	[0.605 2.021]
Age in years	18–20	1.502	0.459	4.491**	[1.827 11.039]
	21–23	0.573	0.395	1.774	[0.818 3.845]
	24–26	0.285	0.416	1.329	[0.588 3.005]
	27–29				
Domicile					
	Village				
	City <50k	-0.684	0.395	0.505	[0.233 1.094]
	City 50–100k	0.106	0.421	1.111	[0.487 2.535]
	City >100k	0.194	0.504	1.214	[0.452 3.261]
Father's education level	Primary or secondary				
	High	0.372	0.371	1.45	[0.7 3.002]
	BA or higher	0.815	0.384	2.259*	[1.064 4.793]
Economic situation (1 – good)		-0.430	0.366	0.65	[0.317 1.332]
Constant		-0.623	0.484	0.536	
R^2_N		136			
n		210			

* p<0.05; ** p<0.001.

The role of socialisation in transnationalism in migration readiness

The experience of growing up in a family using an international mobility strategy was associated with migratory readiness ($chi^2(3, n=302)=8.048$, p=0.045). The children of mobile parents more often indicated having plans for permanent or temporary migration (by 14.8 pp.) and were slightly less likely to report a lack of any plans (2.2 percentage point difference). There was no association with their peers' mobility ($chi^2(3, n=302)=1.84$, p>0.05). Crosstabs are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Associations between migration readiness and internationally mobile family and peer networks

		Mobility plans (number and percentage)				
		Stay in Poland	Migrate permanently	Migrate temporarily	I don't know	Total
Mobile parent*	No	85 (47.8)	20 (11.2)	25 (14.0)	48 (27.0)	178 (100.0)
	Yes	44 (35.2)	24 (19.2)	26 (20.8)	31 (24.8)	125 (100.0)
Migrating peers	No	64 (40.0)	23 (14.4)	31 (19.4)	42 (26.3)	160 (100.0)
	Yes	65 (45.5)	21 (14.7)	20 (14.0)	37 (25.9)	143 (100.0)

* p<0,05.

In the second logistic regression model (Table 6), we added socialisation in internationally mobile families and having mobile peers – both to gender, age, domicile size and respondent's father's educational level – as predictors. Migration readiness was used as an outcome variable. The model fit with the data (H-L test) was insignificant and explained the 18.4 per cent of changes in migratory readiness (R^2_N=0.184). The strongest predictor was living in a city of between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. It raised the probability of declaring migration readiness by 3.2 times (OR=3.267, p=0.027, 95 per cent CI [1.147 9.299]). The association with growing up with at least one mobile parent was also strong, increasing migration readiness by 147 per cent (OR=2.469, p=0.005, 95 per cent CI [1.311 4.649]). We also observed the role of age. The model confirmed that the youngest respondents have the highest level of migratory readiness. Being a member of each older cohort reduced the probability of declaring a willingness to live abroad by 60 per cent (cohort 21-23, OR=0.399, p=0,049, 95 per cent CI [0.160 0.997], 71 per cent (cohort 24-26, OR=0.294, p=0.012, 95 per cent CI [0.113 0.762], and 76 per cent (cohort 27–29, OR=0.240, p=0.002, 95 per cent CI [0.095 0.603].

Table 6. Socialisation to transnationalism, sociodemographic factors and migration readiness

		B	SD	OR	[95% CI]
Gender (1-M)		0.206	0.318	1.229	[0.659 2.290]
Age in years	18–20				
	21–23	-0.918	0.467	0.399*	[0.160 0.997]
	24–26	-1.225	0.486	0.294*	[0.113 0.762]
	27–29	-1.427	0.470	0.240*	[0.095 0.603]
Domicile	Village				
	City <50k	0.772	0.415	2.164	[0.959 4.882]
	City 50–100k	1.184	0.534	3.267*	[1.147 9.299]
	City >100k	0.755	0.406	2.128	[.961 4.713]
Father's education level	Primary or secondary				
	High	0.337	0.378	1.401	[0.667 2.941]
	BA or higher	0.736	0.393	2.088	[0.966 4.509]
Economic situation (1 – good)		-0.332	0.376	0.717	[0.343 1.498]
Mobile parent (1 – yes)		0.904	0.323	2.469*	[1.311 4.649]
Mobile peers (1 – yes)		-0.080	0.315	0.923	[0.498 1.712]
Constant		-0.320	0.545	0.726	
R^2_N		0.184			
n		210			

* p<0.05.

The role of socialisation in transnationalism in past mobility

Emerging adults are a relatively mobile group. Over a quarter already had experience working abroad: 16.8 per cent less than one month and 8.9 per cent a longer period (M=16 months, Mdn=8, SD=19.8 in that group).

To see the role of socialisation in transnationalism, we constructed two logistic regression models. In the first, we used any past mobility as an outcome variable; in the second, we used mobility no shorter

than one month. Two predictors indicated different modes of socialisation: being raised in a family of mobile parent(s) and having peers with mobility experience in a network. We included two additional predictors: gender and respondent's father's educational level to control for the moderators described in the literature. Our models fit the data, as the results of the Hosmer-Lemeshow tests were insignificant ($p>0.05$) but their quality was low and varied from 11 per cent ($R^2_N=0.111$) for the first one to 5 per cent ($R^2_N=0.049$) for the second. The only significant predictor in both models was gender. Being a female reduced the probability of past mobility by 52 per cent for any duration of stay abroad (OR=0.481, p=0.012, 95 per cent CI [0.271 0.851]) and by almost 59 per cent for longer stays (OR=0.413, p=0.049 95 per cent CI [0.172 0.995]). The experience of being raised by a mobile parent is a strong, significant predictor of undertaking any mobility, increasing the probability of any form of it almost three times (OR=2.805, $p<0.001$, 95 per cent CI [1.578 4.987]) – however, it was not associated with longer migrations (OR=1.478, $p>0.05$, 95 per cent CI[0.635 3.443]).

Table 7. Associations between gender, inherited cultural capital, socialisation in internationally mobile families and mobile peer networks and past mobility

		Any past mobility				Mobility ≥1 month		
		B	**SD**	**OR**	**[95% CI]**	**B**	**SD**	**OR [95% CI]**
Gender (1-M)		-0.733	0.292	0.481*	[0.271 0.851]	-0.884	0.449	0.413*[0.172 0.995]
Father's education	Primary or secondary							
	High	0.176	0.351	1.192	[0.599 2.372]	0.323	0.502	1.381 [0.517 3.694]
	BA or higher	-0.252	0.374	0.778	[0.374 1.618]	0.143	0.527	1.154 [0.410 3.243]
Mobile parent (1 – yes)		1.032	0.294	2.805**	[1.578 4.987]	0.391	0.431	1.478 [0.635 3.443]
Mobile peers (1 – yes)		0.086	0.293	1.090	[0.614 1.934]	0.366	0.430	1.442 [0.621 3.350]
Constant		-1.227	0.321	0.293**		-2.376	0.479	0.093**
R^2_N		0.111				0.049		
n		278				278		

* $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.001$.

Discussion

Almost one-third (31.3 per cent) of emerging adults plan transnational mobility. This share is significantly lower than the migratory readiness of Polish youths reported in scarce research published in the last two decades. In Cieślińska's (2008) study among junior- and high-school students, it was slightly over 46 per cent. In Walczak's (2018) 2014 survey, the level of migratory readiness among high-school students reached almost 53 per cent. The sample of medical students from major Polish cities revealed a migratory readiness in 41–43 per cent of respondents (Bojarczuk, Duszczyk, Matuszczyk and Pszczółkowska 2022; Bojarczuk, Duszczyk, Matuszczyk, Pszczółkowska and Szyszkowska 2022). The sample specifics may cause a discrepancy between our results and those of other studies. Cieślińska and Walczak both sampled slightly younger respondents, while Bojarczuk *et al*. researched a specific professional group. The 2019 CBOS survey offers results similar to ours: among respondents younger than 30 years, migratory readiness was at 27 per cent. The level of migratory readiness may be affected by the overall economic situation and migrational landscape, as Poland is turning into an immigration

country with a relatively good economy. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, migratory readiness reached 47 per cent (Soldo, Spahić and Hasić 2021) while, in Irish students, surveyed shortly after the 2008 crisis, the figure skyrocketed to 59–62 per cent (Cairns 2014; Cairns, Growiec and Smyth 2012). It shows the volatility of migratory cultures (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011; Madianou and Miller 2012). Our data do not provide an answer to the question about the cause of the change. It can be hypothesised that this is a result of the overall economic situation, the main migration driver (Rosińska 2024; Tufiș and Sandu 2023). However, other drivers, in particular socio-cultural ones, may play a role here. On the one hand, the decrease may result from changes in the perceptions of potential destinations, rationalising the myth of the receiving country (Chavez 1992). On the other hand, the growing anti-migration discourse in Poland may affect pro-mobility attitudes (Łodziński 2017). Given our results, a decrease in migration readiness when compared with pre-2022 data, it seems that security-driven motivation (the war in Ukraine) does not affect mobility plans.

Migratory readiness decreases with age; people aged under 30 are the most-ready-to-go group (Cairns 2014; CBOS 2018; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2006; Zaiceva 2014). Therefore, we can assume that passing through adulthood markers is negatively associated with migratory readiness. As Cuzzocrea and Mandich (2016) pointed out, referring to Erikson's theory, engaging in the exploration of possible life strategies is typical for younger cohorts and constitutive of their agency. It intertwines with the *mobile turn* (Urry 2009): younger people are more familiar with shrinking physical distance in their life management (Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016).

Surprisingly, a high share (26.1 per cent) of emerging adults were not able to declare mobility or immobility plans. It is strikingly higher than the 1 per cent share reported for all age brackets (CBOS 2019) and may indicate uncertainty, as reported in research on the transition to adulthood (Leccardi 2005). The source of uncertainty may lie in the changing life and work situation but it is also possible that it indicates the possibility to choose (Frändberg 2014). It aligns with the sense of 'in-betweenness', instability and exploration related to emerging adults (Arnett 1998, 2000; Geisen 2010; Nelson *et al*. 2007).

Migration readiness is associated with age and the father's educational level. The younger the respondents are, the higher their inherited cultural capital and the greater their readiness for mobility. The association with age follows a general pattern: younger people are generally more mobile (Zaiceva 2014). The significance of age on mobility was explained by several factors, including a higher level of possible gains from migration and fewer psychological barriers, usually argued to be caused by the involvement in familial roles (Goss and Paul 1986; Lewis 1977). The question is why age differentiates migratory readiness within a relatively narrow age cohort. We assume that passing (or attempting to pass) the adulthood markers may limit planned mobility when individuals take over responsibilities attributed to new social roles (Grob *et al.* 2001).

The second significant predictor – parental educational level – shows that mobility strategies can be more accessible to specific social classes, which has already been confirmed in research (Cairns 2014; Jeffrey and Mcdowell 2004). Inherited cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) can be converted into mobility capital (Finn 2017). It somehow aligns with the neoliberal concept of a cosmopolitan, entrepreneurial young agent benefiting from middle-class privileges (Bennett 1999; Harris and Raffaetà 2021; Skrbis, Woodward and Bean 2014; Yoon 2014), reproduced globally by the media (Jeffrey 2010); on an operational level, it can be represented by the 'hyper-mobility' of middle-class students seeking new distinctions (Finn 2017). Thus, mobility remains the distinctive *rite de passage*, marking the transition to adulthood (Bagnoli 2009; Madianou and Miller 2012;Silver 2006; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2002) – although mainly for the privileged groups.

When adding socialisation in mobile parent(s) families, we identified a role of the migratory culture: being raised by mobile parents and growing up in medium-sized towns (cf. Weiss, Ferrante and Soler-Porta 2021) affects migratory readiness. Contrary to the other results (Azaola 2012; Growiec 2010; Punch 2002; Walczak 2018), there is no association with peer network mobility.

Over a quarter (25.7 per cent) of our sample declared past mobility, which is slightly higher than the 22 per cent reported for the general population (CBOS 2019). Male respondents were more mobile than females, reflecting a general population trend (CBOS 2019; Grabowska-Lusińska and Okólski 2009). Gender is an element of a realised trajectory but it is not embedded in a migratory readiness, at least not in this age group (Thomson and Taylor 2005). Growing up in a family involved in transnational mobility is a significant predictor, so we may assume that strategies learnt from mobile parents affect emerging adults' mobility transitions (Cohen 2004). It is associated with general mobility but not with longer migration periods. We suppose that being raised in an internationally mobile family provides emerging adults with a strategy that is apparently tested but not always continued.

The study presented is not free from drawbacks. The main limitation is the sample representativeness. Although random, it is based on a voluntary access panel and not on the population as a whole. Therefore, the conclusions should not be extrapolated to the population (Blom, Bosnjak, Cornilleau, Cousteaux, Das, Douhou and Krieger 2016). The main criticism of internet-based panels is the reproduction of the digital divide in social research (Leenheer and Scherpenzeel 2013). This limitation is only partially relevant to emerging adults, as internet use for this age cohort is almost equal to 100 per cent (Staistics Poland 2023). Another limitation refers to the analysis. The dichotomical construction of two main outcome variables may be criticised for a binary recognition of mobility (Harris and Raffaetà 2021).

Polish emerging adults are a particularly interesting and challenging group for migrational studies for a couple of reasons. By definition, they are a group in transition – but so is the migratory context in which they live. Poland pivots from being an emigration country to being an immigration country, which will change the migratory cultures and, in a long-term perspective, mobility strategies of the youngest generations.

Emerging adults have a high level of migration capital in terms of *access* and *competence* (Kaufmann *et al.* 2004). They come from a culture with a well-established migratory tradition and network. Most of them have migrants in their kinship and peer groups and many have experienced their parents' mobility. If they decide to move abroad, they will experience fewer constraints compared to previous generations. The high level of migratory readiness indicates that *appropriation* (Kaufmann *et al.* 2004) should also increase mobility, which may be a normalised path along which to pursue their life course (Robertson *et al.* 2018). In fact, as stated by Thomas Geisen (2010: 13), it should be considered as a structural process of developing a biography, not a unique event.

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European Transnational Carers' Lived Experiences and Perceptions of Workplace Policies in South-Western Ontario

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The lived experiences of Transnational Carer-Employees (TCEs) are becoming increasingly relevant to workplace scholarship surrounding caregiving. Furthermore, the conversations around Caregiver Friendly Workplace Policies (CFWPs) are growing due to their significance in helping caregivers to manage their care and work duties. In Canada, the growing immigrant population has led to an increased number of TCEs, yet their experiences remain understudied. The current qualitative study addresses the gap for a better understanding of TCEs experiences by exploring the lived experiences of European TCEs and their perception of CFWPs in Ontario, Canada. The findings suggest that European TCEs' caregiving experiences are shaped by cultural expectations, including those based on gender. Participants provided practical, emotional and technology-based transnational caregiving. Their caregiving experiences were impacted on by their roles as paid employees. Transnational considerations such as travel time make negotiating paid work and caregiving complex. Participants reported overall positive experiences with their employers, regarding the accommodation of their needs to provide transnational care. However, there was a lack of awareness of CFWPs. Without these policies, TCEs and other carer-employees must navigate difficult conversations with employers in order to manage work expectations and caregiving responsibilities.

Keywords: transnational carer-employees, transnational caregiving, transnationalism, caregiving, thematic analysis

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Introduction

The phenomenon of transnational caregiving is not novel in academic literature (e.g. Baldassar 2007; Dhar 2011; Giorgio and Alcantara 2021; Krzyżowski and Mucha 2013), yet it will continue to become more relevant in industrialised countries like Canada, where population growth is maintained by immigration (Government of Canada 2022). In 2021, immigrants accounted for 23 per cent of the Canadian population, with the nation's growth expected to continue due to its reliance on immigration (Statistics Canada 2022a). It is noteworthy that, following the implementation of the points-based system, the rate of Europeans immigrating to Canada has declined (Statistics Canada 2022a). Most newcomers are of working age, young and visible minorities from Asia and the Middle East. The Employment Equity Act (2021, para. 18) defines visible minorities as 'persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour'. However, Census Canada utilises the term 'racialised' to emphasise the process of racialisation (Statistics Canada 2022b); the visible-minority concept is currently under review (Statistics Canada 2024).

Racialised immigrants constitute four-fifths of labour-force growth and are expected to address Canada's job vacancies (Statistics Canada 2022a). These job vacancies were 80 per cent higher post-pandemic. Many new immigrants are providing transnational care to their aging populations (Rottenberg, Seth and Williams 2023; Sethi, Williams and Leung 2022; Shahbaz, Williams, Sethi and Wahoush 2023). Understandably, recent research on transnational caregiving has primarily focused on the experiences of racialised immigrants. Yet, Bushnik, Tjepkema and Martel (2020) note that the substantial size of Canada's aging European population will influence the health and socio-economic realities of many Canadians. As the Canadian population of European immigrants grow older so, too, will their loved ones across international borders. Global ageing is impacting on the increase in the number of caregiver-employees (CEs) in Canada and other industrialised nations (Hlebec, Monarres and Šadl 2024; Ireson, Sethi, Williams 2016; Sethi *et al.* 2022).

Defining caregiving and caregivers

Carer-Employees (CEs) are defined as:

> *family members and other significant people, who provide care and assistance to individuals (i.e. parent, spouse or life partner, adult child, sibling and/or friend) living with debilitating physical, mental and/or cognitive conditions, while also working in paid employment* (Ireson *et al.* 2016: 1).

Due to evolving dynamics of caregiving based on factors such as technological advances, changing family structures, ageing populations, gendered roles in caregiving, increase labour mobility and increased migration (Bei, Zarzycki, Morrison and Vilchinsky 2021), the literature on informal (unpaid) caregiving from afar (Bei *et al.* 2021; Cagle and Munn 2012) and scholarship on eldercare in the context of transnational settings (Amin and Ingman 2014) has increased. In a recent study of immigrants caring for their family members in Europe, Shrestha, Arora, Hunter and Debesay (2023: 43) note: 'Caregiving dynamics are changing, both in terms of motivations and approaches to caregiving'. These authors found that the lack of culturally sensitive policies has increased the care burden on immigrant families.

Distance Care Givers (DCGs) are individuals who are not living with their caregivers but provide informal care to adult family members or relatives who need help due to their physical and/or mental impairment across geographical distance within the same country (Bei *et al.* 2021). Transnational

caregivers are individuals who provide unpaid care to family, friends or relatives with physical, mental and/or emotional health-care needs across international borders (Sethi *et al.* 2022). Despite the growth in literature on caregivers providing care to their families dispersed geographically across national or international borders, we do not know much about the experiences of caregivers working in paid employment in their country of migration and providing care to their family, friends and/or relatives across international borders. (Sethi *et al.* 2022)

Transnational Carer-Employees (TCEs) 'provide unpaid/informal care across international borders to an adult family member, friend or relative with a disability and/or age-related needs, while also working in paid employment in the country of resettlement' (Sethi *et al.* 2022: 427). Transnational caregiving can include any form of support, whether emotional, financial or moral (Sethi *et al.* 2022). Often, TCEs also have dependent family members to care for in Canada. TCEs differ from migrant care-workers who migrate to high-income countries such as Canada to address labour-market shortages and are paid for their employment (Marks 2024).

One of the issues in the international caregiving literature is the heterogeneity in definitions of caregiving and caregivers (Bei *et al.* 2021; Ireson *et al.* 2016; Sethi *et al.* 2022). With the growing ageing immigrant population worldwide, it can be expected that the number of TCEs in Canada and other nations will continue to rise (Rottenberg *et al.* 2023; Sethi *et al.* 2022). Further, due to the rising demand for paid and unpaid caregivers, Caregiver Friendly Workplace Policies (CFWPs) are necessary to support caregivers in being able to balance paid employment and unpaid caregiving. To address Canada's caregiving crisis, the Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence (CCCE) has released a National Caregiving Strategy. One of the five priority areas is to support informal or family caregivers by encouraging employers to provide CFWPs across all federally regulated sectors (CCCE 2025). CFWPs are 'intentional organisational changes, whether in practices, policies or the workplace culture, which relieve work–family conflict' (Williams 2019: 1). CFWPs include policies such as flex and shared work, non-contiguous leaves, compressed work weeks, counselling, support groups and other workplace accommodations for CEs (Ireson *et al.* 2016). They are also called Family-Friendly Workplace Policies.

This article contributes to the growing scholarship on transnational caregiving – specifically on European TCEs' experiences – and offers insights about TCE's perceptions of CFWPs. The goal of this research was to continue to lift the voices of TCEs and advocate for workplace policies to help them to balance paid work and unpaid transnational caregiving. It is important to note that, in addition to providing transnational care, many TCEs also provide care to their families in Canada.

Context of the research

In the context of this study, we adopted both Hochschild's (1983) and Thomas' (1993) understandings of care, to define caregiving as a multifaceted concept and labour that draws upon emotional strength. In other words, individuals can both care about and care for others (Tronto and Fisher 1990). Although caring for and caring about individuals are not mutually exclusive, this study specifically examined TCEs who provide direct care to adults with age- or disability-related needs.

Some TCEs travel to their country of origin to provide personal care (e.g. Gui and Koropeckyj-Cox 2016; Heymann, Flores-Macias, Hayes, Kennedy, Lahaie and Earle 2009; Lahaie, Hayes, Piper and Heymann 2009). Others make informal care (having extended family or friends to help with groceries) or formal care (e.g. home-care visit) arrangements across international borders (e.g. Baldassar 2015; Brijnath 2009; Lee, Chaudhuri and Yoo 2015). Regardless, a transnational (between countries) and geographical context adds layers of complexity to how care is provided. Geographical distance is a foundational feature of

transnational caregiving. Despite the challenges which this distance presents, family ties within the context of caregiving appear to remain strong (Baldock 2000). Gender also appears to play a role in TCEs' caregiving experiences (Bernhard, Landolt and Goldring 2009; Lee *et al.* 2015). Cultural factors, in tandem with different international norms and policies of the immigrant's country of origin, their country of resettlement and their employment status, all impact on the expectations of care and how it can be received and delivered. For TCEs, the workplace also fundamentally alters how care can be delivered (Merla and Baldassar 2016). The following sections detail the relevant literature on TCEs' caregiving in the context of (1) geographical distance, (2) gender and culture, and (3) the workplace and CFWPs.

Geographical distance

Geographical distance provides new challenges as caregivers attempt to navigate complex healthcare and employment systems. While individuals can provide substantial emotional care virtually, they are more limited in their ability to help with 'everyday' practical matters (hands-on care: Kilkey and Merla 2013) such as dressing, cooking, cleaning and transportation. Nevertheless, due to technological advances, transnational caregivers play instrumental roles in establishing caregiving networks remotely (Brijnath 2009; Rottenberg *et al.* 2023). In some cases, transnational caregivers can arrange for caregiving (i.e. care coordination: Kilkey and Merla 2013) with family members and other loved ones still living in the same country as the person requiring support. However, transnational caregivers have expressed concerns about their loss of control over caregiving decisions, as they are no longer able to facilitate all caregiving needs (Amin and Ingman 2014). This can cause feelings of guilt as TCEs are not physically present to take care of their loved ones (Amin and Ingman 2014; Rottenberg *et al.* 2023).

At great geographical distances, transnational caregivers face other unavoidable challenges. For example, caregivers living in different time zones may find it difficult to organise communication times (Dhar 2011; Sethi 2022). Modern technologies can mediate some of these difficulties. For example, messaging platforms have provided more accessible international communication. Other technologies, such as shared calendars, can be beneficial for scheduling. Previous studies suggest that many transnational families rely on virtual platforms to maintain communication and sustain familial ties and bonds (Sethi *et al.* 2022). However, while the technologies serve as practical tools, they do not replace in-person interactions. Wilding (2006) expressed a sentiment felt by many transnational families – that, while technology 'can increase feelings of psychological closeness, it does not completely eliminate the effects of geographical distance' (as cited in Miyawaki and Hooyman 2021: 465). Some family members find this type of 'information and communication technologies co-presence' unsatisfying (Baldassar, Nedelcu, Merla and Wilding 2016: 133), suggesting that it cannot replace physical presence. Moreover, some individuals find that technology-mediated interactions remind them of the physical distance separating them from their loved ones (Madianou 2014). Furthermore, often, 'physical separation causes participants' struggles to be invisible to care recipients' (Rottenberg *et al.* 2023: 5).

The COVID-19 pandemic also shed light on the difficulties of transnational (Rottenberg *et al.* 2023) and long-distance caregiving (Herbst, Schneider and Stiel 2022; Shahbaz *et al.* 2023) and highlighted the needs of caregivers, due to the shutdown and nation-wide quarantine policies. Many domestic caregivers (i.e. caregivers in their home country) felt frustration at their inability to participate in medical appointments and engage in in-person conversations; they also experienced limitations in advocating for their loved ones' care (Sadler, Yan, Brauner, Pollack and Konetzka 2021).

While TCEs experienced challenges in providing care to their loved ones across international borders pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, border closures prevented them from travelling to their country of origin, even to attend a funeral (Rottenberg *et al.* 2023; Sethi 2022). Geographical distance is an identifying factor underlying all transnational caregiving. While modern technologies and techniques ease certain aspects of care, transnational caregivers still face limitations to the care they can provide across borders. Even with the advent of modern communication technologies and the intensified focus on long-distance caregiving due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of geographical distance deeply impact on the lives of transnational caregivers.

Gender and culture

Although caregiving expectations have shifted from what were once typical gender roles, recent studies have provided evidence of gender disparities in caregiving, with most caregivers being women (daughters, daughters-in-law or wives: Shrestha *et al.* 2023; Zygouri, Cowdell, Ploumis, Gouva and Mantzoukas 2021). Gender also plays a role in the type and quantity of caregiving expected from caregivers. For example, female caregivers spend more time providing emotional support to their loved ones than male caregivers (Amin and Ingman 2014; Shrestha *et al.* 2023; Zygouri *et al.* 2021). Studies have also shown that female transnational caregivers more often take leave from employment to travel to their loved ones to provide care compared to male transnational caregivers (Bernhard *et al.* 2009; Lee *et al.* 2015). Additional research has shown that caregiving is affected by overarching gender expectations and biases such as the stereotype that caregiving is a woman's job (Shrestha *et al.* 2023; Wallroth 2016). For example, men find it difficult to assume caregiving roles because of stigma related to concepts of masculinity and needing to be the 'breadwinner' as opposed to the caregiver (Maynard, Ilagan, Sethi and Williams 2018). However, other research suggests that gender is less influential in caregiving than the practical capability of caregivers at the time of need (Miyawaki and Hooyman 2021). Notably, there is a lack of research which documents nationality and ethnicity as driving factors contributing to the differences in gender expectations, as they relate to caregiving broadly (Radziwinowiczówna, Rosińska and Kloc-Nowak 2018) and TCEs roles more specifically (Sethi *et al.* 2022).

Cultural obligations and family values are also motivating factors for transnational caregivers (Miyawaki and Hooyman 2021; Ran and Liu 2021; Sethi *et al.* 2022). Scheffler (2007) defines culture as the informal and formal connections between customs, institutions, rituals, values, beliefs, practices and norms. The importance of kinship and filial piety is a consistent theme within transnational research (Sethi, Williams, Desjardins, Zhu and Shen 2018). Obligations to fulfill these duties are often culturally constructed (Baldassar 2015). For example, there is a distinct tradition of care expectations in Chinese families regarding filial piety, suggesting that children are expected to provide care for their ageing parents (Gui and Koropeckyj-Cox 2016; Sethi 2022; Sethi *et al*. 2018).

These same cultural expectations – or the perception of them – can lead to feelings of guilt in transnational caregivers. For example, transnational caregivers feel an expectation to provide financial support to their families, and this sense of duty is often influenced by cultural pressures and outside perceptions of industrialised nations being lands of wealth and opportunity (Liu and Ran 2021). During COVID-19, TCEs were unable to provide money as they had lost their jobs. This led to increased feelings of guilt as remittance is the primary form of caregiving that many TCEs provide (Rottenberg *et al.* 2023).

The role of the workplace

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the caregiving crisis. In their recommendation to the federal government for a National Caregiving Strategy, CCCE (2025: 4) note: 'Caregiving takes a significant toll on caregivers' physical, mental and financial wellbeing: caregivers in Canada are past their breaking points, just as care needs are increasing across the country'. Given the significant contribution that caregivers make to the Canadian economy, employers must get more engaged in supporting CEs to remain in their profession and be able to provide care.

Research suggests that CFWPs tailored to immigrant workers, including flexible family leave, could alleviate some of the pressures imposed by travel time (Ireson *et al.* 2016; Miyawaki and Hooyman 2021). Notably, there are substantial differences in the experiences of TCEs within different work environments. For example, larger businesses with human-resource departments are sometimes more likely to offer CFWPs (Vuksan, Williams and Crooks 2012a, b). Without CFWPs and other similar support systems in place, TCEs and other caregiver employees are limited in their ability to provide care. Likewise, they often suffer work-related consequences which also impact on their employers – such as premature retirement, health problems, reduced productivity and other costs to employers (Peters and Wilson 2017).

Despite evidence supporting the need for CFWPs to help caregivers remain in the workplace there appears to be a lack of policies and programmes currently in place for TCEs within the workplace (Amin and Ingam 2014; Sethi *et al.* 2022); those that are in place are not always well-understood by employees (Peters and Wilson 2017). In fact, even when policies do exist, immigrant workers are often ineligible for caregiving benefits (Miyawaki and Hooyman 2021). As Canada continues to rely on immigrants to address its labour shortage (Statistics Canada 2019), CFWPs must be designed to help TCEs balance paid work, transnational caregiving and caregiving to their family in Canada.

Methodology

Aims

The study discussed herein is part of a larger 5-year research programme addressing gender, health and CFWPs. The larger research programme also recruited caregivers from other demographic groups (Sethi and van Haaften 2025; Shahbaz *et al.* 2023). The overall goals of the current study were: 1) to explore the lived experiences of European TCEs in London, Ontario; and 2) to examine TCEs' understanding and knowledge of CFWPs within their workplaces. London is a city in South-Western Ontario, Canada, with a population of 422,324 (Statistics Canada 2021).

Recruitment, participants and data collection

This study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Morse 2007; Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe and Young 2018). The second author has built a substantial research programme in London, Ontario – and a research assistant (RA) emailed to contacts from this programme a flyer with the study information. Individuals were invited to participate if they were 18 years of age or older, living in London, Ontario, working, identified as European and were a caregiver to a family member or friend in their country of birth. Six participants were recruited for this study. Even though we made efforts to recruit people from different ethnicities who identified as European, we only received interest from

white participants. It may be that immigrants from the European regions in the study area are largely white or it may be that our recruitment strategy did not adequately reach non-white European immigrants. Participants' demographics are displayed in Table 1. While this is a small sample size, the study was conducted during COVID-19 health-care restrictions. Likewise, it is possible that the ageing nature of European immigrants in Canada did not fit the inclusion criteria for the study, as they were no longer working.

An RA conducted one-to-one 60–90-minute recorded interviews over Zoom, following interviewing techniques that were intensively culturally informed (Charmaz 2006). This method suited the interpretive inquiring nature of the study as it allowed for detailed and direct conversations about the topic at stake. The RA employed open-ended questions as prompts, thus allowing for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences of transnational caregiving (Charmaz 2006). The interview questions were broadly captured in four categories:

1. The challenges and opportunities of transnational caregiving
2. The economic, social and health impact of transnational caregiving
3. The cultural and gendered expectations of caregiving
4. The participants' knowledge and use of CFWPs at their workplace.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Pseudonyms	Country of origin	Gender	Care recipient	Employment status
Alex	Germany	Female	Grandparents	Part-time
James	Greece	Male	Extended family	Part-time
Magda	Poland	Female	Mother	Full-time
Maggie	Scotland	Female	Sister	Full-time
Mila	Croatia	Female	Husband	Part-time
October	Germany	Female	Grandparents	Part-time

Data analysis

The authors employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis for the initial analysis of the study data. Specifically, the researchers familiarised themselves with the interview transcripts through thorough re-reading. In Phase 1, the first author of this paper familiarised himself with the interview transcripts. In Phase 2, he generated initial codes from the data using NVivo 14. These codes were reviewed by the second and third authors. In Phase 3, codes were compiled into themes and subthemes. In Phase 4, these themes were reviewed collaboratively by the three authors, in the context of the transcripts, for comprehensiveness. In Phase 5, the final themes were solidified. This use of themes ensured that the interview data could be dissected in a meaningful way.

To further explore the data, the authors also applied foundational latent content analysis, a methodology for examining non-verbal communication established by Bales (1951). Building on what Potter and Levine-Donnerstein (1999) term 'latent projective variables', the authors documented their subjective interpretations of how key pieces of data (i.e., interview responses) were delivered, including tone of voice and other non-verbal clues (such as tone of voice), to explore potentially richer evaluations of the data. Potter and Levine-Donnerstein (1999: 258) also suggest that 'content analyses need not be limited to theory-based coding schemes and standards set by experts'. Therefore, the analyses of non-

verbal data presented in this manuscript are meant not to replace but to enrich the existing thematic analyses. Specifically, the authors have provided insights into the data based on their impressions of the participants' non-verbal communications. These analyses are presented and marked throughout the thematic analysis where relevant. Notably, most of the participants had a video on during the recording of their Zoom interview. However, one participant (Mila) did not. Therefore, non-verbal observations in that interview are limited to audio only.

Ethics

This study received approval from the McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB # 4881, 24 July 2018) and the King's University College Research Ethics Review Committee (21 June 2019). Informed consent from participants was obtained through Qualtrics. The participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. They selected pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity. The RA also made available to the participants a comprehensive resource list of community supports with up-to-date contact information. This was put in place in case participants experienced any distress during or after the interview. Participants were offered a $35 (CAD) honorarium for their participation in the study.

Author(s) positionality statement

Before we present the findings and in the spirit of reflexivity, we first present the positionality statement. A researcher's positionality is important to acknowledge as:

> *…it necessitates the researcher consciously examining their own identity to allow the reader to assess the effect of their personal characteristics and perspectives in relation to the study population, the topic under study and the research process, the effect of their personal characteristics and perspectives in relation to the study population, the topic under study and the research process* (Wilson, James and Williams 2022: 44).

There are three authors for the current study. The first is of European descent and male. The second is a female racialised immigrant who has been engaging in transnational care for over 15 years. She led the data collection and analysis processes and supervised the Research Assistant. The RA involved in the data collection process was of European descent. She kept a reflexive journal throughout the data collection process to remain conscious of how her positionality may impact on the research process (Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti 2013; Wilson *et al.* 2022). For example, the shared European ancestry of the RA conducting interviews may have influenced the data collection process to some extent. However, meaningful member-checking by giving participants the opportunity to provide feedback on the transcripts (McKim 2023) and peer-debriefing (Johnson, Crosschild, Poudrier, Foulds, McHugh, Humbert and Ferguson 2020) with the second author throughout the data collection process served as a valuable tool to reflect on potential biases and assumptions. The third author is a female racialised second-generation immigrant; her family has engaged in transnational care throughout her life. The three authors engaged in peer-debriefing throughout the data analysis process and contributed to data interpretation and implications of the study results.

Results

The thematic analysis identified three overall themes: (1) cultural expectations and gender roles, (2) multifaceted caregiving and (3) the role of the workplace and CFWPs.

Cultural expectations and gender roles

Participants in this study stated that their cultural identity played a role in their beliefs about and willingness to participate in unpaid care. Alex suggested that caring for family members is a part of her German identity. Further, James recounted that, in Greece, family comes first. The structure of the TCEs' families is deeply informed by cultural expectations and can drastically influence the way that caregivers identify themselves. For example, three participants noted that there was no difference in the quality of care they provided to their transnational family and the family in Canada, meaning they did not prioritise one over the other. One participant reflected: 'I have a sick husband, so I was taking care of him, helping him to get through life and helping my son and my daughter as well, trying to help as much as I can. Taking care of myself, it's always last' (Magda). This participant is the primary caregiver of her family in Canada, which extends to the role she feels she must play in a transnational context. This cohesion between caregiving roles across countries is also apparent in another participant's reflections on how close he feels to his family. James commented: 'I mean, it's like I don't distinguish between the levels of family, like, if I feel someone is my family, they are close to me'. He further reflected that 'in the old days, like, they all lived in the same house'. Based on these responses, family members are close regardless of their genealogical separation. Other participants reported that caregiving had been part of their upbringing:

> [My mother] *had taken care of my grandparents when, um, my grandmother had Parkinson's and so I was introduced at a very early age to caregiving: helping with bathing, general basic, um, care in the home, big farmhouse … they would take us at every opportunity to care for old relatives and they might be close by or away in the highlands … it was just a very colourful but compassionate introduction to that we gained from our parents* (Maggie).

From a non-verbal perspective, Maggie delivered this statement nonchalantly. That is, when describing family caregiving and illness in her childhood, she presented the experiences as a normal part of her upbringing. This statement was delivered in an unchanging tone. Based on this, Maggie appeared to expect this type of engagement with caregiving from a young age.

While there appeared to be a strong connection between individual family values and caregiving practice, there were also challenges. Mila reflected that, for her parents, 'it's really hard to admit that they need help. They think they can do everything for themselves but it's hard'. However, James, reflecting on the capacity of his family to ask for help, noted:

> *There's just always open lines of communication, there's daily, like, calls to my grandmother, my aunts, it's, like, we're always there for each other whether people like that or not. I mean sometimes it's like our families tend to be intrusive okay* [laughter] *so we're always in each other's business'.*

James delivered this statement with a big smile on his face; his comments about intrusiveness were not made in frustration. Based on the way he presented this response, it seems that he likes the family

closeness. For example, even though they are apart geographically (James's family is in Greece), they often pray together. Overall, there seems to be an appreciation of the importance of family and caring for family members; however, in some cases, it can be difficult to maintain these helping relationships because of pride.

For some participants, specific cultural factors impacted on their caregiving expectations – independent of gender roles and familial expectations – such as closeness with family. For example, Alex identifies the cultural impact of 'family cohesion' when discussing her caregiving family efforts, noting that she and her friends stay in contact with loved ones in Germany, 'assuming it is partially cultural'. For Alex, it is an expectation that she remain in contact with her family members in Germany. However, she was initially hesitant to describe this as a cultural expectation. Nevertheless, through further probing, there was acknowledgement that such family cohesion across geographical distance was related to culture as she also has German friends who felt the same way. This manifested itself through pauses to reflect on the discussion and interruptions to her speech, such as 'um'. James also alluded to the cultural forces that tie family members to caregiving efforts when discussing the typical dispersal patterns of families in Greece, noting 'they are a very family-oriented society. I mean even if they do move far, they visit as much as they can'.

Mila felt that, at a societal level, there were marked differences in attitudes towards and values of caregiving between Canada and Croatia, particularly for the elderly. She shared that 'in Europe it's like a natural progression of things and how people are aging that means they are going to stay in the home and their children and their grandchildren are going to take care of them'. She further explained that 'North America is, like, a little bit different … people here, they are afraid of retiring and going to a retirement home and nobody even considers whether the kids will take care of their parents when they are older'. In Croatia, it is a cultural expectation for the elderly to be cared for by their family, which is reflected in their strong welfare system. Mila suggested that there is less of an expectation for future generations to care for their elderly loved ones in Canada than in Croatia. Not unlike Mila's sentiments, October observed that there is a difference in caregiving expectations between Canada and Europe. She noted that 'friends [her] age, um, there's only really one friend here that I can think of who's taking care of her grandparents … Whereas [she knows] that European families, if you're not helping out your grandma or grandpa, you'll be sent to hell – at least that's what they think'. October ended this observation with laughter, suggesting that, while she does not necessarily believe that she would be sent to hell if she did not help her family members, the expectation is deeply engrained in her family's culture. For TCEs of European descent in Canada, caregiving is greatly influenced by cultural factors and family histories and structures.

Cultural expectations shaped gender roles. Below, the findings demonstrate how transnational caregiving responsibilities were gendered and influenced by culture. Five of the study's participants were female. Two of the participants shared that they are expected to provide care due to being female. For example, one participant expressed surprise and gratefulness for her brother's contributions:

> *…my brother. He doesn't have to do it, and he's still doing it… So I'm really grateful to my brother because he took the initiative and he's cooking and cleaning at home and I'm really surprised that he stepped up and he planned to do this* (Magda).

Magda further added: '…I think it's a woman and women always do more than the man. In Poland that man is the head of the family. The man usually makes more money'. There did not appear to be any resentment in Magda's tone or gestures as she related these gendered expectations. Magda sighed when

she explained that there simply was not an expectation for men to contribute to these types of task. She also shrugged her shoulders when she said: 'Women always do more than the man'. Indeed, her gratefulness for her brother's contributions was substantial and sincere.

When asked about how caregiving duties are divided, one participant reflected: 'My elder sister and I – and my brother to a lesser extent, a much lesser extent – it's usually the sisters that have done the support' (Maggie). She felt that she and her sister contributed more to caregiving efforts. She also shared that she 'wasn't just caregiving [or] supporting [her] family overseas. But [she] was caring for [her] in-laws here … [her] husband's parents'. She reflected that it 'was taking a huge toll, so yes, you're just torn in every direction' (Maggie). Further reflecting on her brother's contributions, Maggie shared that 'It was a big relief for [her] when [she] found out that [her] brother would just step up and start doing this extra work at home – he never did it before'.

Multifaceted caregiving

This theme explained three forms of care that participants engaged in: practical care, emotional care and technology-based care. The realities of transnational caregiving limit the types of practical care that caregivers can provide. In this study, practical caregiving served a functional role, including organising events and appointments, providing financial support and participating in daily activities.

Because of the transnational context and scheduling limitations due to work, TCEs often find it difficult to organise care for their care recipients. Alex shared that 'the time difference with Germany is six hours, so being able to find a time to talk with them would usually be in the morning. But I usually work in the mornings, so a little bit complicated that way – finding time, I guess, for everything'. Alex's tone and expressions during this part of the interview displayed frustration and sadness with the practical difficulties she experienced in providing transnational care. Alex shared these thoughts with multiple pauses and her tone was very pessimistic. Transnational realities, such as time changes and conflicting work schedules, may make it challenging for carers to connect with their loved ones synchronously. While these challenges pose limitations for all types of care, they make planning events and scheduling services particularly difficult.

Other participants shared that they provide financial care to their loved ones. However, the money does not help with ensuring that their loved ones receive proper care. Mila reflected that 'If you don't have anyone to employ to take care of you … that's the hardest part in the whole process. I can send money but she doesn't have anybody to employ to help her out'. If her loved ones are unable to put the money to practical use, it is not particularly helpful. Mila's sombre and somewhat annoyed tone of voice conveyed her frustration and lack of control over her ability to arrange care for her loved ones.

This desire to provide practical care to their loved ones is mirrored in other participants' stories. October shared that she 'would prefer to go to doctor's appointments and [she'd] love to be able to drive them places as well … but [she] can't do it and there's not a real way of [her] being able to manage that too from [Canada]'. October further expressed the guilt she feels when asking for help because she cannot provide practical care to her loved ones: 'Something that wouldn't be a big deal for me to go and get groceries for them might be a huge deal for somebody else because it takes, like, valuable time out of their day'.

While providing practical care for loved ones is very important, the emotional aspects of caregiving are also critical. This caregiving can take the form of phone and video calls, text messaging, emails and sending gifts as expressions of love. However, the transnational context also poses a challenge to emotional caregiving, such as a lack of physical presence. Magda reflected that 'It's completely different

when you see somebody and talk to somebody just over the phone'. For the TCEs in this study, there appears to be a marked difference in experience between providing emotional care in-person and at a distance. This longing was expressed in Magda's statement: 'It is challenging because we don't see each other and that human touch which … I think that's something she is missing from her side and I'm missing from here you know, just to touch her and hug her; everybody needs a hug or touch from time to time'. Throughout the interviews, all participants expressed frustration about and guilt over their inability to properly provide emotional care transnationally. The conversations about the lack of control and the feeling of helplessness in the various interviews were often quieter and subdued, indicating that this issue has a particularly emotional significance.

The advent of modern communication technologies has drastically affected the caregiving landscape. These technologies have been very beneficial for TCEs. Some participants were grateful for their access to internet-based communications due to the significant cost savings they allow compared to long-distance calling. Likewise, Magda shared her appreciation for the increased ease of online shopping: 'Buying on the internet a few years ago wasn't as easy but, now, if you know what they need, some food, some other clothes or some medical supplies, it's easier for me to buy online and just send it to them'. Alex also shared that her family has made efforts to keep her and other transnational members of the family informed through Zoom and other technologies: 'My family members are trying to make it over Zoom… so my whole family here can watch and sort of be a part of it … there's an attempt to keep us involved'. Yet, however helpful these technologies can be, they still present limitations and challenges to providing emotional and practical care. For example, October said that 'There's only so much that [I can do] over a phone call ... I can support them emotionally but I'm not actually there to help them out physically'. Likewise, the advanced technologies still cannot replace in-person caregiving in terms of its emotional value (Baldassar *et al.* 2016).

Role of the workplace and CFWPs

Central to studies concerning TCEs is the role of the workplace and the supports available to help caregivers to balance paid employment and family caregiving. Below we discuss this theme, based on participants' workplace experiences and their knowledge of CFWPs. Overall, all participants reported positive experiences with their supervisors when they needed to take time off or limit their shifts due to caregiving responsibilities. For example, Alex shared: 'I've had pretty good experiences with [my supervisor] ... I could usually just tell him what's going on and he would make sure that I don't have to work or whatever it is'. Alex works at a large company's branch location and also reported that she 'hadn't really heard other people, at least at [their] store, having problems [with their manager]'. James shared similar sentiments about his workplace, reporting that they encouraged him to 'take the time [he] needs'. Likewise, Mila shared that her workplace has a 'really really good approach' and she is 'grateful to them for being there in that hard situation'.

While October's direct experience with the employer was positive, her narrative suggests that she was upset that her mother's employer was rigid and did not accommodate caregiving responsibilities. October worked part-time at the time of the interviews; she said that the part-time nature of her work was important because of the flexibility it provided. However, October notes '… when my mom tried to talk to her boss about this [and say] "I have to go help out my dad because he's getting surgery"... they're not that flexible and, in fact, they get kind of angry with her about it'. October's facial expressions and the tone of her voice conveyed her frustration at the lack of support afforded to her mother at work. We asked participants if they were aware of any CFWPS to accommodate individuals who must leave work

or alter their schedule to provide care for loved ones, particularly for transnational caregiving. While participants had not heard of CFWPs, they were able to relate to specific accommodations that the employers provided. Alex shared that, at his workplace, employees are given the option to round up their purchases and the excess change is placed into a fund dedicated to employees who may need support. This fund is then distributed to individuals to cover missed work shifts. However, this is not a policy specifically designed to cover the costs of caregiving leave. Instead, it is a discretionary fund for managers to distribute to an employee in need.

Mila suggested that her union provided some assurance: 'We have a really good union and our union rules, I know I can take some time off to take care of my elderly parents if it's needed'. Similarly, Magda felt confident that she would be given time off if she needed it but she was unaware of CFWPs:

> *I'm not aware of something like this but I can tell you if, for example, if I need a vacation and I need more than everybody else is taking, I never have a problem getting a longer vacation, so I could use, for example, four weeks at once … I'm sure that they will work it out with me. I will have to negotiate some stuff but I am sure that they will, they will provide.*

Overall, the participants in this study were confident in their ability to obtain time off if needed but they were not aware of any protocols or policies designed to accommodate or protect transnational caregivers.

Discussion

This paper contributes to the burgeoning literature on TCEs. As we indicated previously, to our knowledge, this is the first study which is exclusively focused on European TCEs in North America. There is also little literature on the role of CFWPs in supporting caregivers. Although immigration rates in Canada from European nations are decreasing (Statistics Canada 2016), current European immigrant populations in Canada continue to play a pivotal role in the Canadian economy (Bushnik *et al.* 2020). As many European immigrants in Canada are also TCEs, we must continue to investigate how best to support this population. This discussion is based on the three overarching themes that we previously discussed in the paper.

Cultural expectations and gender roles

Similar to the cultural expectations regarding caregiving responsibilities which our participants identified, earlier studies have linked caregiving responsibilities and roles to cultural expectations (e.g. Sethi *et al.* 2022). For example, in a recent meta-ethnography study with older immigrants' family members in Europe, a participant of Turkish origin said: 'It is partly inspired by culture, partly by religion and our faith dictates that we must continue to look after our parents until the end' (Shrestha *et al.* 2023: 11). Gui and Koropeckyj-Cox (2016) outline that Chinese immigrants in North America feel a specific responsibility to care for their ageing parents. Other research has found that, for many caregivers, cultural identity significantly impacts on their decision to provide care and the type of unpaid care they provide to family members (Miyawaki and Hooyman 2021; Ran and Liu 2021).

Rottenberg *et al.* (2023) make the important observation that culture intersects with gender to determine caregiving roles. Similarly, our results suggest that gender plays an important role in participant's caregiving relationships. Overall, the findings of our research are consistent with the

consensus of much caregiving literature, that gender significantly impacts on who provides care. In our study, two female participants directly voiced the larger caregiving responsibility they have as women. This phenomenon is mirrored across other caregiving literatures. In a scoping review, Ferrant, Pesando and Nowacka (2014) found that women contribute 2 to 10 times the amount of time to unpaid care work compared to men. In a transnational context, some female Polish immigrants in Germany feel constrained by societal pressures for women to act as caregivers and, therefore, provide the majority of unpaid care (Barglowski, Krzyżowski, Świątek 2015). In this study, Magda, a Polish immigrant in Canada, expressed her immense gratitude for her brother's contributions to caregiving as, in Poland, men are typically seen as breadwinners and do not engage in unpaid/family care.

Multifaceted caregiving

Our study results identified practical, emotional and technology-based care. While not necessarily referred to in the same terms, these themes are present in much transnational literature. Sethi *et al.* (2022: 447) defined practical caregiving as 'performing instrumental activities by paying actual visits … planning for home care … medical care' and they reflect that 'practical care is the only form of transnational care that cannot be provided on a regular basis by both parties'. Participants in this study shared several difficulties relating to this type of care, including Alex's reflection on trying to connect with someone and organise events from a different time zone. Likewise, October revealed her desire to have FaceTime with her loved ones. The inability to be present in in-person care can also limit the benefits of financial support, as Mila outlined in her comments on the difficulty of hiring caregiving support in her home country. Although TCEs can send money, they cannot control how the money is used. This lost sense of control has also been observed in other transnational studies. Amin and Ingman (2014) reported that Bangladeshi immigrants living away from their country of origin felt like they had less control over the care which their loved ones were receiving.

Consistent with much of the transnational literature, our participants also engaged in emotional caregiving (Amin and Ingman 2014; Brijnath 2009). In this study and many others, much transnational caregiving is conducted over the phone or through other communication technologies (Sethi *et al.* 2022). However, participants in this study emphasised the limited nature of this type of emotional caregiving. Magda and Mila both reflected on feeling that the technology-assisted conversations could not replace true, in-person contact. This is also consistent with other research suggesting that technologies are not true replacements for human contact (Baldassar *et al*. 2016). Yet other participants in this study, like Alex, felt grateful for technology like Zoom as it allowed her to have some form of contact with family members who have now adopted these technologies for their own use.

The role of the workplace and CFWPs

Understanding the workplace culture, specifically in relation to workplace support, is necessary to help TCEs stay in their employment. Caregivers' ability to manage work–family balance relies 'heavily on supervisors' understanding of the caring situation, encouraging working carers to ask for and take advantage of organisational or institutional measures' (Hlebec *et al.* 2024: 3). On a daily basis, TCEs try to maintain a balance between employment in Canada and providing care across international borders. In this study, overall the participants had good experiences within their workplaces. However, none of the participants had heard of CFWPs nor were aware of how they were implemented. Nevertheless, there were other, more general, policies that supported them to do their unpaid caregiving duties. This

suggests that general workplace flexibility (or policies that support their employees, more generally) is also supportive of carer employees. Alex discussed a 'round-up policy' in her workplace, which enabled employees to contribute to a fund to support their co-workers in times of need. Likewise, Mila believed that her union provides the necessary policies and support for employees engaged in caregiving. Ultimately, as has been observed in other research, there was an overall lack of awareness of carer policies, let alone TCEs-specific workplace policies (Ireson *et al.* 2016).

As we noted earlier, the Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence (CCCE) has unveiled a National Caregiving Strategy, highlighting five key priority areas. One of these focuses on supporting informal or family caregivers by advocating for the implementation of CFWPs within all federally regulated sectors (CCCE 2025). Current evidence also illustrates the health benefits and cost-effectiveness of CFWPs in employment – including worker satisfaction – and, thus, reduced absenteeism (Hlebec *et al.* 2024; Ireson *et al.* 2016; Lorenz, Whittaker, Tazzeo and Williams 2021; Rottenberg *et al.* 2023; Wang, Williams and Kitchen 2018).

Study implications and future directions

While some of our findings are consistent with existing research on transnational caregiving, such as the gendered nature of care, this paper contributes to the literature related to TCEs with special attention given to European TCEs' experiences in London, Ontario. We also highlighted the importance of cultural factors in caregiving identity, the different types of care that TCEs provide and the need for a better understanding of CFWPs especially targeted to meet the needs of TCEs. Future research should continue to explore the overall experiences of TCEs from a wider range of ethnic identities. Likewise, wider studies could include comprehensive reviews of how gender-based expectations of care differ among cultures and transnational contexts. Future research should also continue to examine TCEs' understandings of CFWPs as well as employers' perspectives on offering CFWPs to their employees. This could lead to the development of specific recommendations for employers to accommodate TCEs within their workplaces. Evidence-based studies are needed to explore the relationship between remote work and its impact on employee productivity across major industry sectors.

Limitations

While this study has contributed to the growing literature on TCEs, particularly European TCEs, it is not without limitations. The study was conducted solely in London, a city in South-Western Ontario, Canada. Furthermore, the sample size of this study was comparatively small (n = 6) and not representative of the entirety of European TCEs' experiences in Canada. While we provided insights about TCEs' experiences from six different countries (see Table 1), we cannot draw definitive conclusions about culture based on the experiences of one individual. Consequently, larger studies should investigate these same questions with the heterogeneity of the participant population (age, class, gender, country of origin, etc.) in order to gather information about the diversity of their experiences. Studies with a larger sample size can help to draw pan-European conclusions. Similarly, this study explored the experiences of white European TCEs, whose experiences may be different from visible minority European TCEs. Furthermore, from the perspective of CFWPs, it is important to explore European and racialised TCEs' experiences in different occupations (healthcare, education, etc.). For example, the study by Ireson *et al.* (2016) found that the availability of CFWP in the workplace is based on the company's culture, size and motivation. While caregiving is gendered, more men are engaging in informal caregiving; thus,

understanding immigrant men's experiences, specifically, in a female-dominated industry, is vital to support this population in transnational care (Ireson *et al.* 2016). Further studies can also explore how countries of origin impact on TCEs' experiences in Canada. Scholars may also consider undertaking a longitudinal study to explore TCEs' experiences over time.

Conclusion

Future research can explore whether the sectors of the labour force, workplace diversity (e.g., ethnicity, race, gender, employment status, etc.) and other factors (such as workplace culture) impact on the perceived flexibility of workplaces. Canada is becoming increasingly transnational and culturally diverse and the global population is ageing. Amid these demographic and cultural shifts, Canada and other industrialised nations will continue to rely on immigration to address their skilled labour shortages. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the caregiving crisis. The current study has demonstrated that the type and nature of transnational caregiving are dependent upon cultural expectations. While men are also providing transnational care, caregiving continues to be gendered. CFWPs in the form of flexible work arrangements, remote work, paid leave and support services are fundamental to the promotion of caregivers' work–life balance and address the caregiving crisis. Targeted services are necessary to support TCEs as they manage their employment with caregiving duties in Canada and their country of origin.

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The Resilience of the Polish Healthcare System after the Arrival of War Refugees from Ukraine

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After the Russian aggression on Ukraine in February 2022, Poland experienced the largest European movement of war refugees in nearly a century: 8,000,000 crossed the border by the year's end. The European Union granted them immediate access to healthcare systems. This sudden increase in the number of patients challenged Poland's healthcare system's resilience. This article, based on a mixed-methods analysis of data from public and private institutions, a survey of medical students (n=581) and interviews with junior doctors (n=18), investigates how the system remained resilient and identifies the contributing and hindering factors in health-service delivery, the health workforce and leadership/governance. Initially, the system's resilience was upheld by an outburst of support, with doctors working overtime, private providers offering free services and NGOs facilitating access. Personnel shortages were reduced by swiftly employing Ukrainian medical staff, based on a special law. However, in the medium term, communication and other difficulties became evident.

Keywords: refugees, Ukraine, healthcare, resilience, Poland, doctors, medical students

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Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 precipitated the largest movement of war refugees in Europe in nearly a century. Over 2,000,000 people crossed into Poland within a month and 8,000,000 by the end of the year (Duszczyk, Górny, Kaczmarczyk and Kubisiak 2023a). Many continued their journey or returned home but, by December 2023, some 954,874 war refugees – 63 per cent female and 44 per cent minors – still lived in Poland (Otwarte Dane 2023), making it the country with the second-highest number of Ukrainian war refugees (after Germany) and the second highest rate of war refugees per 1,000 inhabitants (after Czechia) (Eurostat 2025).

The situation challenged Poland's already underfunded and understaffed healthcare system (OECD 2023; Statistics Poland 2023). A substantial proportion of the newcomers suffered from chronic illnesses or PTSD – or rated their well-being as poor (Bilewicz, Babińska and Gromova 2024; Kulhánová, Lustigová, Drbohlav, Leontiyeva and Dzúrová 2024). Disparities in treatment methods and vaccination rates between Ukraine and Poland compounded the difficulties. Given the exceptional situation, this article investigates the resilience of the Polish healthcare system in the short and medium term and the factors affecting it. Previous studies on the resilience of healthcare systems have focused mostly on old immigration countries (Catussi Paschoalotto, Alves Lazzari, Rocha, Massuda and Castro 2023; Fleming, O'Donoghue, Almirall-Sanchez, Mockler, Keegan, Cylus, Sagan and Thomas 2022) and mainly covered the response of public entities to existing crises (Ignatowicz, Tarrant, Mannion, El-Sawy, Conroy and Lasserson 2023). By focusing on a new immigrant destination and the unprecedented scale and generosity of public, private and individual responses in providing health services, we are contributing to the rapidly developing scholarly works on policies towards Ukrainian war migrants (Kardas, Babicki, Krawczyk and Mastalerz-Migas 2022; Spiegel, Kovtoniuk and Lewtak 2023). Understanding of the Polish healthcare experience can aid in designing better future responses in mass movement situations.

The Polish case is not only instructive because of the scale and swiftness of arrivals. The European Union's reaction was also unprecedented. For the first time, the EU applied the *Temporary Protection Directive*, which granted war refugees immediate access to the labour market, education, social support and public healthcare. Previously, newcomers – e.g. Syrians in the EU, Lebanon or Turkey – received limited access or were accommodated within separate healthcare structures and policymakers took pains not to attract asylum-seekers by offering more than the utterly necessary care (Biddle, Mladovsky and Bozorgmehr 2020a; Montes 2020; Roos 2023). On 12 March 2022, Poland passed the *Law on Assistance to Citizens of Ukraine in Connection with the Armed Conflict on the Territory of That Country* (hereafter 'Ukrainian special law'), detailing the modes of access and facilitating Ukrainian health professionals' employment in Poland. Ukrainian patients were incorporated into the public Polish system and could use almost all services, from basic care to cancer treatment and organ transplants (Lewtak, Poznańska, Kanecki, Tyszko, Goryński, Jankowski and Nitsch-Osuch 2023; Małyszko, Macech, Kępska-Dzilińska and Nazarewski 2023). An almost general mobilisation of society accompanied the state's reaction to help the newcomers. Although providing healthcare is the responsibility of the healthcare system, the Polish experience highlights the supporting role of various actors – such as businesses, NGOs and individuals.

This paper resorts to the concept of healthcare system resilience (Blanchet, Diaconu and Witter 2020; Thomas and Fleming 2024) and focuses on three of the six building blocks of health systems distinguished by the World Health Organization (2010) which were particularly impacted by the war in Ukraine – health-service delivery, the health workforce and leadership/governance – only briefly touching upon the other three: health information systems, access to essential medicines and financing.

To understand the ongoing changes, we examine various data obtained from public and private healthcare institutions, as well as a survey conducted among medical students and interviews with junior doctors.

It begins by clarifying the concept of health system resilience, understood here not only as the operational capacity of public healthcare in the face of a shock but also as the reaction of a complex body of public and private entities. Previous works have focused on the resilience of public healthcare; we broaden the perspective by including private providers and the role of civil society. We first describe Poland's system and its use by migrants prior to February 2022 and then analyse the service delivery, healthcare workforce and governance after the arrival of war refugees. Changes in the workforce were important because many Ukrainian doctors and nurses were swiftly employed in the Polish healthcare system. We demonstrate the factors which both increased and hindered Polish healthcare resilience in the short and medium term, providing lessons for other situations of large-scale refugee arrivals.

Healthcare resilience during mass arrivals

The concept of resilience began to be applied to healthcare during the 2000s (Blanchet *et al.* 2020; Thomas and Fleming 2024; Truppa, Yaacoub, Valente, Celentano, Ragazzoni and Saulnier 2024) and developed dynamically during the Covid-19 pandemic (Catussi Paschoalotto *et al.* 2023; O'Grady and Shaw 2023). However, a commonly agreed-upon definition is yet to be developed (Saulnier and Blanchet 2024). The differences concern, for example, the magnitude and duration of events which a health system must be able to withstand in order to prove itself to be resilient (Turenne, Gautier, Degroote, Guillard, Chabrol and Ridde 2019). Some authors argue that the choice of approach and indicators should depend on the type of shock experienced (Fleming *et al.* 2022; Ignatowicz *et al.* 2023).

The various definitions of resilience all relate to the ability of a system to continue providing services in the face of a crisis or significant change of circumstances, such as an armed conflict, natural disaster, pandemic or financial crisis (Biddle, Wahedi and Bozorgmehr 2020b; Blanchet, Nam, Ramalingam and Pozo-Martin 2017; Bozorgmehr, Roberts, Razum and Biddle 2020; Kruk, Myers, Tornorlah Varpilah and Dahn 2015). To be defined as resilient, a system must promptly respond to increased numbers of patients where they are gathered, while still providing the same level of services for the local population. Health system resilience is frequently understood on three levels: (i) its absorptive (short-term) capacity – the ability to deliver the same level of services to an increased number of people; (ii) its adaptive (medium-term) capacity – the ability to deliver the same services with fewer or different resources; and (iii) its transformative (long-term) capacity – the ability to transform its structure and functioning in response to changed conditions (Biddle *et al.* 2020b; Blanchet *et al.* 2017, 2020; OECD 2018). This article focuses on the absorptive and adaptive capacities of the Polish health system. In our understanding, a system can be considered resilient only if it provides the same level of service to existing patients while simultaneously serving the newly arrived. A deterioration of services for locals, such as longer waiting times, would probably cause social tensions.

The functioning of health systems is influenced by numerous elements of the formal and informal social, economic and political environments, including social trust (Blanchet *et al.* 2020; Witter, Thomas, Topp, Barasa, Chopra, Cobos, Blanchet, Teddy, Atun and Ager 2023) and governance, as well as information flows (Thomas, Sagan, Larkin, Cylus, Figueras and Karanikolos 2020). A system is resilient when there is a high level of integration between the actors and institutions that comprise it (Nowicka, Bartig, Schwass and Matuszczyk 2021). In Poland, research on the response to war refugee arrivals has demonstrated that a high level of involvement of diverse private and public actors reinforced social

resilience (Cullen Dunn and Kaliszewska 2023; Pachocka, Lewandowski, Nowosielski, Popławska and Wach 2025; Podgórska, Jekaterynczuk, Yarosh, Kuzmuk and Liubchuk 2024). We analyse healthcare in Poland as part of the broader institutional environment, co-created by formal and informal institutions, as well as numerous organisations and individuals who became involved in the response to the mass arrival of war refugees (Pszczółkowska, Bojarczuk and Okólski 2026). In this context, the efforts of commercial medical entities were also a key element of the resilience.

The Polish healthcare system and its foreign patients before and after February 2022

The Polish healthcare system, financed through compulsory social health insurance contributions, is characterised by low financing (6.7 per cent of GDP in 2022, compared to the 9.2 per cent OECD average) and a high share of out-of-pocket expenditures (OECD 2023). Its most significant challenges pertain to the consequences of a rapidly ageing population and the emigration of medical personnel, which has resulted in a low ratio of doctors and nurses per 10,000 inhabitants (Duszczyk *et al.* 2023b; Sowada and Kowalska-Bobko 2021). Patients face lengthy waiting periods for some procedures, e.g., over a year for a hip or knee replacement (Ministerstwo Zdrowia n.d.; Statistics Poland 2023). Many resort to a combination of public care for emergencies and major treatments and private care for treatments they can finance themselves, such as ambulatory or dental care. Moreover, those who do not contribute to compulsory health insurance or are not covered through other entitlements find themselves uninsured (Sowada, Sagan and Kowalska-Bobko 2022).

In December 2021, 627,000 Ukrainians were insured through the public insurance system, out of an estimated 1,350,000 people present in the country (Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk 2022; ZUS 2025). Other adults were either employed based on various types of short-term contracts, which did not include insurance, or – more rarely – worked without a contract. This was partly the result of Poland's flexible work regulations and unwritten migration policy, which encouraged non-permanent employment and 'incomplete migration' (Okólski 2012). Other migrants resorted to tourist insurance for limited periods (required to obtain a visa), used private healthcare or planned their medical appointments during visits to Ukraine (Cope, Keryk and Kyliushyk 2021; Fiałkowska and Matuszczyk 2021; Levitas 2020;). These people barely used the Polish healthcare system and did not contribute to it. Refugees had healthcare access through dedicated services (Sobczak-Szelc, Pachocka, Pędziwiatr, Szałańska and Szulecka 2023). In comparison to both groups, war refugees – i.e., Ukrainian citizens who crossed the border on or after 24 February 2022 – obtained much easier access based on the 'Ukrainian special law', which guaranteed them free public healthcare (with the exception of spa rehabilitation, the right to treatment abroad and reimbursement for treatment abroad under the EU 'cross-border' directive).

Data and methods

Our mixed-methods approach relied on three types of data. Statistical data were obtained from public institutions and private healthcare providers, as well as publicly available reports – e.g. the private Watch Health Care barometer, which measures the accessibility of services. Data concerning the numbers of patients, types of services and expenditure in 2022 and 2023 were provided upon request by the National Health Fund (NFZ) – which finances healthcare – and the Ministry of Health. Data concerning foreign doctors who were allowed to practice in Poland were obtained from the Supreme Medical Chamber (NIL). Private healthcare provision information was requested from the largest private providers in Poland: Lux Med, Medicover and CM Damiana. We treat the three as illustrative of

the reaction of private providers, although the numbers are not comprehensive for the whole, very fragmented sector (PWC 2023).

The above sufficed to provide a statistical overview of the situation of Polish healthcare. To understand the situation on the ground and ongoing changes, we reached out to health professionals. An online survey was sent to final-year medical students from 13 public universities throughout Poland, which constituted 85 per cent of final-year medical students in the country studying in Polish (February–March 2023, n=581, response rate 17 per cent). We did not observe any self-selection bias in terms of basic demographic features, as the characteristics of our respondents reflected those of medical students in Poland – nearly 60 per cent were women, 34 per cent were men (6 per cent did not answer or chose 'other') and 98 per cent were childless. As the title of the recruitment e-mail revealed that the survey concerned the migration plans of medical students, people interested in migrating may have been more likely to open it and take part. However, it is not apparent whether or not this could have impacted on their opinions on the issues discussed in this article.

Final-year students have insight into the system but do not significantly shape it, providing simultaneously an insider's and an outsider's view. This choice was methodologically innovative, since medical students' perspectives have not yet been considered in studies of health-system responses to refugee migration in Europe. Questions regarding the arrival of Ukrainian patients and doctors were included among a broader set of questions on the migration and professional plans of medical students and the state of Polish healthcare. At the same time, the choice of respondents is a limitation of the study, as the findings cannot be treated as representative of the opinions of all medical professionals in Poland. In particular, the study did not seek the opinions of medical doctors in more senior or managerial roles but focused only on those who were about to embark on a medical career. To partly counter this limitation and to enhance our understanding of the survey responses, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with randomly selected respondents (n=18, 2023–2024). The interviews took place when the respondents were already junior doctors doing their internships, all but one in public hospitals. They were thus already employees of the healthcare system, albeit in junior roles. All interviews were conducted remotely (Zoom, Skype) and lasted 25–40 minutes.

Service delivery as a measure of healthcare resilience

This section focuses on the first building block of healthcare resilience: health-service delivery. We present a comprehensive picture based on statistics, e.g., the number and types of treatment offered to Ukrainian patients, the waiting times for services for all patients and the perceptions of those involved – both doctors and medical students.

Access to public healthcare for Ukrainian patients

The influx of war refugees resulted in the immediate need to admit many of them into the Polish healthcare system. In more than 10 months of 2022, 800,000 public healthcare services were provided to 651,594 Ukrainian war-refugee patients. This means that only a minority of those who arrived and registered in the PESEL UKR database[1] (1,497,000 persons by the end of 2022) or who passed through Poland, used its public healthcare. In the first weeks, up to 100,000 people arrived daily, some undergoing chemotherapy or dialysis (Małyszko *et al*. 2023). This challenged the system, as patients had to be quickly matched with the appropriate services. Employees of the public system, NGOs and private citizens all helped with the coordination, sharing their knowledge of the complex – mostly public

but partly private – Polish healthcare system (Biesiada, Mastalerz-Migas and Babicki 2023). This contributed to the system's short-term adaptive resilience.

By 2023, the Ukrainian population in Poland was more stable and most of those registered (holding a PESEL UKR public registration number) had contact with public healthcare – 802,102 patients received over 2,000,000 services during the whole year (data from the National Health Fund). The number of services per person increased and the types of service provided also changed (see Table 1).

Table 1. Individual Ukrainian patients obtaining services paid from public funds by the National Health Fund under the 'Ukrainian special law' by gender, age and types of services - a selection of the most frequent types

	March–December 2022					January–December 2023				
	Women		Men		Total	Women		Men		Total
Age in years	>18	<18	>18	<18		>18	<18	>18	<18	
Primary healthcare	91,550	130,800	93,287	23,250	338,887	85,079	113,529	86,556	27,175	312,339
Outpatient specialist care	19,911	70,196	23,071	12,139	125,317	20,038	58,720	22,910	11,700	113,368
Dental treatment	22,917	24,982	21,014	3,350	72,263	23,713	22,712	22,367	4,786	73,578
Hospital treatment	14,244	29,225	15,684	7,128	66,281	9,759	25,695	11,347	6,914	53,715
Drug reimbursement	6,420	12,019	6,442	2,085	26,966	49,451	94,914	51,964	19,196	215,525
Medical devices	2,045	2,257	1,194	1,068	6,564	1,727	6,016	1,496	3,880	13,119
Therapeutic rehabilitation	1,416	2,242	1,690	6,132	11,480	1,814	3,931	2,119	976	8,840
Psychiatric and addiction care	531	2,096	900	697	4,224	761	1,833	1,238	685	4,517

Source: Data obtained upon request from the National Health Fund. If a particular patient obtained a service of the same category more than once a year, they were counted only once – e.g. if a child visited a paediatrician several times in one year, they were counted once.

While, in 2022, more war refugees used primary, outpatient and hospital care and therapeutic rehabilitation, by 2023 these numbers fell; however, the number of people obtaining drug reimbursement increased eightfold and medical devices doubled. This suggests a more regular, non-emergency use of the system. This movement from emergency towards regular healthcare by Ukrainian war refugees was also observed by Pędziwiatr, Bielska, Wanke and Luchik-Musiyezdova (2024) based on data from the city of Kraków. The causes of hospitalisation changed compared to the pre-war period – while, before February 2022, accidents were the most frequent cause, followed by childbirth, after the Russian aggression on Ukraine, more cases concerned chronic diseases, including cancer treatment (Lewtak *et al.* 2023). The above demonstrates that, in the medium term, the healthcare system has adapted to serve the varied needs of more regular patients.

A particular type of service, not distinguished above but constituting an important section of the hospitalisation of women, was linked to childbirth. In 2023, 14,846 children were born in Poland to

Ukrainian mothers, over 5 per cent of all births that year (Statistics Poland 2024a). Additionally, Poland treated over 3,300 wounded in Ukraine, most within the EU Medevac programme, which operated a hub near Rzeszów (data obtained by the authors from the Ministry of Health).

Despite the broad range of services provided, the cost of care for Ukrainian war refugee patients remained relatively limited – 514,600,000 PLN in 2022 and 848,000,000 PLN in 2023, amounting to 0.35 per cent of the total current public expenditure on healthcare in 2022 and 0.44 per cent in 2023 (data from the National Health Fund and Statistics Poland 2023). This did not include the cost of existent equipment and personnel – but the financial burden of this crisis seems limited and not comparable to the Covid-19 crisis, when 92,800,000,000 PLN were spent in 2020 alone (NIK 2023). Moreover, in response to the arrival of war refugees, Poland received financial and in-kind support (vaccines, HIV and tuberculosis medications, vehicles, respirators, defibrillators) from the EU, WHO and UNICEF. We thus do not focus in detail on financing as a building block of healthcare resilience, since the funding available per patient did not change fundamentally.

The contribution of private providers

The resilience of the public system was reinforced by private providers offering free services to war refugees. In the first months, they served large numbers of Ukrainian patients (nearly 30,000 services per month), lessening the burden on public healthcare and contributing to its resilience. Data from Table 2 suggest that most services in March and April 2022 were provided privately, which was probably not the case but resulted from initial under-reporting in the public system (Biesiada *et al.* 2023). The types of service used by war refugees in the public and private systems differed, with the more costly specialist and hospital care focused mostly in the public system. Nevertheless, the private system complemented the public, increasing the overall absorptive capacity.

Ukrainian war refugees quickly started contributing financially to the system through employment, which increased rapidly to 78 per cent for all Ukrainian citizens (war refugees and previous migrants) in 2023, compared to 67 per cent for Polish citizens (NBP 2024). About a quarter of war refugees were working as professionals and managers (Górny and Kaczmarczyk 2023) and could probably afford to pay for some private services. Nevertheless, others, due to their health or family situation, found themselves without resources. War departures from Ukraine were strongly selective, with few people over 65 – who are more likely to need healthcare – arriving in Poland (dane.gov.pl 2025). Overall, in a survey of Ukrainian war migrants conducted in the summer of 2022 by the WHO and Statistics Poland (2022), 90 per cent reported having access to health services, the vast majority through the public system – but half indicated an information barrier. In another survey, help with organising a medical consultation was one of the top needs reported by war refugees (Górny 2023). A qualitative study (Follis 2026) documented the difficulties in accessing the system for people without a PESEL UKR number (which can be lost by leaving Poland for over a month) or by people perceived as undeserving – for example a Ukrainian citizen with a non-white skin colour.

One particular challenge concerned the provision of psychological and psychiatric care, given the increased stress levels and the high incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder among war refugees (Bilewicz *et al.* 2024; Długosz 2023). The 'Ukrainian special law' facilitated the recognition of Ukrainian psychological and psychiatric qualifications. The Ministry of Health's pilot programme for trauma victims served 1,327 people in 18 locations (data from the Ministry of Health). Numerous NGOs – for example, the Polish Red Cross – offered free consultations to improve access. Nevertheless, the public

mental-health system, already underserving local patients, especially children (Jankowski, Lazarus, Kuchyn, Zemskov, Gałązkowski and Gujski 2023), remained insufficient.

Table 2. Number of health services made available to Ukrainian war refugees by public and private healthcare providers

		Number of healthcare services made available to Ukrainian war refugees	
		In the public system	**In the private system**
2022	February		204
	March	393*	27,649
	April	5,485*	27,329
	May	73,046	26,538
	June	122,479	18,227
	July	109,711	15,291
	August	95,579	13,438
	September	97,516	11,991
	October	100,308	11,695
	November	103,046	11,893
	December	119,325	11,220
2023	January	274,840	10,566
	February	153,291	9,457
	March	160,027	10,139
	April	135,852	7,287
	May	121,714	6,529
	June	171,444	5,738

Note: *Data regarding services in the public system were under-reported in the first months, as newly arrived Ukrainian patients did not yet have PESEL UKR numbers and medical administrators were not always aware of how to report such cases.

Source: Data obtained upon request from the National Health Fund and the three largest private healthcare providers (Lux Med, Medicover, Damian Medical Center).

Changes in access to healthcare for the local population

An important indicator of health system resilience during mass arrivals is whether the service for the local population remains unchanged (WHO 2010). In Poland, the arrival of new patients did not substantially impact on waiting times for various services (Ministerstwo Zdrowia n.d., WHC 2023). The Watch Health Care barometer, which measures queues by calling health facilities and registering for visits or procedures, demonstrated that waiting times increased from 3.4 months in 2021 to 3.6 months in November 2022, before dropping to 3.5 months in 2023 (WHC 2023). These changes can be considered minor, given that, in the pre-Covid-19 years, the numbers were 3.7–3.8. The data demonstrate that long waiting times are a problem in the Polish healthcare system – which, however, was not seriously aggravated by the arrival of war refugees.

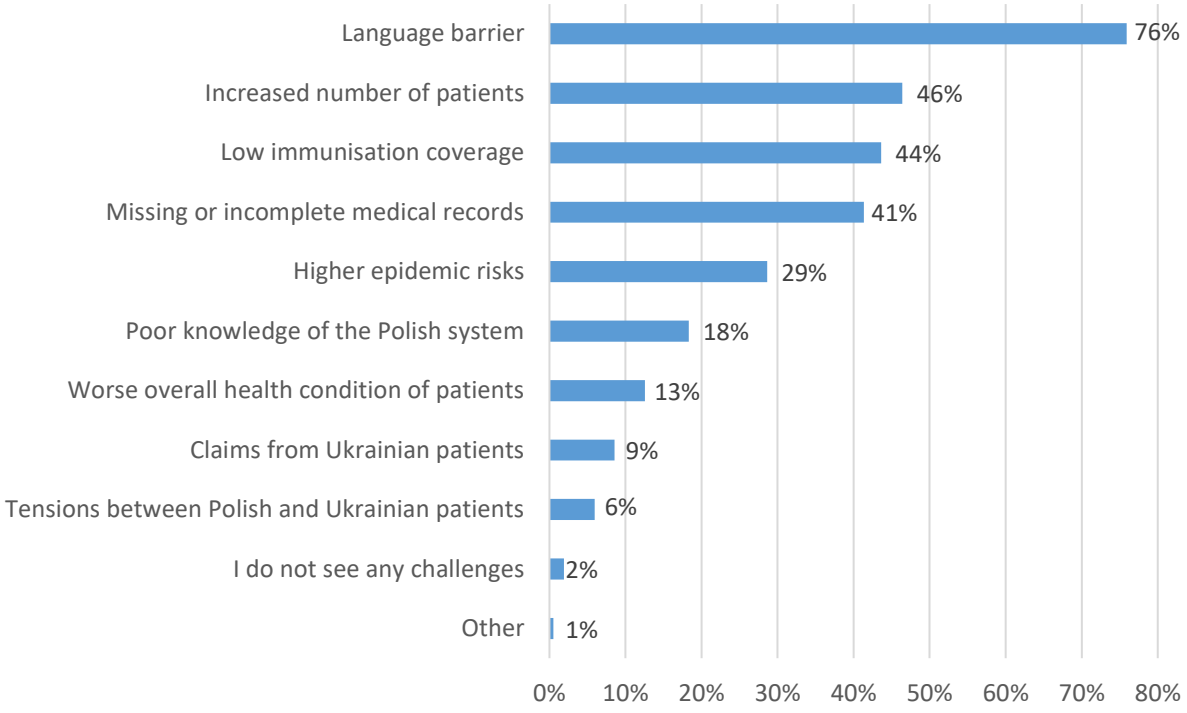
Moreover, changes were not evident for women and children. Generally, many of the longest waiting times concern children. Between February and April 2022, some increased by weeks or even months.

For example, the average wait before admission into an audiology and phoniatrics ward – from 269 days to 303 days – while others such as admission into a pediatric oncological surgery ward decreased – from 211 to 168 days – with no general trend visible (Ministerstwo Zdrowia n.d.). By the end of 2023, waiting times had again fluctuated depending on the type of service. Queues for services for women lengthened between 2022 and 2023 from 2.2 months to 2.5 months, before a similarly large increase in 2024 (when the number of Ukrainian patients did not increase) (WHC 2024). The above suggests that the arrival of Ukrainian patients did not have a clear impact, with other factors playing a larger role.

Difficulties in service provision reported by junior doctors and medical students

The above provides an overview of the situation regarding health provision for Ukrainian and Polish citizens. Below, we aim to provide a deeper understanding of the situation by seeking the opinions of final-year medical students (survey) and junior doctors (interviews). In the survey, participants were asked multiple-choice questions about the major challenges related to the arrival of patients from Ukraine and the consequences for the Polish healthcare system.

Figure 1. Opinions on the inflow of patients from Ukraine among final-year medical students at Polish medical universities. Q: *What major challenges do you see related to the arrival of patients from Ukraine?* [%] (n=573)



Source: Own elaboration based on survey dataset (2023).

By far, the largest group – 76 per cent – expressed concerns over the communication barrier (Figure 1). This was corroborated in interviews – participants had witnessed doctors not understanding medical documentation in Ukrainian or patients not understanding what treatment would be undertaken: 'The older generation of [Polish] doctors, who speak Russian, managed somehow. But for the young, there was a huge communication gap. Especially if the patient didn't speak any English' (Respondent 8,

female). She described how translation was spontaneously organised in her hospital in Kraków by resorting to Ukrainian or Russian-speaking medical students:

> *They were asked to take on translation duty, without remuneration. One of my classmates was Ukrainian. (…) They phoned him and he stepped out of classes to translate in another part of the hospital. (…) He lost out on classes but, of course, did not want to leave his compatriots in need.*

This was an example of resilience created bottom-up by the local community – but it was unlikely to work in the long term. Respondent 6, who was working near the border with Belarus, where the newcomers were from Ukraine and many other countries (because of the migration route through Belarus), pointed out that, frequently, when patients did not speak English, employees tried to make do with Russian or French although their medical vocabulary was insufficient.

The second most popular challenge confirmed by the survey (46 per cent) was the increased number of patients. Some interviewees saw this as a serious problem, while others believed the system managed to serve all in need, thanks to the goodwill and additional unremunerated work of staff. Somewhat ironically, several believed that the system remained operational because medical staff were already used to being overburdened with tasks: 'The system was already inefficient, so the inflow did not deregulate it too much. Every healthcare employee is used to a heavy load of responsibilities, so these people somehow just mixed in' (Respondent 6, male).

The overburdening of the healthcare system in usual times led to a more flexible and efficient response during the crisis. Others, however, believed that the increased number of patients exacerbated problems: 'Even before, access to doctors and procedures was problematic. Now it's worse because the number of patients has increased' (Respondent 7, female).

The frequent lack of immunisations of Ukrainian patients was pointed out as a challenge by 44 per cent of respondents and a higher epidemic risk by 29 per cent. Covid-19 and other vaccination levels were much lower among the Ukrainian population, while the prevalence of diseases such as measles, HIV infections or tuberculosis was among the highest in Europe (Kardas *et al.* 2022; Korzeniewski, Shkilna, Huk, Shevchuk and Marchelek-Myśliwiec 2024). From February 2022 to the end of 2023, Ukrainian citizens in Poland obtained 373,382 doses of Covid-19 vaccines (Ministry of Health data), but individuals had to take the initiative to receive them. Some doctors saw the lack of health screening at the border and mandatory vaccinations as a systemic failure:

> *Why was everybody at the border not vaccinated against transmittable diseases? (…) Why did we not think of this? Free transportation was offered but nobody thought about healthcare, which was a grave mistake. These children started mixing with our children in schools…* (Respondent 4, male).

The issue of 'missing or incomplete medical documentation' was pointed out by 41 per cent of respondents, corroborating the findings of a survey among primary care physicians (Biesiada *et al.* 2023). Some respondents (18 per cent) perceived a lack of understanding of the Polish health system as a challenge. A smaller group (9 per cent) judged Ukrainian patients to be demanding because they asked to be treated immediately, even for minor conditions. Moreover, some junior doctors commented on the poor health of some newcomers:

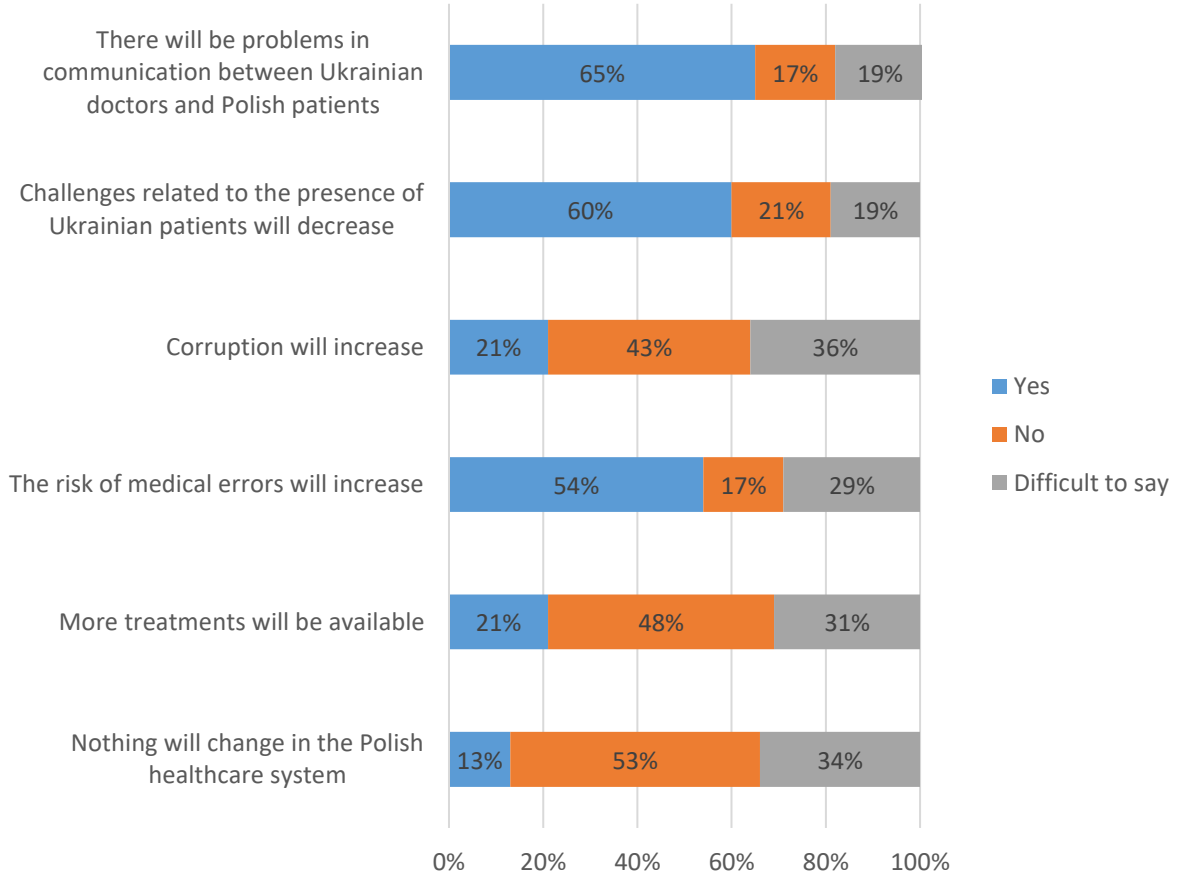
> *More people are in advanced stages of various diseases, so the situation is even more difficult (…). The level of preventive care is lower, so these patients had many viral infections, advanced stages of cancer or various complications of illnesses which, in Poland, would have been cured at an earlier stage and at a lower cost* (Respondent 7, female).

Changes in the health workforce and their impact on resilience

The health workforce, which is the second key building block of a resilient healthcare system (World Health Organization 2010), has been underlined as essential, especially in recent research concerning the response of health systems to the Covid-19 pandemic (Burau, Falkenbach, Neri, Peckham, Wallenburg and Kuhlmann 2022; Onvlee, Jacobs, Tromp, Bailey and Dieleman 2026). Shortages of doctors and nurses, caused by low wages and difficult working conditions, as well as emigration after EU accession in 2004, have long been a problem in Poland (Duszczyk *et al.* 2023b; Pszczółkowska, Bojarczuk, Duszczyk, Matuszczyk and Szyszkowska 2024). Although wages have improved, the problem is not entirely resolved.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the shortages. The Polish authorities introduced a simplified procedure for recognising non-EU qualifications in order to attract doctors from abroad (Andriiashenko, Zabdyr-Jamróz, Lipowski and Domagała 2025). This was a temporary solution, offering the conditional right to practice for a maximum of five years, before the full recognition procedure came into force. The scheme had limited success – in 2021, 1,378 non-EU doctors were practising in Poland, a mere 0.9 per cent of all practitioners (155,600 persons) (Statistics Poland 2022) and fewer than 7 per cent had passed the Medical Verification Examination by 2023 (Andriiashenko *et al.* 2025).

Figure 2. Opinions of medical students regarding the increased number of Ukrainian doctors in Poland. Q: *In your opinion, what are the consequences of the increased number of doctors/physicians from Ukraine in the Polish health care system?* [%] (n=574)



Source: Own elaboration based on survey dataset (2023).

This solution was repeated for doctors, dentists, nurses and midwives under the 'Ukrainian special law', with a permission to practice issued by the Ministry of Health. The Supreme Medical Chamber (NIL) called the employment of non-Polish speakers a 'lowering of standards, which endangered the safety of patients' (NIL 2024). Nevertheless, by the end of 2023, the Ministry had issued 3,959 positive decisions for doctors and dentists (data from the Ministry of Health) and, by January 2024, NIL had confirmed the right to practice of 2,596 of them (data obtained from NIL). In the first quarter of 2024, over 1,000 further positive decisions were issued. The Polish healthcare system thus went from having fewer than 1 per cent of non-EU doctors to having about 4 per cent. Additionally, until the end of the first quarter of 2024, some 2,098 Ukrainian nurses and midwives were issued the right to practice. The increased number of staff undoubtedly helped to resolve shortages and serve Ukrainian- or Russian-speaking patients. Simultaneously, however, the presence of foreign staff in the Polish system posed challenges.

Respondents were asked about the consequences of the increased number of doctors from Ukraine in the Polish system (Figure 2). The majority noticed problems communicating with Polish patients (65 per cent) and an increased risk of medical errors (54 per cent). The only positive effect seen was fewer challenges related to the presence of Ukrainian patients (60 per cent).

Interviewed junior doctors were even more sceptical, due to language issues and because they judged the qualifications of some Ukrainian colleagues as insufficient. One had encountered medical documentation in a Polish hospital written in the Cyrillic alphabet:

> *A doctor needs to speak Polish well enough not only to talk to the patients but also fill out medical documentation, use professional vocabulary. There are more problems with that* (Respondent 6, male).

> *If a doctor speaks good Polish, then fine. But if not, he is the kind of employee others must take care of* (Respondent 2, female).

> *The problem is with junior doctors from Ukraine because their level of education is different. Specialists know a lot and have a lot of experience, also with diseases we don't see here, which is valuable. The problem is with young doctors, who start and end their education at an earlier age and are not taught to EU standards* (Respondent 12, male).

Nevertheless, the interviewees were almost unanimous in their belief that more doctors were needed in the Polish system and were not against sourcing them from abroad. Several believed that the employment of Ukrainian doctors was a positive development. Most did, however, believe that the facilitated route to employment was a problematic solution. In May 2024, the 'Ukrainian special law' was amended by the new government. Most instruments facilitating Ukrainians' access to the medical labour market were abolished. Those whose qualifications had already been recognised in a fast-track procedure were obliged to present at least a B1-level certificate of Polish by 1 January 2026.

The arrival of Ukrainian doctors and nurses in the Polish system increased its short-term resilience, also because they could serve Ukrainian patients and act as intermediaries between them and the system. Simultaneously, language problems became evident. These will probably be resolved over the next few years and the presence of foreign medical staff, if they remain, will alleviate shortages in the medium and perhaps long term, contributing to the absorptive and adaptive capacity of the system.

Governance on the local level

In this article, we argue that, apart from healthcare professionals, social and business actors forming part of the institutional environment, especially at the local level, also contributed to the system's resilience, increasing its absorptive capacity. The role of NGOs in managing migration is growing, especially in facilitating integration and acting as the migrants' advocates in shaping migration policies (Campomori and Caponio 2017). In new immigration states, including Poland, where immigration and integration policies are underdeveloped, the support system relies precisely on NGOs (Jóźwiak, Sánchez-Domínguez and Sorando 2018).

The broad institutional environment of healthcare provision in Poland included public and private organisations, NGOs and informal groups of Polish, Ukrainian and other nationals, who facilitated the war refugees' access to healthcare and provided various types of assistance. Before February 2022, several hundred NGOs dealt with migration, including refugee issues. Immediately after the arrival of the war refugees, thousands of others became involved in helping people affected by the war in Ukraine – according to national statistics, over 32,000 among the 103,000 Polish non-profit organisations undertook such activities in 2022 (Statistics Poland 2024b). Most provided goods or food, with 5.9 per cent of them providing medical aid or healthcare (*ibidem*). Organisations specialising in medical assistance, such as the Sovereign Order of Malta or Doctors Without Borders, stepped in to organise large-scale, comprehensive support (Zakon Maltański n.d.). In practice, NGOs were key actors with their knowledge of how to deal with refugees and which actions should be taken first (Sobczak-Szelc *et al.* 2023). They stepped in immediately, before central and local authorities could take over some activities.

Central and local authorities were active in organising and coordinating various types of support for war refugees, from housing to free transportation and cultural activities. However, local governments were insufficiently funded by the central government and often had to rely on cooperation with NGOs, which were financed by donations from individuals and international sources (Łukasiewicz, Yeliseyeu and Pachocka 2026). The flexibility of NGOs allowed them to organise – at first very basic and then much more advanced – support, while individual citizens joined in, responding to an 'all hands on deck' atmosphere (Pachocka *et al*. 2025). Public statistics have not reported on non-governmental help for Ukrainian war refugees in the years after 2022; however, a 2024 survey of NGOs found that 10 per cent were still helping refugees, including about 1 per cent as their main sphere of activity (Charycka, Bednarek and Belina 2025). This suggests that, after a short period of widespread mobilisation in support of newly arriving Ukrainians, the number of NGOs dealing principally with refugees remains significantly larger than before 2022, while others help occasionally. As Witter *et al.* (2023) argue, shocks sometimes empower local communities to be innovative and not wait for slow top-down orders. This seems to have been the case in Poland, where the arrival of war refugees resulted in a spontaneous and large-scale self-organisation of Polish society and the Ukrainian community already in place (Fomina and Pachocka 2024; Pszczółkowska 2022). The large number of 'social brokers' (Blanchet *et al.* 2017) who acted as intermediaries between Ukrainian patients and the Polish healthcare system seems to have been an important element in facilitating foreign patients' access to the rather complex, mainly public but partly private, Polish healthcare system and contributed to its resilience, especially in the short term. In crisis situations, such bottom-up activity may greatly reinforce the frequently insufficient state-led efforts (Jahn, Perplies, Rast, Biddle, Gold and Bozorgmehr 2025).

Conclusions

In the short term, the Polish healthcare system proved to be largely resilient to the shock of incorporating numerous patients from a neighbouring country, with the incoming group receiving basic and advanced care and the access for local patients not obviously decreasing. Although the system was not fully resilient to begin with, as manifested by long waiting times for various procedures, this did not immediately deteriorate due to the arrival of several million new potential patients temporarily – and nearly one million longer-term.

Several factors contributed to this short-term resilience of the healthcare system. Staff shortages, which impacted on Polish healthcare even before 2022, could have been a significant bottleneck. However, the good will of health professionals – who worked overtime – and the incorporation of Ukrainian medics alleviated these challenges, increasing the system's absorptive capacity and facilitating communication with Ukrainian patients. Private healthcare providers participated by offering free services for over a year after the Russian aggression, decreasing pressure on the public system. NGOs, local authorities and individuals facilitated war refugees' navigation within the health system. The unprecedented solidarity and close cooperation of participants of the whole institutional environment proved especially important in the first months, impacting on the short-term, absorptive capacity of Polish healthcare. However, in the medium term, it started to become evident that social support and willingness to help were dwindling and that more systemic solutions were necessary. As the above critical opinions of junior doctors suggest, resorting to the goodwill and additional work input of medical staff, as well as administrators, NGOs and others, was a spontaneous solution which could not be effective in the longer term. It also became evident to the participants of this system that the language difficulties of patients and some Ukrainian doctors and nurses, which were not dealt with in any systemic way, became a factor hindering the system's functioning. This led to the reintroduction of language requirements for medical staff. It may thus be concluded that, while the Polish healthcare system demonstrated resilience in its absorptive and adaptive capacity, many of the solutions applied were dependent on the goodwill and extra work of doctors and others, which was not tenable in the longer term. It is not obvious that the system would have responded equally effectively if Poland had experienced a second mass arrival from Ukraine. More systemic solutions would be necessary to conclude, in the future, that the system demonstrated a transformative capacity and thus long-term resilience.

The above suggests two broader conclusions regarding healthcare resilience in situations of mass arrivals: one methodological and one practical. Methodologically, our research demonstrated the strategic role of not only the public healthcare system but also a broad spectrum of actors, including private providers, NGOs and other grassroots initiatives. Thus, when conceptualising and researching healthcare resilience, their role needs to be included. Further research should investigate the role of these actors in the longer term, especially in situations whereby public enthusiasm and financial resources dwindle.

On a more practical level, the events discussed can also provide a valuable lesson for future situations of mass arrivals. The case of Ukrainian war refugees in the European Union, including Poland, was specific due to the implementation of the EU's Temporary Protection Directive, which gave them access to public healthcare. As the above analysis demonstrates, in some situations, granting the newly arrived access to the general healthcare system can guarantee appropriate care, without strongly impacting on the system's resilience and service provision for locals. This is an important conclusion for the broader debate regarding modes of healthcare provision for refugees.

Note

1. Number allocated to all Polish citizens and some foreigners, allowing access to public and other services. Numbers with the 'UKR' annotation were allocated to Ukrainian war refugees.

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AI use disclosure

Grammarly.com was used for language editing. No other AI was used.

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— SPECIAL SECTION —

Editorial Introduction: Reflexivity of Migration Processes in the Context of Ukrainian Displacement

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This editorial introduction situates research on Ukrainian refugees within broader trends in migration studies. It seeks to bridge the gap between critical migration studies and the growing body of scholarship on refugees from Ukraine. The articles in this special section introduce new themes and perspectives to the study of migration processes involving Ukrainian refugees. They also offer new analytical lenses through which these processes can be examined, including migration infrastructures, institutional practices, and displaced persons' own understandings of temporariness. Importantly, the aim is to move beyond understanding Ukrainian refugees solely through the lens of forced displacement. Viewing them primarily as victims limits our understanding of their experiences and other key aspects of their lives. This special section seeks to broaden that perspective by introducing new analytical approaches and identifying promising directions for future research.

Keywords: forced migration, migration processes, refugees, Ukrainian displacement

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This editorial introduction presents the context for the *CEEMR* special section dedicated to the reflexivity of migration trends in research on Ukrainian refugees. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, triggered a displacement of Ukrainians worldwide; however, the European Union member states remain the primary host countries. It has already been more than four years since the invasion began and this special section consists of articles illustrating how research on Ukrainian displacement has developed and changed. In line with the focus of this special section, the authors discuss issues of identity, belonging and boundary-making, as well as intersectional categories such as gender and class, along with language-related issues. In this introductory article, we comment on the development of research on Ukrainian refugees and connect this issue to broader trends of reflexivity in migration studies (Dahinden, Fischer and Menet 2021; Dieterich and Nieswand 2025; Iosifides 2018).

The displacement from Ukraine after 24 February 2022, caused by Russian military action, should not be regarded as the beginning of the conflict. As many Ukrainians emphasise, the Russian military operations against Ukraine started in 2014 in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. In the European Union, these events were not initially regarded as the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine (Mikheieva and Jaroszewicz 2023). However, the events also caused changes in migration trends from Ukraine. While, before 2014, many Ukrainians migrated both to the European Union and to Russia – on either a temporary or a permanent basis – from 2014 onwards Ukrainians from different regions increasingly began to see new opportunities in the European Union (Drbohlav and Jaroszewicz 2016). Furthermore, after 2014, many displaced Ukrainians from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which were the most affected by the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, fled to central and western parts of Ukraine in order to establish new lives as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Many others moved to Poland and other countries in the European Union. However, in the European Union they did not usually receive refugee status (Mikheieva, Kuzemska and Sereda 2023). Displaced Ukrainians who fled after 24 February 2022 were treated significantly differently. They obtained temporary protection (TP) under the Temporary Protection Directive (Council Directive 2001/55/EC), which provides both protection and new opportunities.

The Ukrainian displacement after 24 February 2022 has generated extensive interest among migration scholars. While migration from Ukraine before this date was primarily studied by scholars originating from Central and Eastern Europe, it was a somewhat marginal topic for scholars in Northern, Southern or Western Europe (even though there are many exceptions, such as Vianello 2014). However, after the Russian invasion, academics from all European countries became interested in the Ukrainian 'topic', which is evident in the increasing number of academic texts on Ukrainian displacement produced by scholars from various corners of Europe. The increasing number of academic texts on Ukrainian migration is also patterned in leading migration journals. For example, in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, there is a 271 per cent increase in the number of articles using the term 'Ukrainian' during the years 2022–2026 in comparison to 2018–2022. In the leading migration journal in Central Europe, the *CEEMR*, there is (based on the authors' own calculation) a 223 per cent increase in the production of articles using the term 'Ukrainian' over the same period. It should also be noted that this output has also increased due to Ukrainian academics who have established positions in European institutions and who are often refugees themselves. Their output is a positive development, as it amplifies their voices, which were previously, to some extent, under-represented in influential migration journals. In summary, since 2022, there has been a marked increase in academic interest in migration from Ukraine and this raises the issue of how knowledge is produced and transferred or, more specifically, of how Ukrainian displacement is perceived and studied. Therefore, four years after the

beginning of the Russian invasion, it is now time to reflect on and discuss the trajectories of research on Ukrainian displacement and emphasise how the research has been developing.

In the first year after displacement, scholars frequently studied how Ukrainian refugees navigate their lives in the host countries (including transnational ties) under temporary protection, as well as how specific policies in different European countries have treated (or governed) Ukrainian refugees. More recently, we have seen a shift towards discussing the gender dimension (Byelikova 2024; Mezihorák 2025), criticism of the temporary protection status and its use (Gheorghiev 2025; Grigoleit-Richter and Fübbeker 2026) – including its neocolonial sense (Mayerchyk, Plakhotnik and Yaremchyshyn 2026) – or return migration and the recovery of Ukraine after the war (Romashchenko 2025). Furthermore, the production of knowledge about Ukrainian refugees is focused on refugees who live in European cities (Kohlenberger, Buber-Ennser, Pędziwiatr, Rengs, Setz, Brzozowski, Riederer, Tarasiuk and Pronizius 2023), which is likely to produce knowledge on urbanised patterns of Ukrainian refugees' settlement, while simultaneously omitting the living circumstances of Ukrainian refugees in rural areas.

Scholars often use quantitative research instead of qualitative – which limits the understanding of refugees' subjectivities. This is related to centring on empirical studies without theoretical contextualisation (Mikheieva and Jaroszewicz 2023). Scholars also often focus on women while research on men is less stressed (Kogan and Kosyakova 2025; Mickelsson 2025). Finally, the existing research does not provide a sufficient answer to whether Ukrainian refugees will return to Ukraine or stay in their countries of settlement (Mikheieva and Jaroszewicz 2023), although the more time they spend in the host countries, the more they are willing to stay (Mykhailyshyna, Samoiliuk, Tomilina, Myronenko, Levchenko and Vyshlinsky 2025). Current research also focuses on mental health, education and demographic characteristics. While this production of knowledge is understandable – early research prioritised rapid empirical insights into Ukrainian displacement – important topics remain underexplored, including the critical insight into migration governance and temporary protection, conceptualising empirical insights into a theoretical framework and introducing intersectional issues. This special section tries to fill this gap.

The first article, written by Katarzyna Krakowska and Kamil Łuczaj, addresses the organisational disorder in reception centres in Poland (facilities offering initial shelter, food, medical and psychological care and guidance for Ukrainian refugees) using qualitative research. Based on the theoretical approach of the Multilevel Governance (MLG) Framework and anomie, they refer to 'organisational crisis' and institutional anomie in a Polish reception centre which provided social infrastructure and support for Ukrainian refugees during the first months of their displacement from Ukraine (spring and summer 2022). The authors highlighted how the reception centre suffered from the disorder while, at the same time, there were many volunteers and also refugees willing to assist newcomers. This disorder led to ambiguity between solidarity and market-based logic and the authors conclude that a market-based logic focusing on economic profit was the prevailing aspect for the organisation in the reception centre. This organisation leads to conflict between volunteers, employees and the manager of the centre because humanitarian efforts were penetrated by market-oriented rationality. In that context, this article refers to the inequalities and tensions created during the first months of Ukrainian displacement. It provides a critical insight into migration governance in Poland and offers theoretically underpinned research reflecting the notions of legitimacy and representation.

The second article, written by Martina Wilsch, Miroslava Hlinčíková, Marketa Štefková and Helena Tužinská, offers insights into Ukrainian refugees' access to housing practices and healthcare in Slovakia. Drawing on qualitative research and the theoretical concept of epistemic injustice, the authors examine

the interplay between the living conditions of Ukrainian refugees, interpreters and institutional actors. They argue that migration governance and epistemic authority contribute to the disempowerment and misrecognition of refugees' agency, ultimately resulting in the exclusion of refugees' voices. These barriers are not only caused by the state; the authors also stressed the role of interpreters who are not competent enough, while both lead to a failing recognition of refugees' perspectives. The problem, as the authors put it, also lies in the emergence of interpreters as private actors who operate outside state control. While Ukrainian refugees exercise epistemic resistance, its effects are largely limited to their adaptation to existing institutional structures rather than challenging the underlying mechanisms of epistemic marginalisation. Therefore, Slovakia should adopt state-operated language services to promote epistemic justice. Overall, this article provides critical insights into migration governance in Slovakia and offers a theoretically grounded discussion of the ways in which language mediation, institutional practices and epistemic authority shape the experiences and agency of Ukrainian refugees.

The third article, by Ivanna Kyliushyk, Dominika Winogrodzka and Emil Chról, examines the situation of Ukrainian refugees in Poland through the theoretical concept of liminality. The authors scrutinised the different factors shaping the liminality process and analysed both the external conditions and the psychological (inner) mechanisms for inducing liminality. Based on qualitative research in Warsaw with highly educated refugee women in 2023, the authors offer three key dimensions for understanding the women's experiences – disrupted life paths, fractured identity and belonging tensions. The first dimension stems from uncertainty, living in spatio-temporal limbo and being trapped between the past and an uncertain future which leads to agency-in-waiting (Maxwell, Leybenson and Yemini 2024). The second dimension refers to the socio-professional establishment of refugees' lives in Poland, which enables them to navigate their new circumstances in the host country. However, this process is often accompanied by an identity crisis stemming from the tension between their previous lives and the rational recognition of the need to redefine their roles and identities in a new social context. The third dimension is about belonging tensions which are connected to social exclusion and the neocolonial perception of Ukrainian refugees as less-educated, inferior and passive victims, which undermines their agency. Ivanna Kyliushyk, Dominika Winogrodzka and Emil Chról directly refer to the neocolonial attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees and critically discuss their situation as holders of temporary protection in Poland. This reflects unequal power relations and the issue of not recognising the refugees' pre-war identities.

Although these articles focus on diverse topics, ranging from migration governance and marketisation to language, epistemic injustice and the liminal experiences of Ukrainian refugees, they share several important features that deserve particular attention:

1. While the existing literature on Ukrainian refugees extensively employs a quantitative methodology, the articles in this special section adopt qualitative approaches, enabling a deeper focus on identities and the subjective perceptions of Ukrainian refugees.
2. At the onset of the Ukrainian displacement, many scholars emphasised both governmental and civil society support for Ukrainian refugees. In contrast, the articles in this special section highlight the limitations and weaknesses of such support, reflecting an important shift in scholarly perspectives on the situation of Ukrainian refugees.
3. Earlier studies on Ukrainian refugees were often criticised for lacking a strong theoretical framework. However, the contributions in this special section demonstrate that all the articles explicitly engage with the relevant theoretical conceptualisations in interpreting their empirical findings.

4. The authors also distinguish between subjective self-perception and the external social environment, differentiating between self-narratives and the perceived or prescribed place of refugees within society.
5. Finally, the articles emphasise belonging and exclusion as processes shaped by refugees' (non-)acceptance within society. They show that belonging is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by cultural integration, legal frameworks, institutional embeddedness and economic conditions.

Recently, in the fifth year of displacement, many refugees have returned to Ukraine, while others continue to enter the European Union. However, the situation is not clear-cut, as many Ukrainians move back and forth, crossing borders frequently. This mobility suggests that their lived experience cannot be understood solely in terms of either integration into host societies or the abandonment of their lives in Ukrainian society. In that context, their belonging is a complex scene influenced by many factors – not necessarily affected only by their 'migranticised' identity (Dahinden 2016) but also by intersectional factors influencing belonging and exclusion in both the host society and their country of origin; they build upon the interplay between culture, class, gender, age, norms, values, language, family expectations, social networks, structure and other outer conditions which relate to their lived experience (Anthias 2008). While Ukrainian refugees are categorised primarily through the lens of forced displacement, they can contest and negotiate their social identities and challenge being defined by displacement.

Scholars should reflect on the use of terms such as 'Ukrainian refugees' and the biases inherent in these categories. This is visible in media representations and research about Ukrainian refugees (Ajana, Connell and Liddle 2024; De Coninck 2023; Krivonos 2025; Zawadzka-Paluektau 2023). In migration studies, there have been calls for greater reflexivity (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014), particularly regarding processes of knowledge production and representation – and the voices that are included or excluded. Dahinden *et al.* (2021) argue that categories such as migrant descendants are political and performative rather than neutral – and that knowledge is co-produced with research participants, who actively negotiate and contest migratory labels. The same applies to Ukrainian refugees. Consequently, there is a need to create spaces for these latter to participate in the co-production of knowledge. Such an approach may help to counteract the tendency of migration research to construct epistemic objects and reproduce its categories (Dieterich and Nieswand 2025).

Several additional issues remain unresolved and warrant further research. For instance, despite the recent emphasis on the agency of Ukrainian refugees, they are still frequently conceptualised primarily through lenses of vulnerability and victimisation, suggesting that a fully developed understanding of refugee agency has yet to be achieved. Another limitation concerns the predominant focus on the experiences of Ukrainian refugees in the European Union, as well as in countries such as the United States, Canada and Australia, while the situation of Ukrainian refugees in other countries, including in Russia, remains underexplored and calls for state-of-the-art research. Furthermore, a significant body of work produced by Ukrainian scholars is published outside the leading migration journals and is often overlooked in European academic discourse. Incorporating these contributions could substantially enrich the existing knowledge base on Ukrainian refugees and help to further decentre the research field (Triandafyllidou 2022).

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When Roles Collide: How Ambiguities Triggered an Organisational Crisis in a Polish Refugee Reception Centre

Katarzyna Krakowska*, Kamil Łuczaj*

This study investigates deviant behaviours within a volunteer-based refugee assistance centre operating during a time of crisis. Drawing on ethnographic fieldnotes, interviews and autoethnographic observations from multiple site visits, we argue that the absence of clear operational rules, blurred normative frameworks and tensions between market logic and altruistic values all contributed to irregular practices by the private entrepreneur managing the facility, volunteers, and displaced persons. The findings underscore the challenges of public–private collaboration and call for a critical rethinking of multilevel governance assumptions in crisis contexts. During the 'organisational crisis' phase, irregularities surfaced, including an unequal distribution of labour, ambiguous employment conditions and tolerated illicit activities such as currency trading. According to participants' accounts and field observations, these dynamics contributed to organisational disorder, disproportionately burdened female volunteers and gradually eroded trust in leadership. The subsequent 'crisis of legitimation' phase intensified internal conflicts, revealing tensions between solidarity-based and profit-oriented motivations.

Keywords: organisational chaos, marketised mentality, refugee reception centre, volunteers

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Introduction

Since 24 February 2022, the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Poland has become the primary destination for millions of Ukrainians fleeing the war. According to UNHCR data, by the end of 2022 more than 7.8 million people had crossed the Polish border, with approximately 1.5 million remaining in Poland and relying on various forms of support offered under the framework of temporary protection (UNHCR 2023). The sheer scale and rapidity of these migratory flows necessitated the creation of an unprecedented reception system that encompassed governmental and municipal responses, as well as grassroots civic initiatives.

From the outset, the management of the refugee crisis in Poland adopted a multi-level governance (MLG) model, in which key operational responsibilities were distributed among state administration, local governments, non-governmental organisations and international institutions (Błaszczyk, Dolińska, Makaro and Pluta 2024; Caponio and Ponzo 2022). This approach stood in contrast to strictly top-down, hierarchical decision-making processes – although it did not entirely preclude hierarchical elements. In practice, the distribution of responsibilities emerged organically within self-organising, volunteer-based initiatives, even though the voivodeship government legally retained sole responsibility for establishing and managing reception centres.

While this structure enabled swift and flexible responses during the initial weeks of the crisis, over time it revealed substantial challenges related to coordination, sustainability and accountability in the provision of assistance. A significant share of the burden of aid management was shifted onto local communities, individual households and volunteers – often without adequate institutional support (Hospitable Poland 2022).

A distinctive element of Poland's response to the crisis was the extensive practice of hosting refugees in private homes, on a scale previously unseen. As indicated by national and international reports, this form of assistance benefited up to 600,000 refugees at its peak (Fundacja To Proste and IOM 2024). Although private hosting practices have been observed in other countries as well (see Burrell 2024; Daoust and Dyvik 2025), the spontaneity and magnitude of this phenomenon in Poland were unprecedented. In contrast to the British 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme, which involved the formal registration of hosts and the provision of financial support (Burrell 2024), the Polish approach relied for a long time on *ad hoc* subsidies and weakly institutionalised forms of assistance (Czepil and Jańczak 2024; Jarosz and Klaus 2023).

Parallel to the private accommodation arrangements, numerous reception points were established across Poland – temporary shelters located primarily in sports halls, dormitories, holiday centres and schools. At the peak of the crisis, their number reached several hundred, varying significantly in terms of standards, organisational structures and sources of funding (Fundacja to Proste and IOM 2024). These centres fulfilled multiple functions: registration and first-aid provision, accommodation and meals, the distribution of clothing and other basic necessities, as well as psychological and logistical support. Despite their undeniable importance during the initial months of the crisis, reports began to emerge over time regarding serious issues: substandard conditions, staff and volunteer fatigue, financial opacity and even deviant behaviour and abuse, both towards and among refugees.

The aim of this article is to analyse irregularities – understood as patterns of institutional behaviour arising from unclear, contradictory or constantly changing policies and resulting in normative chaos as they deviate from the model of a transparent non-profit organisation – observed in one of the large reception points in Poland, located in a major regional city. Drawing on qualitative data – interviews and participant observation – we offer a theoretical interpretation of the observed behaviour through the

lens of organisational crisis theory, supplemented by insights from anomie theory and the volunteer coordination literature. Building on these perspectives, we argue that mass-scale, volunteer-based organisations operating under a market logic (Bourdieu 1993) – in which social institutions such as the family, education and the state lose their regulatory capacity – become particularly vulnerable to normative disintegration and various forms of deviant behaviour. We hypothesise that the operational conditions of the reception centre under study – perceived by volunteers as marked by ambiguous responsibility structures, resource scarcity, high emotional tension and undefined normative frameworks – contributed to the emergence of practices perceived by participants as abusive, emotionally manipulative or based on double standards.

The following section outlines the theoretical framework. In the subsequent analysis, we demonstrate how this framework helps to clarify the underlying logic of the behaviour – shaped by a 'marketised mentality' – observed in the reception centre and we discuss the implications this has for the future design of humanitarian aid systems.

Literature: defining, identifying and preventing the 'organisational crisis'

One possible approach to analysing organisational crises in volunteer-based organisations is the Multilevel Governance (MLG) Framework, which considers the involvement of various actors engaged in complex formal and informal relationships at different levels of government policy implementation. In this paper, MLG is understood in the classical sense as

> *a specific mode or instance of policy-making that results from the simultaneous occurrence of collaborative relations between different governmental authorities (vertical dimension of policy-making) and between public and non-public actors (horizontal dimension)* (Caponio and Ponzo 2022: 220).

However, rather than studying the policy-making arrangements themselves, we focus on their practical effects – specifically, everyday practices. Our data allow us to address the broader issue highlighted by Tiziana Caponio and Irene Ponzo (2022: 220), who argue that asylum-seekers' reception constitutes a classical MLG challenge – 'one that brings a multiplicity of interdependent actors into play, questioning state-based hierarchical implementation processes'.

The everyday operation of the reception centres we investigate may lead to 'organisational crises', often defined as 'organisationally-based disasters which cause extensive damage and social disruption, involve multiple stakeholders and unfold through complex technological, organisational and social processes' (Shrivastava, Mitroff, Miller and Miglani 1988: 285). This definition was later adopted by Tracey Rizzuto and Laura Maloney (2008) in their analysis of organisational responses to Hurricane Katrina. They employed a three-stage model of crisis management developed by Denis Smith (1990) to explain the processes they observed. Smith's model consists of three phases. The first is the 'crisis of management', a period leading up to the crisis event during which the organisation fails to recognise or adequately prepare for an impending situation. In this phase, 'the actions (or inactions) of management can promulgate the development of an organisational climate and culture within which a relatively minor triggering event can rapidly escalate through the system and result in a catastrophic failure' (Smith 1990: 270). The second phase is the 'operational crisis', when 'the human face of management' becomes critical to mitigating negative outcomes but often dissolves into a search for culpability (Smith 1990: 271). The third phase, the 'crisis of legitimation', follows the catastrophe. As Smith (1990: 271)

noted, 'time is of the essence during this phase as the organisation, often in collaboration with others, attempts to cope with the implications of the crisis event'. This so-called 'post-crisis' period – which, somewhat misleadingly, suggests a resolution or the obvious end of the crisis – often involves ongoing painful consequences, attempts to assign blame and efforts to legitimise organisational procedures and management styles (Smith 1990: 271).

In the case of our research, Phase 1 corresponds to the period leading up to 24 February 2022, when little was done by the state to prepare reception facilities for the anticipated wave of war refugees. Consequently, our focus is primarily on the 'operational crisis' and 'crisis of legitimation' phases, both of which contributed to what many scholars refer to as 'organisational chaos'. Research on two reception centres in Warsaw by Mateusz Trochymiak and Nina Wróblewska (2025: 281) defined 'organisational chaos' operationally as a situation where 'there was a problem with defining who is responsible for what'. Their comparative analysis of two centres revealed several irregularities. In this paper, we build on a more extensive dataset, focusing on a single case study to investigate the processes underlying individual actions across multiple organisational levels. In a different socio-economic context, Vincent Roscigno, Randy Hodson and Steven Lopez (2009) observed that 'organisational chaos', defined as the poor organisation and coordination of labour processes, was a significant factor in nearly all forms of 'workplace incivility' within the organisations they studied. Thus, the concept of organisational crisis offers a valuable framework for identifying and naming the social problems we observe.

Linking organisational crisis and chaos with the theory of anomie traditionally rooted in sociological thinking can substantially enrich the existing literature, offering a more nuanced understanding of both the micro-level processes affecting individuals and the structural conditions that shape these dynamics. Classical anomie and strain theory, as developed by Robert Merton (1957), seeks to explain why certain individuals, social groups or cultures display stronger tendencies towards deviant behaviour. Institutional Anomie Theory (IAT), developed by Steven F. Messner and Richard Rosenfeld (2001), extends the basic Mertonian model. Its core assumption is that a society functions properly only when economic and non-economic institutions remain in balance. In capitalist societies, however, this balance is disrupted in favour of the economy, thereby undermining the regulatory capacity of institutions such as the family, education and religion (Messner and Rosenfeld 1997). The resulting anomic condition is characterised by individuals acting according to the logic of instrumental effectiveness and utilitarian rationality, irrespective of prevailing moral norms.

Although IAT – typically used to analyse the erosion of norms within long-established institutions rather than institutions still in formation – is not the main theoretical frame of this analysis, one of its central insights remains useful: deviance is rooted in the institutional structure of society rather than solely in individual characteristics. Market values – individualism, achievement orientation, universal success metrics and the fetishisation of money – form a dominant cultural pattern often described as the 'American Dream ethos' (Messner and Rosenfeld 2001: 89), which gradually displaces non-economic values (Hövermann, Messner and Zick 2015). Adapting IAT to the Polish context, Bieliński and Hövermann (2021) introduced the concept of a 'marketised mentality' as an analytical tool for examining anomie at the micro-social level (Bieliński 2013; Hövermann *et al.* 2015).

Moreover, in the data analysis we draw on insights from human resource management (HRM) in the context of volunteer coordination. A literature review by Studer and von Schnurbein (2013) demonstrates that, in successful organisations, volunteers cannot be managed in the same way as paid staff. As they note, 'volunteers and paid staff constitute different resources for the organisation and different perceptions exist about the nature of the relationship between them (e.g., with respect to work quality standards and the balance of power)' (2013: 414). Furthermore, 'role ambiguities and conflicts

lower the contribution made by volunteers to the organisation, as shown by many empirical studies' (2013: 414). These findings have informed the development of various models of volunteer involvement (2013: 415). The model the most relevant to our analysis corresponds to what Rochester (2007) terms the member/activist model, which focuses on how volunteers become involved, what motivates them, how organisations are structured and managed and how governance systems operate. This stands in contrast to the service delivery, support role and co-worker models. This perspective, combined with selected insights from anomie theory, enables us to engage more deeply with the empirical material, which suggests a blending – and, at times, tension – between market-oriented and volunteer-based logics of practice (Bourdieu 1990).

Summing up, the phenomenon we study can be referred to as an instance of organisational chaos, which runs away from control. Although the Polish reception centres played an important role in the first weeks of the full-scale invasion, we focus on a case study which showcases what kind of processes and actors operating on different levels were responsible for the anomic situation in this particular place. We do not claim, however, that this was a typical model, as other studies prove it otherwise (Kalinowska, Kuczyński, Bukraba-Rylska, Krakowska and Sałkowska 2023a; Kalinowska, Krakowska and Sałkowska 2023b; Szpargała 2024). The aim of this study is to provide a detailed analysis which may help to avoid similar mistakes in other socio-cultural contexts.

Our findings resonate with recent scholarship in migration studies that highlights the informal, emotionally charged and politically ambivalent character of grassroots refugee assistance. Cantat (2021) and Sandri (2018) both demonstrate that volunteer-led initiatives often arise in response to state inaction, enacting alternative forms of solidarity that may challenge, supplement or inadvertently reproduce existing humanitarian regimes. These insights enrich our application of anomie theory by contextualising individual and organisational behaviour within a broader ecology of crisis-driven aid.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design aimed at capturing the dynamics of grassroots humanitarian practices that emerged in Poland after 24 February 2022. Three primary qualitative techniques were used: participant observation, reflexive self-interviews conducted in the evocative style (Ellis 1997) within the research team and comprehensive interviews with individuals engaged in humanitarian work. Before conducting interviews with aid workers, the researchers – all of whom had been involved in various forms of support for displaced persons from Ukraine prior to the study – responded in writing to the same interview questions later posed to participants. This reflexive exercise served both ethical and analytical purposes, enabling researchers to critically reflect on their own positionalities and experiences of engagement, while also generating additional contextual material for team discussion and analysis. One of the co-authors worked in the reception centre discussed in this article. The project was conducted during an unfolding refugee crisis and followed the concept of 'methics' (van Brown 2020), which emphasises the integration of methodological and ethical reflection in research under exceptional circumstances. In the initial weeks – when humanitarian work absorbed most volunteers – field observations were initiated, whereas interviews were conducted only once the intensity of frontline activities had partially stabilised. The project developed gradually in the spirit of 'hot sociology', grounded in ongoing engagement with rapidly evolving social processes during a moment of crisis.

Participant observation

Participant observation was conducted between March and June 2022 in a variety of humanitarian settings, including two large reception centres, a railway station, a volunteer aid point in a major urban centre and two rural local communities organising support for displaced persons from Ukraine. Parishes, community cultural centres, rural women's associations and local entrepreneurs were all involved. The observations took the form of complete participation, as researchers initially became involved in humanitarian activities as volunteers rather than entering the field as external observers. Throughout the fieldwork, researchers produced fieldnotes containing elements of analytic autoethnography (Anderson 2006). These notes documented not only the course of events but also emotions, interpersonal tensions, moral dilemmas and organisational dynamics observed during humanitarian work.

Conducted in the second month of the war, the reflexive interviews within the research team served to deepen their reflection on humanitarian experiences and refine the interview guide. Since the formation of the research team, regular analytic seminars were also held to exchange field experiences, discuss emerging interpretations and critically reflect on any methodological and ethical dilemmas arising during the study.

Subsequently, between April and August 2022, comprehensive qualitative interviews (Kaufmann 2007) were carried out with individuals actively involved in assisting displaced persons from Ukraine across the different humanitarian settings included in the broader project. Interviews were conducted with volunteers, coordinators and organisers engaged in grassroots support initiatives operating in both urban and rural contexts. In total, approximately 40 hours of recorded material were collected.

Across the broader research project, a purposive sampling strategy was used, combined with volunteer networks, personal contacts and snowball sampling. Participants were recruited primarily from urban middle-class environments and local civic elites in Central Poland. The sample included individuals representing diverse forms of engagement in humanitarian support, including: (a) first-time volunteers, (b) irregular volunteers, (c) everyday activists, (d) professionals working in support roles and (e) long-term residents in Poland of Ukrainian origin who were involved in assistance activities. Theoretical saturation was achieved at the level of the broader multi-site research project rather than within this individual case study (Kvale 2007).

This article focuses on one particular reception centre that became an important site of humanitarian coordination during the first months following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The case was selected because of the intensity and continuity of volunteer engagement observed there, as well as the researchers' prolonged direct involvement in everyday activities at the site. The analysis presented here draws on participant observation, fieldnotes and approximately four hours of interview material related specifically to this reception centre. Interviews concerning the site were conducted with three volunteers who were not members of the research team but belonged to the core group of the most consistently involved participants in the reception centre's activities. The interviews were conducted by a researcher who had previously volunteered at the site and were carried out either in person or online, each lasting approximately one hour.

The material on which we build represents only one snapshot of the vast landscape of refugee assistance described elsewhere based on the same material (Kalinowska *et al.* 2023a, 2023b; Krakowska 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Krakowska and Kalinowska, in press). Although the picture that emerges is clearly negative, we believe that researchers have a moral obligation to reveal such irregularities. We therefore

treat this case study as a contrastive case to analyses highlighting the positive forms of social mobilisation demonstrated by Polish society in 2022.

Our reliance on purposefully selected material stems from the fact that interviewees are generally reluctant to disclose the negative aspects of humanitarian assistance, for reasons ranging from shame and a sense of inadequacy to a lack of knowledge about the broader organisational context. Such a research strategy was unavoidable, as it was impossible to confront these accounts with managers or to juxtapose our findings with other written sources discussing the same institution without risking the anonymity of the interviewees.

One limitation of this approach is that the resulting picture reflects the interpretation of the situation from a particular perspective, one that is also informed by the experience of one of the co-authors, who actively participated in the activities of the centre. Consequently, this paper should not be understood as a comprehensive policy evaluation. Rather, it offers a sociological analysis of an organisational crisis from the perspective of selected activists. This requires us to acknowledge that other activists may have been less informed or may have interpreted the situation differently. Conducting research during an ongoing humanitarian crisis involved several methodological challenges. The inability to establish even an approximate number of volunteers was itself symptomatic of the organisational conditions under study. No formal registry was maintained and participation remained highly fluid, involving private individuals as well as representatives of municipal institutions and private companies who entered and left the reception centre on an ongoing basis.

Given the limited number of interviews conducted specifically for this article and the case-oriented character of the analysis, the study does not aim to produce statistically representative conclusions regarding humanitarian mobilisation in Poland more broadly. Rather, the reception centre is treated as an analytically significant case that enables an in-depth examination of organisational mechanisms, interpersonal dynamics and ethical tensions emerging during grassroots humanitarian responses in conditions of crisis. The value of the analysis therefore lies in its interpretative and contextual insights rather than in empirical generalisability.

Researcher positionality

The research team emerged from individuals who had been deeply involved in solidarity-based humanitarian action since the beginning of the war. The research project itself was secondary to ongoing practical engagement and developed gradually from experiences gathered during humanitarian work. This created both analytical opportunities and methodological challenges related to proximity, emotional involvement and the dual role of researchers as both participants and observers (Nikulkin and Zvonareva 2024).

One of the researchers – and co-author of this article – was strongly involved in various forms of assistance, including direct support for refugees, administrative tasks and the long-term provision of home-prepared food and basic goods to the reception point discussed here. She also conducted interviews concerning the reception point, speaking exclusively with individuals with whom she had no prior personal relationships or interdependencies in the division of labour within the facility. The second author was not involved in this particular form of refugee assistance but he privately hosted two refugee families in his home.

Throughout the project, considerable attention was devoted to reflexive methodological work concerning researcher positionality, emotional engagement and the influence of personal experiences on interpretation. Regular analytic seminars within the research team played an important ethical and

methodological role in the development of the study. These discussions enabled the researchers to collectively examine field experiences, confront interpretative assumptions, identify potential biases and critically reflect on the tensions arising from their dual involvement in both humanitarian action and academic analysis.

For the authors, who were themselves participants in the Polish humanitarian mobilisation, working on this article was emotionally demanding. While we do not question the legitimacy of humanitarian assistance itself (see Shephard 2011), we argue that the irregularities and organisational problems observed during the refugee response require critical scholarly examination in order to improve future institutional support systems. We also consider it our responsibility to complement earlier publications with a more reflective analysis of the mechanisms underlying the problems revealed in the operation of the reception point. At the same time, the researchers' embedded position within the field provided access to processes, interactions and moral tensions that would have been difficult to capture through detached observation alone.

Research ethics

Interview participants were informed about the aims of the study, the principles of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation. They gave explicit consent to audio-recording. All data were anonymised and – at the request of interviewees – we refrained from disclosing any information that could reveal the location of the reception point. In the absence of an institutional ethics committee, the project underwent ethical assessment within the university's grant review system.

One of the authors' involvement in the reception point preceded the formal start of the research. Therefore, the initial observations stemmed from practical humanitarian work rather than explicit research intention and were not conducted as overt observation. After the project was formally designed and informed consent obtained, she changed her mode of participation, reducing her daily on-site work in favour of supplying goods from outside. This shift enabled greater analytical distance and ensured compliance with ethical standards.

Data analysis

All empirical materials were transcribed and subjected to qualitative content analysis. The first analytic round involved open and theoretical coding (Gibbs 2011; Glaser and Strauss 2017[1967]), which enabled the identification of categories emerging from the data and their alignment with the study's research questions.

For the purposes of this article, the selected material was re-analysed using open coding focused on the specific functioning of the reception point, the identification of problems and the reconstruction of their underlying mechanisms. Coding categories addressed: (a) ethical stances and volunteer–refugee relations; (b) interpersonal tensions among volunteers and in their interactions with facility managers; (c) abuses and irregularities; (d) emotional labour; and (e) signs of fatigue and burnout. This approach resulted in analytic categories capturing the relationships between work organisation, volunteer practices, institutional structures and the emotional experience of both volunteers and displaced persons.

Results

The big reception centre: space and people

The object of analysis in this paper is a temporary reception centre established by a local government unit under the authority of a decision issued by the Prime Minister, based on the National Crisis Management Plan (Rządowe Centrum Bezpieczeństwa 2022). The plan envisaged the establishment of centralised reception centres providing essential social infrastructure and support in cooperation with civil society organisations. Its day-to-day management was delegated to a commercial entity.

The reception centre served as a short-term shelter, offering accommodation, meals, medical care and assistance with refugee relocation. Its operational structure was based on cooperation between public administration, non-governmental organisations and volunteers. However, the absence of a clear division of competences and responsibilities among the actors involved led to coordination difficulties and tensions in the centre's daily operations, thus exhibiting symptoms of an 'operational crisis' (Smith 1990).

During periods of peak influx, the centre accommodated more than 4,000 individuals simultaneously. Although it was initially designed for short-term stays, many people – particularly the elderly, the sick, persons with disabilities and large families – remained for weeks or even months, unable to make decisions about further relocation. This situation, though stemming from unavoidable circumstances, still left room for actions that could mitigate the negative consequences of the organisational crisis (Smith 1990). For reasons which we discuss later, however, the crisis only deepened as time passed.

The centre's infrastructure, initially configured for brief occupancy, included a registration area, an information point (providing details on available support, registration for international transport, housing and employment assistance), a dining facility, a medical station, a distribution warehouse for essential items (clothing, hygiene products, chargers, suitcases, etc.) and dormitory-style halls equipped with camp beds for women, men and children. Over time, the centre underwent intensive adaptation to meet residents' needs. The medical and dining facilities were expanded (including a snack bar and refrigerators for refugees) and new spaces were created: a recreation room with a piano, a playroom, a computer lab and a Covid-19 vaccination point. Psychological, spiritual and legal support services were introduced, alongside cultural events and educational activities. The staff came to include translators (including sign-language interpreters), educators, facilitators and assistants supporting sick people. This means that the problem did not lie in the absence of crisis management – since the aforementioned adjustments were indeed necessary – but, rather, in the sphere of volunteer management.

It is clear that it was the volunteers – both individuals and those delegated by public institutions and private companies – who made the development of the infrastructure and the provision of services possible. Their efforts encompassed not only direct assistance but also the initiation of partnerships with national and international organisations, as well as local educational institutions. Each day, dozens of volunteers were engaged in on-site and remote tasks, supporting a small team of permanent staff employed by the managing entity and a local government representative. The phase of 'operational crisis' (Smith 1990) was often narrated in a way that aligned with the widely publicised media image of the 'refugee miracle' (Łuczaj, Leonowicz-Bukała and Krasko 2024). One volunteer described the large-scale grassroots mobilisation in these terms:

I feel like this just confirms what I've always thought about Poles – that when something bad or difficult happens, we pull ourselves together and people show that we're incredibly united, incredibly organised. You've got volunteers who are far-left, far-right, religious, atheist, Hindu – really, from every political camp – and everyone's working side by side. No one's going around saying, 'I hate Tusk' or 'I hate Kaczyński'. We just help, together. And I think we're actually a pretty great society – not one that's constantly digging holes under its own feet or looking for problems where there aren't any (P1).

The volunteers interviewed for this study, as well as those who collaborated with one of the authors during participant ethnographic fieldwork, had joined the centre in response to urgent calls for support. Their engagement was part of a broader wave of activist mobilisation in Poland during the initial months of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Kalinowska *et al.* 2023b). One of the volunteers described how 'ordinary people from the street' found their way into the centre and the concerns that accompanied this process:

It was totally by accident – somewhere on (a social media platform), a post popped up… the fan page of (this reception centre), which had been set up by volunteers. And there was this message saying they had nothing – no food, no clothes – that everything was needed and that if anyone could bring anything or help in any way, they should come. And since the centre was really close to my house… I spent a few days – I think three or four – going back and forth, thinking about it, kind of torn, whether to go or not. And I'll be honest, I was just scared. I was scared of what I'd find in the thick of it (P2).

These words illustrate how the reception centre became a space for individuals who responded to urgent appeals for action, as well as for those seeking to fulfil a personal need to help people affected by injustice and violence. At the same time, they had to navigate a series of challenges. Within a compressed time frame, they had to establish ways of working together in a team that was constantly expanding to include anyone motivated to engage. The volunteers were often strangers to one another and found themselves tackling tasks that were entirely new to them. All activities occurred under crisis conditions and amid significant informational disarray, ultimately culminating in an organisational crisis.

The crucial circumstance, worth emphasising, was that the facility was managed by a private business owner – an actor embedded in market logic and oriented towards profit and loss (Bourdieu 1993). The same volunteer who praised the grassroots mobilisation was highly critical of the entity managing the centre, echoing the uncontrollable tension between marketised mentality (Bieliński and Hövermann 2021) and what we might refer to as an activist mindset (see Rochester 2007).

And you know what? The owner [of the hall] – *at first he seemed like a wonderful guy, a golden-hearted man with the heart of a lion… but I guess I can say it now – he turned out to be a swindler, someone who really just cared about the money. Meanwhile, we were holding things together, we gave so much of ourselves… and honestly, running around on a Sunday night at 8 p.m. trying to find toilet paper and soap wouldn't have been necessary if the money that was supposed to go to the refugees had actually gone to the refugees* (P1).

This perspective, supported by numerous ethnographic observations, led us to consider the interactions – and often clashes – between business logic and the logic of helping. Operating at the intersection of two distinct orders – the altruistic motivations of the volunteers and the economic

interests of the managers – emerges as one of the core structural tensions underlying the deviant dynamics explored in the following section.

The logic of profit

The operation of the reception centre relied heavily on the around-the-clock work of volunteers, who organised themselves into shifts and handled all the areas of activity described earlier. Their efforts brought direct benefits to the private entity managing the facility, which did not need to hire a large staff to maintain its day-to-day operations. There was also a group of volunteers working remotely, providing support at a distance. Without their contributions, the daily functioning of the centre – though perhaps technically feasible – would probably have been significantly less effective and the living conditions of the displaced persons considerably worse, unless these responsibilities had been assumed by the management (Krakowska 2023a).

Among the many responsibilities, the volunteers were in charge of managing the centre's social media presence, regularly posting updates about current needs. These appeals mobilised spontaneous responses from the local community, both individually and collectively – for example, through schools and workplaces. Volunteers and supporters organised group meal preparations (e.g., sandwiches and snacks), as well as charitable sales. At the same time, they engaged in negotiations with major actors in the humanitarian field, coordinating large-scale deliveries of water, food, hygiene supplies, toilet paper and other essential items.

The financial dimension of these activities – and the economic benefits accrued by the facility's manager – was addressed directly by one of the interviewees:

> [The manager] *made several good millions off this whole operation. We're talking about funds… they're* [managing entity] *in debt to the tune of something like 90+ million and, in the beginning – during the first two and a half, maybe three months – they didn't pay for anything, except utilities. Because yeah… they treated us like free labour. They had maybe five people on the staff, not counting the security. All the catering was paid for by* [the local authority] *and then by* [the NGO providing food for displaced persons], *which is still there and that's free too, even though the contract says they're supposed to provide food themselves… The food came from donations, the extra stuff, I mean – coffee, tea and so on and all the hygiene stuff, all that… all the 'luxury' that* [this reception centre] *had compared to* [the nearest major reception centre] – *that was all… that was all from donors. On top of that, at the very beginning, when we had the most people – even up to 5,000 – there were about 70 volunteers during the day and only around 10 paid workers, so if you calculate how much they saved on labour costs… we're talking millions. At one point* [the manager] *even said to one of our volunteers – this was maybe after three months: 'Great, because for two months we didn't pay a thing'. Meaning just utilities – they didn't put in anything of their own* (P2).

Non-transparent employment rules

Over time, some individuals who had previously worked at the centre as volunteers – and thus subscribed to the activist model (Rochester 2007) – were hired by the managing entity. However, this process lacked transparency – both the recruitment criteria and the terms of employment remained unclear, often even to those directly involved. Among the volunteers were individuals who made deliberate efforts to stand out, hoping to be noticed by the manager and viewing employment as an

opportunity for professional advancement. Others – especially those who were displaced themselves – saw paid work as a pathway to minimal financial stability. There were also individuals who treated the employment primarily as a temporary income source but who hesitated to admit this openly out of fear of being judged by other volunteers:

> *I'll be honest, I really don't know what the recruitment system* [at the centre] *is, because it's always been a mystery to me. But what I can say is that, very often, the people who had been our volunteers – and I mean some of the strongest ones – they were actually ashamed and didn't want to say that they'd been hired by* [the manager], *because they felt like we wouldn't accept them anymore, that they weren't 'ours', that they weren't one of us anymore* (P3).

The ambiguous and informal nature of the employment arrangements with selected individuals introduced tensions and a sense of disorder among volunteers. In addition to the non-standard remuneration of 'workers' (discussed later), this aspect of organisational chaos was particularly evident among displaced persons who juggled voluntary work at the centre with childcare responsibilities and the urgent search for paid employment. One such situation was observed during participant fieldwork, when one of the researchers was assigned a task that other volunteers deliberately avoided, knowing it was typically carried out by salaried employees rather than unpaid staff. The task involved entering the personal data of centre residents into a digital system. The researcher, who was still familiarising herself with the centre's operations, agreed to take on the assignment after being persuaded of its critical importance for the continuity of the facility's work – the data were to be reported to local authorities as a basis for securing further funding.

This situation, in which displaced persons were performing identical tasks either with or without remuneration, was described by the researcher in a fieldnote:

> *When I came in to input data, two Ukrainian women were sitting at the desks next to mine. Both in their 40s. They said they had also fled the war. They were urgently looking for permanent jobs because, soon, they would have to support themselves and their children here. In their free time – when they weren't job hunting and when the kids were still in school – they came to the reception centre to help out.*
>
> *At the computers on the other side of the desk, facing us, sat a young Polish volunteer and two young (30-ish) Ukrainian women who were there for the first time. My neighbours were chatting with each other about job-hunting. Eventually one of them, who used to be a regional manager for a large furniture store chain in Ukraine, asked the two across the desk whether they had found a job. The other women replied that they had come here for work. The volunteer women were surprised – nobody had told them they could get paid. The 'employees' said they had found an advert, although they couldn't recall where. They didn't know any details about the job – not even the salary or how long they were supposed to be there. They had come just to earn something. The 'volunteers' said that this wasn't fair – they were working for free. They didn't blame the 'employees' but said that the manager should give everyone the same opportunity. The 'employees' replied that they couldn't work for free – they had children. The woman from the furniture chain said, 'I have children too'* (R1).

This account illustrates not only the precarious and unequal nature of employment within the centre but also the erosion of solidarity under conditions of opacity and competition. The absence of transparent criteria for recruitment, along with inconsistent communication regarding employment

opportunities, created an environment in which individual volunteers – particularly those in vulnerable situations – had to navigate uncertainty, frustration and informal hierarchies.

Accounts provided by volunteers suggested that the facility's manager exercised authority in ways perceived by participants as abusive, particularly in relation to displaced persons who depended on him in various ways. Repeated testimonies pointed to delayed wage payments, underpayment and discretionary changes to previously agreed terms – all at the manager's behest:

> *We often had to intervene because the girls working in the warehouse or in the 'lower distribution point' – some of them weren't paid for a very long time. Then, for example, he told one of them – she was doing twelve-hour shifts, seven days a week – that he would pay her only for eight. So, the rates kept changing, and we… the girls would often have to step in* (P2).

Hot water as an employee privilege

Another controversial and ethically questionable practice reported by volunteers was the application of double standards in the treatment of displaced persons – specifically, a distinction between those employed by the manager and those who were simply residents of the centre. A form of informal compensation came in the shape of so-called 'non-wage bonuses', such as access to a private hot-water shower – unavailable to the rest of the residents – preferential access to donated 'luxury items' such as branded clothing or tacit permission to engage in legally dubious activities. These clear profits were incompatible with the views of selflessly motivated volunteers, who strongly opposed both this marketised logic and the divisions it generated.

> *And what made things more difficult for us was the emergence of this… kind of 'kapo' system. It developed fairly quickly – after about three or four weeks. Mostly it involved Azerbaijanis, people who theoretically weren't supposed to stay longer than 15 days, right? But then they were somehow hired by a subcontractor* [of the manager], *so officially they weren't* [the manager's] *employees. Instead, they were assigned to this so-called main coordinator* [from the manager's side]. *And, for instance, they opened their own currency exchange desk, with a pretty poor exchange rate – but you couldn't exchange hryvnias anywhere else. I actually reported this* [to the representative of local authorities] *and said that you probably need a special permit to run a service like that. This guy would just show up, open his laptop, check something and so on. Besides that, these men surrounded themselves with young women, saying they were their 'wives' and so on. We didn't like that at all. Plus, they yelled at Ukrainians and were treated really well, unlike everyone else. For example, they had a separate bathroom set aside just for them and only they could use it – while the rest of the people, nearly 2,000 of them, had six showers with cold water. Right?* (P3).

The lack of clarity surrounding employment conditions and resource distribution, coupled with the absence of transparent procedures, led to internal conflicts and deepened divisions – both among volunteers and between the volunteers and the manager. One participant described this mounting tension:

> *We were constantly clashing with the manager – because of all the double standards and stuff disappearing from the warehouse. And the constant arguing… about the things we brought in, the things we arranged. I understand none of us had… we couldn't say we were experienced in deciding who should*

get what; but I also know it shouldn't be like this – that people supposedly volunteering [at the centre] *should be the ones getting the better stuff. Either you pay them or you don't but it can't be both* (P2).

These testimonies reveal how the absence of oversight and institutional safeguards not only undermined trust but also fostered informal hierarchies and inequities, particularly among vulnerable groups. The coexistence of market-based logic with loosely regulated humanitarian action generated conditions that facilitated opportunistic behaviour, favouritism and moral ambiguity, ultimately distorting the mission and functioning of the centre.

Missing aid, inflated numbers

Another problem extended to spatial arrangements, with frequent relocations of service points – especially storage areas – and their contents. Volunteers emphasised that such moves often led to the disappearance of entire pallets of valuable items, triggering so-called 'warehouse wars'. In response to the risk of further losses, some volunteers began hiding donated goods from the manager which, in turn, led to accusations of theft.

Yet, the greatest uncertainty within the centre's operations concerned the number of people actually accommodated. Newly arrived individuals – often transported by buses organised by local authorities – were required to fill out arrival cards themselves. Departures were recorded in the same informal manner. These data were then entered into the computer system with significant delays and by *ad hoc* personnel. As described earlier, this system allowed the manager to inflate the reported number of residents, thereby increasing the budgetary subsidies allocated to the centre.

One informant recounted the situation as follows:

And everything was always being moved around – there was this one place, then another, then something else, then they'd say 'We'll do this here and not do that over there' and it was just chaos. At first, I thought: 'My God, how are these people managing multi-million złoty operations and letting things like this happen?' But then I realised – this was the perfect setup for them. In all that chaos, they could… well, there was always chaos. The moment you introduce rules and start enforcing them, then if someone makes a mistake, you must hold them accountable, right? But they left the chaos in place so that, if anything went wrong, they could always blame the volunteers – and that's exactly what happened. If you read all the press articles – about the daily over-reporting of 1,000 people and the letters sent to the voivode – it's always the volunteers' fault. They were tired, something got misplaced – 200, 300 different files – and no-one reported it anywhere (P2).

From both field observations and interviews, it became evident that the intersection of two conflicting rationalities – grassroots humanitarian mobilisation and the economic interests of the manager – created situations that were not only ethically questionable but also potentially unlawful. The conflation of these two domains led to fundamental ambiguities regarding which logic – humanitarian or market-driven – should take precedence in the governance of the reception centre.

Muddy waters: normative disarray and emerging competition

The normative chaos that prevailed at the reception centre fostered the infiltration of market-like behavioural patterns into the activities of the volunteers themselves. Although many arrived with the

genuine intention of providing assistance to those in need – and some were displaced persons who chose to volunteer rather than remain passive – certain participants began to adapt to the logic of competition that emerged amid organisational disorder. These individuals exploited ambiguities in responsibilities and information flows to engage in actions of questionable legitimacy: bypassing distribution protocols to obtain branded donated clothing or enhancing their own comfort within the centre at the expense of fairness:

> *And when I saw Mirek wearing a Tommy Hilfiger T-shirt one day, I honestly thought I was gonna tear him apart. I walked up to him (…) and I said, 'Mirek!' And he goes, 'Oh, hey', and whatever. And I see he's got this Tommy T-shirt on and the main coordinator's there too, talking… and I go, 'Where'd you get that T-shirt?' And he says, 'Oh God, listen, it's just that I spilled coffee on myself and Paweł gave me another one'. And I go, 'Really? You spilled coffee and couldn't wear a dirty T-shirt anymore, so: you could've gone home and grabbed a clean one, cause you don't live far, you could've taken literally any of the other used ones we've got. You just had to grab the Tommy?' And he's like, 'No, it's not like that…' or something and I said, 'Take it off, come on, that's for the refugees!'* (P3).

Unregulated status wars

Simultaneously, more-or-less overt struggles over status, influence and the right to organise key operational domains began to unfold. These conflicts emerged both between different groups of volunteers – for example, municipal institution staff versus individually recruited helpers – and between long-term volunteers and those newly arriving from recently closed centres. One participant described such tensions as follows:

> *There was a situation where the animal care girls from* [Centre Delta] *came to us – because they no longer had anyone to help over there – so they came here and tried to impose their own rules. It was really unpleasant. It was all: 'Everything here is wrong, this is terrible, it needs to be done differently...' And I said to their coordinator: 'Look, I'm sorry, but you had maybe 500 people max and we've got 5,000 – adding a zero makes a huge difference. It's not going to be like it was at your place, okay?' And 'No, you're not going to keep animals as part of some programme here' – this just isn't the context. And stop trying to kick in the doors – we've been here for three months and we know how this place works'* (P3).

These dynamics reveal how, in the absence of clear structures, the reception centre became a contested space in which informal hierarchies, territoriality and competitive behaviour flourished. The collapse of a coherent normative order and the blending of humanitarian and organisational logics gave rise to ambiguous social fields, in which solidarity was often eroded by rivalries over symbolic capital, control and resource access. Rather than functioning as a unified humanitarian structure, the centre increasingly resembled a fragmented arena, governed by micro-politics and shifting alliances.

Beyond disputes over symbolic status within the volunteer structure, the reception centre also became, for some, a potential springboard for personal advancement. Certain volunteers sought to gain the favour of the facility manager, impressed by his ability to turn the humanitarian crisis into a business opportunity. This was facilitated by the anonymous nature of volunteering: newcomers entered with a 'clean slate' – no one knew their previous achievements, social status or failures, nor were they aware of their actual competencies. This anonymity enabled individuals to construct strategic personas, as noted by one of the participants:

When no one knows anything about you, you can shape your personality – create your new persona, right? And I think some of the volunteers saw it that way. They would craft this image, show themselves from a certain angle but it wasn't always real, right? And that for us… like with Bartek, for example. I get the sense – though I never asked, because I thought he was kind of reserved – I get the sense that he sells underwear at different bazaars. Young, entrepreneurial guy, full of energy. And the story was always that he was the one who got us, I don't know [a large retail company], *that he had the contact, that he arranged this or that. But later it turned out that he hadn't actually done any of that – it was two other girls who had arranged everything but who always stayed in the background. I only found out when I started doing supply logistics seriously – and then I realised that there was no point in even talking to him… And people who didn't have much experience dealing with people like the manager and others like him – those were the ones who would focus a lot on constructing their self-image. They would show up enthusiastically, make themselves visible, talk a lot, and so on* (P3).

Discussion

Our study suggests that the absence of clear operational rules and the blurring of normative frameworks created a space conducive to deviant behaviour – not only on the part of the private entrepreneur managing the facility but also among some volunteers and displaced persons who capitalised on the ambiguity to pursue their own interests. This context underscores a fundamental tension between the logic of solidarity and the logic of profit under conditions of crisis-driven aid management.

During the phase of 'organisational crisis' (Smith 1990), when the organisational structure was still being developed and refugees were arriving in large numbers, we observed significant irregularities due to the lack of clear employment standards and procedures. As a result, volunteers often worked harder and longer than their paid counterparts. The same applied to some refugees, who were able to secure employment under unclear circumstances. This led to a decline in team morale and the eruption of tensions regarding solidarity.

In parallel, concerning initiatives – such as illegal currency trading – were tolerated within the centre. The uncertainty surrounding cooperation rules and the ambiguous legal and organisational status of the involved actors contributed to the organisational chaos, which was particularly distressing for female volunteers. Allowing such initiatives to continue acted as a form of non-monetary compensation for those supporting the centre's core management. However, this pursuit of profit was highly risky symbolically, as trust in the management effectively disintegrated.

In Phase 3 – the 'crisis of legitimation' (Smith 1990) – phenomena that had been previously observed, such as status wars between volunteers, became more pronounced. Although such conflicts seem endemic to every organisational culture, the lack of clear operational rules and clearly defined objectives (as business logic began to conflict with the logic of selfless help) fostered an environment conducive to symbolic competition. The case of Bartek illustrates a clear clash between two value systems within the same organisation. Like a corporate worker, Bartek tended to overestimate his individual impact, rather than subscribing to the collective culture of collaboration. This behaviour aligns with Bieliński and Hövermann's (2021) concept of a 'marketised mentality', which leads to opportunistic behaviour. However, the crisis of legitimation also led to clearly deviant behaviour in this case, such as stealing and inflating the number of refugees hosted in order to gain material profit. This presents a serious challenge to the model of public–private collaboration, prompting us to reconsider the assumptions underlying multilevel governance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the case of this large reception centre reveals clear manifestations of institutional crisis – understood as the destabilisation of balance between cultural goals and the institutional means to achieve them. The lived experiences of volunteers highlight that, from their perspective – which happens to be the perspective of those who made the system work – under conditions of weak normative regulation, unclear organisational rules and poorly defined responsibilities, the humanitarian logic of aid was penetrated by market rationality, which came to dominate everyday practices within the centre. This adaptive space gave rise not only to accommodation – where volunteers and refugees adjusted to situational demands – but also to deviant behaviour, driven by the absence of institutional mechanisms for accountability and oversight. The tensions were not addressed in time due to the lack of confrontation with volunteers whose expectations did not align with the marketised mentality. Ambiguous power relations, selective privileges, a lack of transparency and the marginalisation of certain actors demonstrate how, under conditions of emergency relief, organisational crisis can not only undermine the enactment of solidarity norms but also reproduce inequalities, tensions and subtle forms of exploitation.

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Who Accommodates Meaning? The Privileges of Being Interpreted and Housed from the Perspective of Ukrainians in Slovakia

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Displaced populations experience heightened levels of inequality and injustice in their access to society, where epistemic dimensions contribute to these injustices. Policies that inadequately address the needs of forced migrants often result in restricted access to translation and interpretation services. By failing to address the lived experiences and voices of these populations, systems further perpetuate social inequalities and obstruct the development of inclusive, equitable practices. This paper argues that epistemic injustices, as a specific, nuanced layer, contribute to the production of vulnerability of refugees. In particular, it examines the systemic disregard for refugees' lived experiences and the misrecognition of language use in administrative contexts and in interpreting, demonstrating these processes in housing practices towards Ukrainian refugees. The empirical examples are drawn from qualitative research conducted in Slovakia from 2023 to February 2025, involving displaced persons from Ukraine, ad hoc interpreters and institutional actors responsible for refugee integration and support. The analysis is grounded in translation policy studies, the ethnography of communication and the anthropology of housing, providing a multidisciplinary perspective on the challenges faced by displaced populations.

Keywords: epistemic injustice, refugees in Slovakia, communicative space, interpretation, meaning-making

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Introduction

Displaced populations, such as refugees and asylum-seekers, are particularly vulnerable to various forms of injustice, including epistemic injustice (Dotson 2011, 2012, 2014; Fricker 2007; Medina 2012, 2022; Pohlhaus 2017). Bureaucratic systems are often designed without accounting for the lived realities and epistemic voices of displaced persons, rendering many of their experiences unintelligible, uncredible or illegible to institutional logics. Despite the differences between national regimes of refugee governance, the diverse forms of epistemic inequality manifest as enduring patterns in societies and structural settings. The agency of marginalised populations as knowers is often impeded and disempowered, as well as included only partly or in pernicious ways (Medina 2022). Epistemic injustice permeates even humanitarian structures whose explicit purpose is to help, as data collection encodes the priorities of its commissioners rather than the knowledge and needs of the refugees themselves (Jones and Squire 2025).

The context of Ukrainian displacement is particularly relevant, as the large-scale arrival of refugees following February 2022 has exposed deeper structural inequalities and the ill-preparedness of existing institutional systems – in Central and Eastern European countries in particular – making visible the broader epistemic and structural conditions under which refugee vulnerability is produced. Since February 2022, research on Ukrainian displacement has extensively examined the structural barriers faced by Ukrainian refugees, including the instability of temporary protection and obstacles to labour-market access, housing and social protection (Haase, Arroyo, Astolfo, Franz, Laksevics, Lazarenko and Schmidt 2024; Schrooten 2025). It has further highlighted how labour-market governance shapes refugee positioning in receiving societies and how feminisation and motherhood structure agency and aspirations (Mezihorák 2025). At the same time, this body of research challenges portrayals of refugees as passive victims by foregrounding their resilience, agency and resistance (Dryjanska, Sanchez and Hagues 2025; Nedelcu and Wyss 2026; Rock and Yanaşmayan 2025). In Central European contexts, the consequences of ill-prepared institutional systems, barriers to stable housing, language barriers, discrimination or insufficient information limiting labour integration were at the centre of inquiry (Bahna, Fedáková, Kentoš, Lášticová, Mezihorák, Očenášová, Papcunová, Petrjánošová, Poslon, Prošek and Wilsch 2025; Necel 2025; Wilsch and Hlinčíková 2024). Despite the growing interest in the structural and agential dimensions of Ukrainian displacement, less attention has been paid to the epistemic dimension of these processes, particularly to the role of communication and interpretation in shaping how power operates through meaning-making, the negotiation of meaning and communicative space in institutional encounters (Tužinská 2025).

Slovakia, frequently perceived as a transit country, exemplifies many of these dynamics. Despite its long history of emigration and immigration (Botík 2021), Slovakia's experience as a country of asylum is relatively recent and still transforming. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to the arrival of almost 133,000 persons granted temporary protection in Slovakia (Ministry of the Interior of the SR 2025), putting unprecedented pressure on the country's underdeveloped migration and integration infrastructure. In this article, the term 'integration' refers to a two-way process in which both newcomers and the receiving society participate, making it a relational process of mutual adjustment (Klarenbeek 2021). Despite the increasing linguistic diversity among asylum-seekers and refugees, services operate without fully acknowledging the lived needs of forcibly displaced populations, monolingual policies persist and services are predominantly in Slovak, resulting in inadequate or inaccessible translation and interpretation services, an over-reliance on formal or bureaucratic language, the omission of critical technical terminology and over-simplified translations (Štefková and

Tužinská 2021; Šveda and Tužinská 2021; Šveda and Štefková 2023). In the absence of a systematic public service interpreting (PSI) infrastructure – that is, organised interpreting provision in institutional settings such as healthcare, legal contexts and social services – communication is often mediated by *ad hoc* interpreters. These are typically untrained bilingual individuals, including volunteers or community members, who provide informal language support in response to urgent needs. Their involvement reflects the lack of an institutionalised PSI system and underscores the reliance on improvised solutions in high-stakes communicative encounters (Angelelli 2016), while they continue to play a central yet precarious role in facilitating communication. In Slovakia, PSI exists largely in fragmented or *ad hoc* forms, without a comprehensive national policy or professional framework. The failure to integrate the lived knowledge and experiences of refugees into service provision and policy-making exacerbates existing inequalities and undermines the potential for equitable and inclusive practices (Wilsch and Hlinčíková 2024). Institutional and political inertia in transforming an asylum-related infrastructure, including interpretation services, remains a critical concern.

Our contribution moves beyond an analysis of communicative failures to examine the broader structural and discursive conditions under which certain voices are rendered unintelligible, certain testimonies dismissed and certain forms of knowledge excluded from institutional processes. The paper, theoretically grounded in the concepts of epistemic injustice, explores these dynamics in the context of Ukrainian displacement in Slovakia, with a particular focus on housing and healthcare as sites where such conditions are especially visible. By foregrounding interpretation as a site of power negotiation, the paper traces how systemic misrecognition, interpretive asymmetries and institutional monolingualism constrain and contest refugees' epistemic agency and extends the discussion of epistemic injustice beyond who speaks to how meaning is accommodated or foreclosed in interaction, offering a critical lens for viewing epistemic authority as constructed and challenged through various asymmetries.

Theoretical framework: epistemic injustice as a nuanced dimension of structural inequality in refugee governance

Refugees and displaced populations face a range of structural vulnerabilities and injustices. While the literature often focuses on broader structural barriers to rights, resources and participation (Almohamed and Vyas 2016; Gill and Good 2019; Knappert, Kroon, Kornau and Abdelmageed 2024; Leboeuf, Brun, Lidén, Marchetti, Nakache and Sarolea 2024), recent scholarship has drawn attention to more-nuanced forms of structural inequality by showing how certain groups are marginalised through the devaluation of their credibility, the silencing of their experiences or the rendering of their knowledge as unintelligible within the dominant frameworks (Dotson 2011; Fricker 2007; Kidd, Medina and Pohlhaus 2017; Medina 2012, 2022). Epistemic injustice, understood as the unjust treatment of individuals and groups in their capacity as knowers (Dotson 2012; Dunne 2020; Fricker 2007; Medina 2012, 2022), arises when social actors, particularly marginalised or vulnerable groups such as refugees, are excluded, misrecognised, silenced or partially included in the process of knowledge production. In such contexts, marginalised testimonies are not only ignored but also distorted or instrumentalised – or harm the original intent and meaning of what is being communicated (Dotson 2011; Medina 2022). These frameworks create epistemological and material barriers that prevent marginalised groups from acknowledging their voices as legitimate or having their knowledge meaningfully integrated into collective understanding. Research in refugee contexts has increasingly addressed epistemic injustices, such as testimonial injustice, characterised by disbelief and silencing in camps and detention centres

(Hänel 2021), the moral economy of credibility in asylum hearings (Govindarajan 2022), the failure of institutional arrangements and refugee policy frameworks to incorporate the testimonies of the marginalised groups and the structural neglect of gender-based experiences in asylum policies (Ingram 2021; Steen-Johnsen and Skreland 2023; Wikström 2014).

In displacement contexts, the systematic exclusion, silencing or marginalisation of certain groups' knowledge, experiences and interpretive frameworks within dominant epistemic systems has material consequences – for example, when refugees are unable to access housing or services because the systems governing access fail to recognise their testimony or lived realities as valid. In our article, we approach epistemic injustice as multifaceted, drawing on several closely related forms to capture the various ways in which knowledge and refugee testimonies may be institutionally under-represented or restricted. Power relations further shape how social relations are interpreted, who is recognised as a legitimate knower, whose perspective informs institutional decisions and how shared meaning enters public policies and institutional discourse (Medina 2012). However, who is institutionally recognised as entitled to define what counts as valid knowledge, credible testimony or relevant evidence is related to epistemic authority – the capacity of an individual, institution or system to be acknowledged as a reliable source of knowledge and to establish what is recognised as 'truth', 'need' or 'risk' (Jäger 2022). In refugee governance, epistemic authority is not only the result of individual expertise but is also socially distributed and shaped by wider norms, institutional arrangements and power relations. As a result, policymakers, state institutions or humanitarian organisations may be granted epistemic authority even when their knowledge is partial, biased or disconnected from the lived realities of refugees (Fricker 2007; Medina 2012).

From structural precarity to epistemic inequality

While the precarity experienced by displaced Ukrainians in Slovakia is produced by broader structural conditions, such as unstable policy arrangements, legal uncertainty, underdeveloped welfare and integration infrastructure and persisting infrastructural problems related to housing, healthcare, care infrastructure and other essential resources (Bahna *et al.* 2025), the epistemic layer further compounds the production of vulnerability. Although structural inequalities within refugee governance cannot be reduced to epistemic inequality, they are often closely interrelated and inseparable. For the purposes of this article, epistemic injustice is understood as a nuanced dimension of structural inequality that operates not only through the silencing or devaluation of refugees as knowers but also through the mediation of meaning itself. We focus on situations in which meaning is unevenly negotiated, rendered partial or refracted through interpretation and institutional communication, thereby intensifying vulnerability and reinforcing broader structural inequalities.

Following Fricker (2007), we focus on testimonial injustice – where refugees' accounts are dismissed or devalued because of prejudices about the social identities they hold – and hermeneutic injustice, where structural gaps in collective understanding prevent their experiences from being fully recognised or articulated. At the same time, our material also points to forms of contributory injustice, in which the interpretive resources of marginalised actors fail to shape dominant institutional understandings (Dotson 2012). This is particularly relevant where refugees' own ínterpretative frameworks and ways of making sense of need, entitlement or vulnerability remain external to the frameworks through which institutions classify and respond to them. We also draw on Dotson's (2011) concepts of testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering, in which refugees are not recognised as knowers in the first place or withhold or adapt their testimony due to perceived audience incompetence or the risk of being

misunderstood (Dotson 2011). With these concepts, we analyse under what conditions the voices of refugees are becoming credible, intelligible and capable of influencing the production of meaning, whose voices are institutionally recognised, how power circulates through acts of interpretation and meaning-making and under what conditions the knowledge of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia and their testimonies are not taken into account.

Communicative space, interpretation and epistemic authority

These epistemic dynamics are manifest particularly in interpreter-mediated communication, where the lack of structured language support systems exacerbates inequalities in access to essential services. One of the fundamental communication barriers emerging in the early stages of migrant integration arises from the absence of an institutionalised system of PSI and from the lack of a clear and enforceable interpreting policy. This institutional gap often leads to *ad hoc* solutions for language support which, in turn, hinder equal access to essential services, including healthcare, legal assistance and social welfare. Corsellis (2008), Pöllabauer (2005) and Valero-Garcés and Tipton (2017) have highlighted how the systemic failure to provide structured interpreting services disproportionaltely affects migrants, exacerbating their marginalisation and deepening communicative asymmetries in crucial public encounters. These asymmetries are exacerbated by the power imbalances inherent in interpreter-mediated communication, particularly in institutional settings where one party typically has more authority and agency than the other. According to Mason's (2001) concept of triadic exchanges, interpreters are positioned between institutional agents and service users in a dynamic that reflects and reproduces existing power relations. In such contexts, interpreters may be pressured to align with institutional discourse, consciously or unconsciously affecting the neutrality of their role. Wadensjö (2001) also emphasises how the interactional nature of dialogue interpreting often reveals the interpreter's active role in negotiating meaning, which becomes particularly significant in unequal power dynamics where the institutional voice tends to dominate the exchange. Translation studies provide useful frameworks in which to understand the gravity of this policy vacuum. Meylaerts (2011) defines translation policy as a set of decisions shaping which languages are translated and under what conditions – and how translation is delivered within state structures. These perspectives shift the focus to the interpretation process, where communicative participation, intelligibility and epistemic authority are unevenly negotiated, providing a framework for a nuanced understanding of epistemic inequality adopted in this article.

Research methods

This paper draws on empirical examples from qualitative research conducted in Slovakia between 2023 and 2025. The research samples included three interrelated strands: the lived experiences of Ukrainian refugees in vulnerable situations, the perspectives of institutional actors responsible for refugee integration and support and the interpreters.

Qualitative research on community interpreting in the context of displaced persons from Ukraine was conducted in Slovakia between March 2023 and March 2024. The research sought to address systemic challenges in public service interpreting following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The methodology combined ethnographic interviews and surveys, followed by a comparative analysis of the collected data, in order to investigate communication barriers in public service encounters involving forcibly displaced persons. Interviews were conducted with key institutional actors who regularly

collaborate with community interpreters, as well as with NGO staff and legal advisors working with refugees. The interviews focused on communication practices, interpreter-mediated interactions, the absence of formal interpreting policies and the practical and emotional challenges arising in high-stakes multilingual contexts. In addition, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 31 interpreter candidates prior to their participation in a certified PSI training course, of whom 21 reported active involvement in interpreting. The sample included interpreters of Ukrainian origin (16), many of whom were themselves members of the displaced community. Their educational backgrounds were diverse; although some had previous training in linguistics or interpreting, the majority lacked formal training in PSI. Notably, only one participant was employed as a full-time public service interpreter, while the rest combined interpreting with other professional roles, such as healthcare or social work. The interviews aimed to capture the participants' previous interpreting experiences, career paths, motivations and expectations. The aim was also to identify challenges in communicating with foreign nationals and to gain insight into expectations and perceptions of interpreter competence, as well as the role of community interpreters in reducing communication barriers for displaced people, particularly in the absence of an established national interpreting policy.

The second study on which this paper draws was qualitative research with Ukrainian refugees and institutional actors, conducted in Bratislava between February 2024 and February 2025. Research methods included ethnography, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and informal conversations. The interviews with displaced refugees thematically explored life and social circumstances in Slovakia, focusing on their care, social support and housing experiences. They also examined access to information, the role of institutions in the integration process at the individual level and the subjectively experienced barriers to meeting personal and family needs in the context of displacement. Additionally, interviews with institutional representatives provided insights into the structural obstacles that institutions face in addressing the needs of Ukrainian refugees. The sample consisted of 25 interviews with Ukrainian refugees – 20 women and five men – and two institutional actors – municipal social workers in the field of supporting Ukrainian refugees. The sample of Ukrainian refugees reflected the diversity of regions of origin, stages of integration, various life situations and positions in the life cycle – and the different living arrangements in Slovakia. Finally, the research sample reflects different aspects of vulnerability, including traumatic war-related experiences, the ability to participate in the receiving society, caregiving responsibilities, healthcare needs, social and cultural capital and the (non-)availability of supportive social networks. Interviews were conducted in Slovak, English or Ukrainian. Ukrainian-language interviews were facilitated by the assistance of an interpreter, a Slovak citizen of Ukrainian origin. The interpreter also acted as a gatekeeper and the people we interviewed knew and trusted her, as she is an active volunteer within the Ukrainian community in Bratislava. We approached the data analysis with caution and reflexivity, being fully aware that the presence of an interpreter during the interview may influence both the dynamics of the exchange and the epistemic quality of the data, as the interpreter mediates meaning in ways that may obscure nuance, introduce asymmetries of power and affect the perceived credibility of the participant's narrative.

The research processes adhered to ethical standards for studying vulnerable refugee populations (American Anthropological Association 2012; Düvell, Triandafyllidou and Vollmer 2010; Jacobsen and Landau 2003). The research situations were designed to create safe spaces where interview partners could share information relevant to their experiences, ensuring that the knowledge of marginalised refugees was granted epistemic authority, legitimised and taken seriously (Samzelius 2020). At the same time, we maintained a self-reflexive approach to our positionality as researchers, power asymmetries and the vulnerabilities of our interview partners, aiming to minimise bias and enhance

transparency and trustworthiness (Amelina 2021; Cassell**,** Cunliffe and Grandy 2018). Interview partners received comprehensive information about the purpose of the research and how the data will be used, their rights during the interview – including the option not to answer questions or the right to withdraw from the interview at any point; they then signed the written informed consent form. We respect the privacy and maintain the anonymity of all research participants and thus all names are fictitious. All quotations were translated by the authors. Given the centrality of mediated communication in this study, translation represents an additional layer of meaning-making. In some cases, participants' accounts were mediated twice – first through interpretation during the interview and subsequently through translation into English. The authors adopted a reflexive approach to translation, aiming to preserve semantic nuance and contextual meaning; however, participant validation was not systematically conducted, which we acknowledge as a limitation.

Results: identifying epistemic injustices in the context of Ukrainian refugee displacement

Understanding the epistemic injustice in Ukrainian displacement in Slovakia requires a nuanced approach involving a plurality of situated perspectives to deconstruct its multiple layers. The lived experiences of refugees offer a crucial entry point. At the same time, the perspectives of other actors – such as institutional representatives, community interpreters and support workers – reveal the interlocking layers through which epistemic injustice becomes visible. Each perspective reflects distinct mechanisms by which knowledge is constrained, dismissed or unevenly distributed, as well as how communicative asymmetries, institutional discourse practices and the absence of interpreting policy contribute to layered forms of testimonial, hermeneutical and contributory injustice.

Navigating the unknown: knowledge gaps and informational vulnerability

Ukrainian refugees reported various insecurities arising from their vulnerable position, mainly due to their restricted access to information, whether unavailable, poorly communicated or difficult to understand due to the language barrier. These insecurities often stemmed from a gap between the refugees' lived realities and the systemic frameworks meant to support them but which failed to account for their specific circumstances. Yet, these conditions cannot be understood solely as failures or misunderstandings in communication. At their core, they reflect unequal conditions under which different actors are recognised as authorities in defining measures, decisions and policy responses. This broader pattern of structural disregard for the experiential knowledge meant that their perspectives were largely absent from institutional responses. Interview partners described their reliance on non-institutional, informal knowledge networks, such as family members or the community. While these networks often provided crucial support, they also exposed refugees to risks, including misinterpretation, misinformation and manipulation. The failure of the state to create clear, accessible and culturally legible information channels opened up space for third-party intermediaries to play the role of 'epistemic brokers' with unequal power. This constitutes a condition of vulnerability, not merely because of the refugees' own lack of knowledge but primarily because of the structural absence of accessible, transparent and credible information. To cope, refugees did not remain passive in their situation. They actively sought help, gathered information and navigated bureaucratic systems to secure support. This demonstrates not only their agentivity but also the fact that institutions did not operate in ignorance: the repeated attempts by refugees to seek assistance reveal that relevant actors had some awareness of the group's pressing needs, even if these were not reflected in policy responses.

Epistemic silencing: missing public service interpreting policy

The analysis of communicative barriers in interactions between displaced persons and state authorities reveals a significant systemic gap: the absence of a PSI policy as a risk to procedural integrity. This absence compromises the procedural neutrality and fairness of interactions involving displaced persons, particularly those who rely on interpreters to access their rights and navigate complex administrative procedures. In the Slovak context, the lack of a PSI policy has enabled the emergence of unregulated private actors mediating communication between displaced persons and state authorities. Community members themselves or interpreters employed by private agencies – who often lack formal education, ethical training or professional experience – fulfil this role. Importantly, these interpreters are not bound by any professional code of ethics and operate outside any state-controlled quality assurance framework. The findings suggest that there are significant differences in the way in which public institutions approach the provision of interpreting services. In some cases, such as at the Labour Office, the responsibility for arranging interpretation is delegated to the client. In contrast, institutions that engage more systematically with refugee populations, such as the Migration Office, tend to maintain internal databases of interpreters. These interpreters are usually selected on the basis of previous informal collaboration or through outsourcing via translation agencies. However, even in these cases, there is little to no systematic assessment of the interpreters' qualifications, linguistic competence or familiarity with domain-specific terminology. As a result, the quality and reliability of interpreting services remain largely unmonitored.

Selection procedures often prioritise practical considerations such as availability and previous personal familiarity over professional expertise or formal training in interpreting. Ethical concerns, such as maintaining the neutrality of the interpreter, avoiding the use of acquaintances or family members as interpreters and ensuring confidentiality, are seldom addressed. In addition, institutions rarely acknowledge the emotional strain that can accompany interpreting in sensitive contexts, nor do they provide guidance on communication practices and the positioning of the interpreter within institutional interactions. These gaps point to the lack of clearer guidelines, professional standards and training for both interpreters and service providers.

Epistemic silencing is a recurring feature of institutional encounters, where displaced individuals are not participating on an equal footing due to communicative asymmetries. As the police officer, Jena, notes: 'We are stuck in our own terminology! It is specific and necessary but incomprehensible to others'. The institutional language, though internally functional, can exclude those it is meant to serve. In such contexts, community interpreters frequently step in to bridge the gaps left by formal legal and bureaucratic systems, offering forms of support that extend beyond the boundaries of their interpreting roles. This problem is compounded by the lack of equivalent terminology across legal and administrative systems, a point echoed by state social worker – Gustav – and Aneta, a community interpreter:

> *There are issues with terminology, whether in policing, law or healthcare. Some terms are particularly difficult to interpret, such as birth certificates, guardianship or power of attorney. How do we even explain these to people?*

> *We don't know the terms; there is, for example, no distinction between agreements and contracts in Ukraine. A large part of the workforce in Ukraine works without a contract or agreement, which later causes problems.*

These accounts reveal a wider lack of awareness of key translation strategies, such as compensation, explanation or modulation, which are essential to overcome terminological and conceptual gaps. Furthermore, *ad hoc* interpreters often lack the ability to establish a consistent translational approach or interpretive framework, which further undermines the quality and reliability of interpreted interactions. These findings highlight the urgent need for structured training in PSI that addresses both linguistic competence and cross-cultural conceptual mediation.

The testimonial influence of interpreters in institutional settings

The role of interpreters in migration contexts extends far beyond linguistic mediation; they are deeply embedded in the testimonial infrastructure that determines whose voices are heard, whose experiences are acknowledged and whose knowledge is legitimised. Community interpreters often act as intermediaries between refugees and institutional actors, shaping how narratives are conveyed and received. Jasna, a state social worker, highlights the need for an interpretation that captures this complexity:

> *If something has no direct equivalent in our language, it needs to be explained. Some terms are difficult to translate and there are also cultural taboos – topics that are not considered polite to ask about or things that people are not sure that they are allowed to ask about. These cultural sensitivities matter because they may prevent clients from speaking openly. Interpreters should have the space to indicate when they sense an intercultural misunderstanding, a signal that something specific needs further explanation, because they are often the only ones who can recognise it.*

Despite this crucial role, the knowledge production of interpreters is often undermined or erased within institutional structures. As Zuzana, a higher-ranked official, explains: 'The applicant has no reason to notice the interpreter. What matters is the trust between the decision-maker and the applicant, not the interpreter'. However, interpreters never act as neutral conduits; they bring their own contextual framing and ethical considerations into their work, as social worker Magda articulates:

> *It highly depends on the tone of communication and the personality of the community interpreter, as they have a significant impact on how the information is received by the other party. It also depends on how the interpreters personally insert their own perceptions into the information communicated and the responses given to the foreigners. Essentially, they also act as cultural mediators.*

The interpreter's mediation can be observed in the ways in which people on the move navigate institutional encounters. Without interpreters acting as informal counsellors, the institutional maze may appear opaque and unresponsive. As community interpreter Aneta notes: 'Sometimes they have legal questions and we allow ourselves to answer them if we know exactly, even more than the lawyer sitting next to us'. At the same time, as community interpreters have witnessed, the authenticity of testimonies can also be called into question. Some private interpreting agents reportedly instruct the interpreters to shape the responses of displaced persons to align more closely with the expectations of state authorities. This testimonial injustice arises when individuals' accounts are distorted due to structural inequalities, often manifesting through the overlooked role of interpreters (Rycroft 2005). Therefore, at every stage of the integration process, it is essential to recognise the perspectives of all participants and to actively verify their understanding. The lack of legal recognition for community interpreters

exacerbates systemic gaps in accountability and professional ethics. This leads to frequent, albeit unintentional, breaches of ethical guidelines.

Communicative space: from 'just a number' to dignity

Epistemic inequality is thus manifest not only in the lack of access to information in one's mother tongue or in the reliance on *ad hoc* interpreting provided by untrained bilingual volunteers, community members or service providers operating without formal accreditation, clear role definition or ethical guidelines – often resulting in approximated meanings – but also in the absence of mechanisms to verify mutual understanding among the actors involved. The perspective of applicants for international protection is echoed in the words of the NGO legal representative Laco, who highlights the need for procedural neutrality:

> *I would change the approach from the very first moment a state authority encounters a foreign national. The focus is always on security, while the potential contributions of these individuals are overlooked. This may seem logical from a state perspective but it is not a humane approach. The first point of contact is crucial. What impression does the foreign national take away? It is important to remember that these are people, not numbers. The interpreter embodies this principle; they personify the individual in the eyes of the state, making him more human. However, they must maintain neutrality and avoid taking sides.*

'Being a number' refers to the impersonal approach and a lack of communicative space (Tužinská 2025). At the same time, forced migrants very rarely object to any misconduct: 'They are afraid to express a misunderstanding or say that something is wrong at the beginning because they are in a position where expressing something negative could be directed at the person who holds their fate in his hands' (Laco, lawyer, NGO). Holding institutional power does not inherently entail communicative competence, as Hedviga and Kateryna, Ukrainian community interpreters observe:

> *Sometimes, clients talk at length and service providers perceive this as excessive or irrelevant. However, they are communicating with highly sensitive individuals for whom these details matter.*

> *This reflects an insensitivity on the part of service providers who are asking questions in a less sensitive way, one after the another, as if they were not different in content: 'Where is your husband? What happened? Where did he die? When did he die? Why did he die?'*

Establishing a space in which the meanings are negotiated requires expertise that is often rendered invisible (Tužinská 2023). The accommodation of meaning is a mutual process: lawyers emphasise that justice is produced in relation to the expectations of the administration. Their monolingual standard upheld by the state also impacts on the extent to which applicants' needs are recognised, as Laco, the NGO lawyer, noted: 'Police officers often believe that if they speak in Slovak, the foreigner will somehow understand them. Their attitude changes when they see that the person is accompanied by someone who speaks Slovak. Suddenly they treat them with more dignity'. Learning the language of the receiving country may, over time, reduce certain communication asymmetries at the individual level. Addressing epistemic injustice, however, requires a different layer, an institutional one, such as the development of participatory mechanisms and accessible and professional interpretation, instead of shifting the

responsibility onto the displaced people themselves. However, the relationship between language learning, communicative inclusion and epistemic recognition requires specialised examination that goes beyond the scope of this article.

Healthcare, language and the weight of misunderstanding

Healthcare emerged as a site whereby epistemic injustice was actively produced, as refugees were often denied the linguistic, interpretive and institutional conditions necessary to understand their health situation, communicate their needs and secure appropriate care – particularly those with psychiatric diagnoses, chronic illnesses or caregiving responsibilities for children or elderly family members with complex health conditions. Their experiences reflected both testimonial injustice – in which accounts of medical needs were dismissed – and hermeneutical injustice, in which systemic barriers prevented individuals from understanding and navigating their rights. These were often compounded by institutional framings of refugee needs as merely 'temporary', which obstructed the development of sustainable support systems. Refugees reported limited access to essential services, bureaucratic complexity and a general lack of transparency in communication. For individuals with severe disabilities or long-term conditions, the absence of targeted policies and inclusive frameworks led to increased exclusion and chronic uncertainty. This was the most visible in cases requiring specialised or psychiatric care. Inna, the 39-year-old mother of a young son with suspected developmental disabilities, described a prolonged and frustrating search for diagnosis and care:

> *Since last year, we have been going to doctors constantly. (...) There are multiple diagnoses – so many that it is unclear what the real condition of my son is. (...) But I cannot get an appointment with a psychiatrist. Even after two years, it hasn't been possible, partly due to the language barrier. (...) There is a lack of an organisation or individuals who could help with this process.*

Older adults reported similar struggles. Vitalyi, 66, who had been diagnosed with cancer, described how language exclusion made it impossible to understand his condition or treatment options: 'I often go to a specialist doctor (oncologist). He tells me something but I don't understand what he is saying. (...) The doctor speaks fast and often I don't understand anything'.

Language barriers, contributing to institutionally produced forms of epistemic exclusion, created a double burden: on the one hand, exclusion from institutional communication and, on the other, the inability to act upon one's health knowledge. Therefore, the problem lies in the absence of institutional arrangements that would make the acknowledgement of lived experiences of vulnerable refugee populations possible. The fast-paced, technocratic structure of medical consultations and inadequate interpretation services reinforce testimonial injustice, as patients' concerns are not adequately heard or responded to. The issue is not only individual but widely recognised at the institutional level. One local authority representative acknowledged systemic failure in addressing the needs of refugees with multiple health disadvantages, pointing to a testimonial injustice:

> *Ukrainian refugees with multiple disadvantages, whether psychological, physical or otherwise, who are not integrated into the state system, face serious issues…, which means they are denied support. (...) There is a massive group of autistic children who are completely overlooked. (...) Many remain undiagnosed. (...) The challenges are three times greater because we don't have official documents*

> *proving that they have autism or any other condition. (...) Beneath the surface, an enormous number of unresolved cases have been completely ignored* (Matej, municipal social worker).

The continued lack of access to professional interpreting services in healthcare settings contributes significantly to both testimonial and hermeneutic forms of epistemic injustice, particularly among refugees and migrants with limited language skills. A review of the cost-effectiveness of trained medical interpreters (Brandl, Schreiter and Schouler-Ocak 2020) shows that trained medical interpreters improve the quality of care, reduce diagnostic errors and reduce the risk of unnecessary or inappropriate treatment interventions. As Magda, a social worker, notes: 'The health service particularly valued community interpreters because they recognised the importance of communicating and delivering information correctly to ensure effective care'.

This recognition underlines the fact that interpreters facilitate access to services, shape institutional encounters and, in many cases, safeguard the very right to be heard (Angelelli 2004). In Slovakia, medical interpreting remains absent from institutional frameworks and no systemic provisions have been made to ensure its availability. This institutional neglect, despite clear awareness, constitutes a contributory injustice. Refugees and their advocates often possess relevant experiential knowledge of the barriers they face, yet their insights are systematically excluded from policy-making.

Housing insecurity as a site of epistemic injustice

For Ukrainian refugees, affordable housing is essential to ensure stability and adequate inclusion in receiving societies' social and economic sectors (Habitat for Humanity 2023). Rather than entering a supportive housing environment, refugees have had to navigate a housing market that is already unaffordable and insecure, which has profoundly shaped both their housing pathways (Clapham 2005) and their everyday experiences of settlement. In this sense, housing is a site that exposes how the epistemic dimension of housing-related insecurity is systematically produced in the context of Slovakia, involving unequal power conditions under which rules become intelligible, entitlements are administratively created and interpreted and the testimonies and lived realities of refugees become institutionally (un)relevant.

Therefore, the Housing Subsidy Scheme for Ukrainian Refugees, which was introduced immediately after the outbreak of the war and is a financial allowance (Wilsch and Hlinčíková 2024), has played a crucial role in enabling their stability and security in housing and ensuring access to free accommodation.[1] Since its introduction, the housing allowance for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia has undergone several short-term extensions and changes in amount and a tightening of eligibility criteria and duration – without a clear long-term strategy (Wilsch and Hlinčíková 2024).[2] The discretionary approach to policy adjustments and repeatedly applied changes created significant uncertainty among Ukrainian refugees. Housing policy became a site of hermeneutical injustice because refugees were not provided with accessible, timely and actionable knowledge about their entitlements and because administrative eligibility categories were too rigid to capture lived vulnerability, rendering refugees' own accounts unintelligible or irrelevant within institutional processes. Given the severely limited access to affordable housing, the housing programme represented the main safeguard against housing loss for many refugees. Yet its unpredictability and lack of transparent communication deprived them of clear knowledge about their entitlements, limiting their capacity to act as informed agents in housing matters and, in some cases, exacerbating housing precarity. Several of our research partners encountered systemic obstacles in determining their eligibility for housing subsidies. When they approached public officials or legal

services, the responses were often vague, delayed or contradictory, adding to their confusion and undermining their agency. This deepened their insecurity:

> *We are struggling because the supported housing programme has been extended… only for three months. But when it ends, what are we supposed to do? We are going through a lot of emotional distress, worrying about this... We won't have money for housing if the housing support ends…* (Vitalina, 60).

Crucially, these changes were not communicated in advance and decisions were made at the last moment, severely limiting refugees' capacity for agency. Individuals who lost their entitlement to housing subsidies were given only about a week to secure alternative housing following the 1 July 2024 legal amendment. Such short notice disproportionately affected those without established social networks or financial security, reinforcing their dependence on *ad hoc* community support rather than institutional guarantees:

> *Everything happened so suddenly…* [The family received the information about the need to vacate the accommodation only on 21 June 2024, with the requirement to leave by the end of June 2024]*. I was searching for apartments online but I couldn't find anything at all. (...) (P)eople from the church shared the information that the sister was looking for housing. (...) It was fortunate that we found an apartment so quickly* (Tetiana, 40).

As a result, several of our interview partners who did not qualify for a long-term housing allowance left Slovakia for good. Others consequently faced significant challenges, such as overcrowded housing, sharing commercial accommodation with other families or being overburdened with work to afford commercial rent. This illustrates how administrative definitions of vulnerability can render the lived realities of refugee households institutionally unintelligible. In one interview, our research partner, Danylo, expressed concern that the eligibility criteria for support programmes in Slovakia fail to recognise forms of loss that are less easily measurable, such as the destruction of home and community or the possibility of return, thereby excluding significant dimensions of refugee vulnerability from institutional consideration.

When the system neither provides a transparent and credible source of information in the Ukrainian language nor acknowledges the needs of vulnerable populations, such as refugees from Ukraine, it creates conditions in which these populations are unable to interpret their rights and obligations accurately. This lack of clarity further fosters uncertainty, forcing them to seek information on their own and rely on sources of uncertain credibility. As a result, they are prevented from acting as informed agents, making decisions, or planning their next steps, which reinforces their sense of powerlessness. During the fieldwork in state-supported accommodation facilities, it became clear that uncertainty about housing support was a shared concern. During one of these visits, our interview partner, Mrs Alina (65), gave us a tour of the premises, showed us the common areas and knocked on the door of a room from which a young woman with a small child emerged. She flooded us with a series of questions in Ukrainian, echoing what the interpreter later confirmed: almost everyone felt insecure about their stay because of the housing allowance. The state of uncertainty resulting from the incomprehensibility of the established rules, unclear communication and the non-transparent process of changing these conditions contributes to the deepening vulnerability of refugees from Ukraine.

Concluding discussion

Epistemic injustice has real consequences for Ukrainian refugees' ability to access housing, services and social recognition. They face hermeneutical gaps, where dominant frameworks do not recognise their perspectives; testimonial exclusion, where their voices are dismissed or mediated; and contributory injustice, where their insights are structurally ignored. While the existing literature on epistemic injustice often focuses on the silencing or discrediting of marginalised voices (Dotson 2012, 2014; Fricker 2007; Landström and Crawley 2024; Medina 2012), our study demonstrates that epistemic harm frequently begins with the absence of a recognised communicative space (Tužinská 2025). The ability of refugees to express their experiences in a linguistically and culturally intelligible way is a prerequisite for being heard. This contributes to an understanding of testimonial injustice, not merely as a matter of credibility but also of communicative legibility. At the same time, our analysis highlights how power is embedded not only in what is said or in who speaks but also in the conditions under which speech becomes intelligible or recognised as meaningful (Meylaerts 2011). Institutional monolingualism and the lack of culturally responsive interpretive practices represent structural communicative exclusions, a dimension of epistemic injustice that has received less attention in mainstream epistemology but is critical in forced migration contexts. Such conditions also constrain the state's capacity for inclusive place-making.

Epistemic injustice is also reflected in the way that migrants are often reduced to numbers, lacking the endeavour to be positioned in a respectful way (Rehnberg 2025). This disconnect between systemic provision and actual individual needs in the context of Ukrainian displacement in Slovakia reveals a more fundamental epistemic injustice – the systematic exclusion of refugees' perspectives from the processes that shape their lives. The lack of transparent participatory mechanisms through which refugees could contest, anticipate or influence decisions deepens their precariousness and heightens their susceptibility to marginalisation and exploitation. In Slovakia, public participation in policy-making is generally minimal, particularly for vulnerable groups (Bargerová 2014). While there are no formal mechanisms for refugees to meaningfully participate in integration or migration policy, state institutions proactively do not investigate or incorporate them. Similarly, despite facing systemic barriers, refugees are not recognised as legitimate contributors to housing policy debates. Instead, policies are shaped by institutional actors who fail to incorporate the realities of refugees' precarious living conditions.[3] This dynamic reflects a broader hierarchy, in which certain institutional actors are viewed as legitimate knowers while displaced populations are denied epistemic authority (Samzelius 2020). This results in both hermeneutical and testimonial injustice: refugee experiences are not meaningfully acknowledged or interpreted within dominant frameworks and their knowledge is either filtered through intermediaries or excluded altogether. As our analysis demonstrates, injustices are also deeply embedded in everyday communication and interpretative dynamics. How displaced individuals are listened to, interpreted and institutionally understood is shaped by subtle yet powerful linguistic and interactional processes that often remain invisible in mainstream policy discourse. Misrecognition, silencing or distortion can occur not only through the absence of services but also through the framing, reception and transformation of language within institutional encounters. To mitigate these risks, the adoption of plain language policies is essential to ensure clarity and accessibility in communication across all institutional levels.

Last but not least, despite the deep structural inequalities which they face, Ukrainian refugees actively engage in meaning-making under conditions of systemic constraint. They mobilise informal knowledge networks, navigate complex bureaucratic systems and contest their marginalisation through

everyday acts of negotiation and interpretation, resisting erasure from the spaces in which knowledge is produced and recognised (Dotson 2014; Pohlhaus 2017). Refugees' strategies of sense-making and knowledge-sharing, whether through informal support structures, linguistic self-advocacy or a refusal to conform to institutional scripts, must be understood as situated practices of resistance that challenge dominant hierarchies of knowledge and credibility. Rather than treating refugee voices as data to be extracted, institutions must develop participatory mechanisms for policy-making and service provision, at both local and national levels, that recognise the testimony and experiential knowledge of marginalised groups as a legitimate basis for decision-making.

The accommodation of meaning, much like the accommodation of people, reveals what it means to be lost both in translation and transition. The absence of plain language policies and interpreting services signals a broader institutional ambiguity in which housing opportunities are framed in uncertain terms. For what transforms a house into a home is the capacity to experience oneself as a situated being, as someone who accommodates meaning and, in turn, has the opportunity of being accommodated. Recognising the right of displaced persons to be understood is, therefore, not just a linguistic concern but a fundamental condition for epistemic justice and dignified belonging.

Notes

1. The Slovak welfare system does not ensure that low-income households can afford standard housing (Hegedüs, Somogyi and Teller 2023). The existing housing allowance is limited to recipients of material need benefits, which excludes many working families, parents on parental leave and pensioners (Hegedüs *et al.* 2023; Wilsch and Hlinčíková 2024).
2. Initially set to end in June 2022, the subsidy was extended several times through 2023 and early 2024, often with minimal notice, without public discussion, leading to housing instability. Institutional stakeholders, NGOs and local authorities all criticised the lack of communication and transparency, particularly when key amendments – such as the reduction in March 2024 – were announced only days before implementation (Mittelmannová 2024).
3. In Slovakia, households that do not own their homes have access to either commercial rental or public (social) housing. While the national Housing Policy of the Slovak Republic, until 2030, formally includes migrants among disadvantaged groups, in practice local regulations often exclude them, especially those without permanent residence in a municipality, such as Ukrainian refugees. Even where this condition is not enforced, the severe shortage of social housing makes access nearly impossible. As a result, refugees are largely confined to the commercial rental market, which is increasingly unaffordable.

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Neither Here, Nor There: The Vicious Circle of Liminality among Ukrainian Forced Migrants in Poland

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The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 forced many Ukrainians – including highly educated, middle-aged women with no previous migration experience – to migrate. As a result, they found themselves in liminality – suspended between past and future, old and new identities and different socio-political contexts; they are 'no longer there' (in Ukraine) and they are 'not yet' fully 'here' (in Poland). This article explores three different sources of this state among Ukrainian women: disrupted life paths, fractured identity and belonging tensions. The first source is related to the experience of war and forced migration, which has led to an existential crisis characterised by a sense of uncertainty, disorientation and limited agency. The second source is fractured identity, which involves an identity crisis manifested in self-perception dissonance, the reconfiguration of socio-professional roles and processes of self-redefinition. The final source is belonging tensions, which caused a belonging crisis marked by experiences of marginalisation and social exclusion by both Ukrainian and Polish society, which necessitates a constant renegotiation of social perception. This multifaceted crisis generates a vicious circle of liminality among migrant women which is challenging to overcome. This article demonstrates that liminality is a multidimensional, intersectional and dynamic process, characterised by continuous shifts and transformations.

Keywords: Ukrainian forced migration, middle-aged female migrants, middle-class migrants, liminality, existential crisis, identity crisis, belonging crisis

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Introduction

Ukraine has a long history of migration with particular intensification after independence, resulting in more than 1,351 million Ukrainian labour migrants residing in Poland before the refugee crisis (Statistics Poland 2020). The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, however, 'uprooted' even those who had never considered migration due to a previously stable and satisfactory socio-economic situation in Ukraine. This event triggered a major refugee crisis, with millions of Ukrainians fleeing to neighbouring countries, especially Poland, where the number of forced migrants was 947,031 in 2024 (USC 2024). A significant proportion of those fleeing were women, accounting for 80 per cent of the total, with 32 per cent aged 40–59 and 55 per cent aged 18–39 (Jirka, Kamionka and Macková 2023). The majority of forced migrants (over 66 per cent) went to Poland with their children (Górny and Kaczmarczyk 2023), for whom ensuring safety and access to education and healthcare was a key motivation to leave the country (Baran, Grzymała-Moszczyńska, Zjawińska, Sugay, Pujszo, Ovsiienko, Naritsa, Niedziałek and Boczkowska 2024). Most of the women had higher education (Górny and Kaczmarczyk 2023).

In response to the unprecedented scale of displacement, the European Union (EU) introduced temporary protection measures, granting Ukrainian forced migrants a legal status and access to essential services in countries of residence – including access to humanitarian aid, housing and social and health insurance – and the opportunity to access the labour market. As a result of these measures, which were also implemented in Poland, Ukrainian forced migrants have shown relatively high employment rates (Górny and Kaczmarczyk 2023). However, there is a notable skill mismatch, with many well-educated migrants working in elementary occupations due to language barriers and the need for immediate income (Jirka *et al.* 2023). Furthermore, forced migrants faced significant mental-health challenges, including PTSD, anxiety and depression, due to the trauma of war and displacement (Baran *et al.* 2024). Confronted with an ongoing war and an uncertain future, Ukrainian women experienced a profound sense of temporariness (Griffiths, Rogers and Anderson 2013), which led them to prioritise the present and abandon long-term planning. This period of uncertainty resulted in significant changes to their self-perceptions, values and relationships. Forced migration has affected traditional gender roles as women have taken on more caregiving responsibilities and non-traditional responsibilities for Ukrainian society as head of the household and primary breadwinner (Wolfensohn 2023).

This article analyses the sources of liminality experienced by Ukrainian women forced, by the war, to migrate to Poland. Liminality is understood here as a state of suspension – a transitional space 'in-between' characterised by uncertainty and ambivalence (Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra 2015; Marotta 2025; Turner 1969; van Gennep 1909). The analysis is based on 20 individual in-depth interviews.

The article is structured as follows: The first section outlines the key theoretical foundations of liminality, along with other theoretical approaches that describe the state of uncertainty among migrants. The second section presents the research methodology and provides an overview of the study participants. The following section presents the findings and consists of three parts, each focusing on a different source of liminality among Ukrainian women: disrupted life paths, fractured identity and the belonging tensions. All of these factors contribute to the multidimensional crisis, that generates a vicious circle of liminality among forced migrants, as summarised in the final section of this article.

Neither here nor there: the concept of liminality in migration studies

In migration studies, numerous concepts have been developed to describe the experiences of migrants and refugees concerning temporalities and uncertainty (Griffiths *et al.* 2013). One of these concepts – 'suspended lives' – captures the prolonged state of legal, social and existential suspension experienced by migrants due to restrictive immigration policies, border regimes, bureaucratic delays and precarity spaces – such as camps, detention centres and urban peripheries – where migrants are often immobilised (Menin 2017, cf. Dennler 2023). This concept enables a shift in focus to the nexus of time, legality and agency, thereby illuminating how the futures of migrants are perpetually postponed by exclusionary structures.

A similar concept of 'stuckness' describes a state of involuntary immobility experienced by migrants, who find themselves 'locked in' due to various external factors. These factors may include legal procedures, local labour-market entrapment or socio-economic dependencies (Pustelnikovaite 2020). As a result of a state of stuckness, migrants find themselves unable to advance in their migration trajectory or face difficulties in fully settling or integrating into their new environment. This creates a situation in which migrants find themselves in positions of disadvantage, such as socio-spatial exclusion (Shen 2017) or professional stagnation (Pustelnikovaite 2020).

The next concept is 'protracted displacement', conceptualised as a condition in which migrants remain physically dislocated and socially disrupted for extended periods and unable to return to their previous places of residence. This state is often characterised by a sense of 'permanent impermanence' (cf. Bammer 1994; Brun 2015: 19; Maxwell, Leybenson and Yemini 2024), where time is framed in terms of waiting. Displaced persons live 'in a present that they do not want to inhabit, awaiting a future they cannot reach – a future that is often unpredictable and uncertain' (Brun 2015: 19). In her study on internal displacement in Georgia (2015), Cathrine Brun introduced the term 'agency-in-waiting' to highlight the capacity of displaced persons to act within a condition of uncertainty, rather than seeing their waiting as a purely passive state in suspension. She argued that individuals engage in acts of hope and strategic anticipation that allow them to persist. However, 'agency-in-waiting' does not imply full control over the future – it recognises that structural constraints shape the possibilities for action (Ramachandran and Vathi 2022).

The above discussed theoretical concepts provide only a partial lens through which to analyse the experiences of Ukrainian forced migrants in Poland, as they focus primarily on structural factors related to legal status and limited or impossible return to the former place of residence. They describe the vulnerable situation of migrants who are 'stuck' in a geographical space, with limited possibilities to move. In contrast, Ukrainian women in Poland benefit from a regularised legal status that gives them the right to remain in the country, to continue their migratory journey and to travel freely to and from Ukraine (cf. Maxwell *et al.* 2024). They also have access to the labour market and the possibility to start and run businesses. However, despite these formal guarantees, their situation remains marked by uncertainty due to the unstable future of their residence rights and the continuation of the war in Ukraine. Thus, to provide a more comprehensive perspective on Ukrainian forced migrants in Poland, we adopt the overarching framework of liminality. Liminality integrates these concepts by capturing the structural, social, transitional, uncertain, transformative and dynamic aspects of migrant women's situations in the context of the ongoing war.

The liminality, a state characterised by ambiguity and 'being in-between', is often part of the migration, especially forced migration, experience (cf. Bammer 1994; Scott, Jakobsen, Rye and Visser 2022), where individuals find themselves in transitional phases between different cultural, social and geographical spaces as well as different temporalities, navigating between the past, present and future

(Brun 2015). It is a state that serves as a bridge, linking past roles to new ones, leading to a desired new state (Scott *et al*. 2022). Thus, liminality 'involves a series of changes: social status, values and norms, identity and self-awareness, comprehension and understanding' (Tereshchenko 2024: 23).

The concept of liminality originates from the Latin term *limen*, meaning 'threshold' and was introduced into the social sciences by Arnold van Gennep in his work *Les Rites de Passage* (1909) that explored and developed the concept of liminality in the context of rites in small-scale societies. Studying rites of passage in various societies, van Gennep identified three fundamental stages: separation (preliminal rites), transition (liminal rites) and incorporation/reintegration (postliminal rites), with the liminal phase characterised by the suspension of previous social statuses and uncertainty regarding the individual's future position. This concept was further developed by Victor Turner (1969) who, in the 1960s, integrated it into cultural anthropology, emphasising its significance for analysing social structures and transitional moments in the lives of individuals and groups. Turner highlighted the social dimension of liminality, noting that individuals in this phase undergo intense transformative processes that may lead to a redefinition of their identity and social roles.

The concept of liminality has been further developed by Agnes Horvath *et al.* (2015). In their book *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, Horvath and her colleagues conceptualise liminality as a prism for understanding transformations in the contemporary world, describing it as 'sudden irruptions of existential crisis in people's lives, loss of meaning, ambivalence and disorientation' (2015: 2–3). The volume demonstrates the value of liminality as an analytical tool in the social and political sciences, allowing researchers to examine the intersection of anthropological, social and political processes. The authors highlight how liminal moments reveal both the formative and the transformative potential of crises.

Thomassen (2015) argues that liminal experiences can pertain to both personal life and collective events, operating across multiple levels: individual, group and societal. According to him, liminality also has a temporal dimension – ranging from brief moments, through longer periods, to entire epochs – as well as a spatial one, encompassing concrete thresholds and transitional sites, broader borderlands or even whole states and regions positioned 'in between' larger civilisations. In this way, the category captures both the micro-level experiences of individuals and wide-ranging historical and geopolitical processes.

The concept of liminality had a significant impact on postcolonial studies by offering a lens through which to examine the multifaceted experiences of displacement (Pandey and Limba 2023). Within the postcolonial framework, migration often entails navigating a space of cultural in-betweenness, where individuals must reconcile the demands of integration into a new social environment with the preservation of their original identity. This process can result in a persistent sense of liminality, as migrants or refugees find themselves suspended between two societies, neither fully belonging to one nor the other. Alternatively, some individuals develop a 'hybrid' or 'dual identity' (Tereshchenko 2024), blending elements of both their homeland and the culture of the country of residence to create a new, fluid sense of self.

Liminality, often described as a state of transition, can be a complex and challenging experience for people with a migration or refugee background. It is a period marked by uncertainty and transformation, where individuals are neither fully integrated into their new environment nor able to return to their previous lives. Oksana Tereshchenko (2024: 24) identified a set of factors, in the context of migration, that cause stagnation in the liminal period: the loss of previously held social status, disruption of familiar routines and ways of life, separation from one's homeland and social networks, challenges to identity continuity, language barriers, exposure to social categorisation and stigmatisation, persistent

uncertainty and anxiety, unfamiliarity with cultural norms and traditions, communication difficulties, precarious living conditions, and an inability to predict or plan for the future.

Analysing modernity, Arpad Szakolczai (2016) introduces the concept of 'permanent liminality', which denotes a condition in which transitional phases – normally expected to conclude – become protracted and turn into a durable mode of existence. Instead of leading to a renewed social order, this prolonged suspension leaves individuals and communities caught between 'before' and 'after', unable to restore stability or a sense of closure, which may lead to a limbo state.

The concept of limbo is a term used to describe the state of migrants, particularly refugees, who find themselves in a situation of protracted, open-ended suspension with no clear trajectory forward. This condition is often the result of prolonged waiting periods for legal status or recognition in their countries of residence (Chwieduk 2022; Ukrayinchuk and Havrylchuk 2020). While liminality carries the potential for transformation or passage, limbo foregrounds the experience of being stuck in an indefinite, often immobilising in-between state. The prolonged and indeterminate nature of limbo can hinder integration, erode agency and negatively affect overall well-being, marking it as a more enduring and restrictive form of suspended existence than liminality. Sam Scott *et al.* (2022) examined the balance between liminality – seen as a positive, temporary transitional phase – and limbo, a prolonged and negative state. They suggested that, while migrants engaged in precarious work can avoid falling into limbo, they do not fully experience liminality in its traditional sense. Instead, they encounter what the authors termed 'ambiguous liminality' – the state between limbo and liminality – in which precarious work is perceived as liminal, yet the pathways to achieving a stable new state remain varied, uncertain and gradual.

Liminality is the most commonly studied among low-skilled migrants with limited capital, who engage in hyper-flexible, precarious labour (Scott *et al.* 2022). However, Kate Kirk, Ellen Ball and Sarah Renee Janssen (2017), in their research on liminality among highly skilled Indian migrants in the Netherlands, highlighted that similar social and economic vulnerabilities also apply to this group. The authors shed light on the relationship between individual agency, transnational social networks, geographic location and cultural perceptions of life phases and gender among migrants with high capital and social status who have experienced a state of liminality.

When examining the liminality of middle-class migrants, it is important to focus not only on cultural identity – as most researchers do (Pandey and Limba 2023; Tereshchenko 2024) – but also on professional identity. The loss of qualifications often leads to a decline in social status and agency, negatively impacting on self-esteem as, in contemporary societies, an identity is strongly linked to employment. From a social constructivist perspective, identity is shaped through the interplay between self-perception and social recognition. In the case of forced migration, this process is disrupted by deskilling or by the social perception of highly skilled forced migrants as 'low-skilled labour migrants working in low-wage sectors' (Fedyuk, Kyliushyk and Lashchuk 2023). Such experiences can result in a loss of existential security and lead to an identity crisis (Mijić, Parzer, Tkalich and Zolotarova 2024). Horvath (2015) describes how individuals in a liminal state may undergo a transformative process of redefining their identities, both personally and in terms of their social roles. Drawing on the perspective of rites of passage – conceived as a fluxional, chaotic, void-like liminal stage – Horvath introduces the concept of 'forced liminality', understood as a condition arising either from the deliberate imposition of liminal circumstances or from external factors that compel the transformation of identities from one state to another.

When studying liminality among migrants and refugees, it is essential to consider the transformation of their sense of belonging in the transnational social context (Blachnicka-Ciacek, Trąbka, Budginaite-

Mackine, Parutis and Pustulka 2021; Kirk *et al.* 2017; Marotta 2025), as well as the formation of collective identity through a similar background (Peter 2024). Understanding liminality not just as an individual but also as a collective experience sheds light on the ways in which migrants reconstruct belonging and community amid uncertain circumstances. The study by Laura Peter (2024) identifies temporal and spatial liminality as central collective experiences that both facilitate and hinder the formation of shared identities.

Liminality presents both challenges and opportunities for migrants and refugees (Marotta 2025). While it can lead to a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty, it also provides a space for agency/'liminal agency' (Weidenstedt, Geissinger, Leick and Nazeer 2023) and adaptation – that is, actively pursuing possibilities for progress in uncertain states of in-betweenness. Liminality is not a static experience but a constantly shifting process, as individuals continuously make decisions (Elo, Ermolaeva, Ivanova-Gongne, Klishevich, Kothari and Wiese 2024), form new identities, and adapt to their changing circumstances, which may ultimately lead to a transformative situation (Horvath *et al.* 2015).

Our analysis builds on the assumptions of these concepts and aims to explore liminality in the context of the forced migration of middle-class, middle-aged Ukrainian women residing in Poland. The study examines the factors shaping their experience of being 'in-between', encompassing multiple dimensions – spatial, temporal, social, cultural and others.

Methodology: qualitative research with Ukrainian female forced migrants

This article draws on data collected for the qualitative component of the *BigMig: Digital and Non-Digital Traces of Migrants in Big and Small Data Approaches to Human Capacities* project. The methodological approach used for this research was a co-creation research design, which combined qualitative data triangulation with a participatory approach grounded in ethical reflexivity towards data collection and data analysis (Kyliushyk, Winogrodzka and Chról 2025). The study involved 20 semi-structured in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) with Ukrainian women who became forced migrants following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. These interviews were preceded and followed by focus-group interviews (FGIs) with five Ukrainian women, who are experts and practitioners with both professional and personal migration experience. This methodological approach enabled an in-depth exploration of how the experience of forced migration affected participants' social and professional pathways and, consequently, shaped their mobility capital (Winogrodzka, Kyliushyk and Chról 2025).

This article focuses specifically on the individual narratives of Ukrainian women and uses data exclusively from the 20 IDIs (see Appendix 1). These interviews were conducted between May and August 2023 with participants who had been residing in Warsaw, Poland, for 1 to 1.5 years at the time of data collection. By focusing our research on participants in this specific location – with a high concentration of institutional support, employment opportunities and social networks for migrants – we aimed to understand how feelings of liminality manifest themselves even when migrants have access to a wide array of different resources.

The study participants were socially and professionally active both in Ukraine and Poland, all possessing higher education degrees. Notably, for almost all of them, this migration was their first experience of international mobility, as they had spent their entire lives in different regions of Ukraine – primarily in cities such as Lviv, Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mariupol, Poltava, Chernihiv – without ever planning to live abroad. In terms of their socio-economic background, all interviewees can be identified with the Ukrainian middle class (cf. migrants 'of the middle' – Robertson and Roberts 2022) which, to some extent, differentiates them from earlier waves of migrants from Ukraine (Kyliushyk and Chról 2025).

They represented various employment sectors – including administration, finance, services, healthcare, education, culture and fashion – and worked in diverse organisations such as domestic companies, international corporations, educational institutions and NGOs. Some participants were self-employed. All interviewees had actively sought to continue their professional careers in Poland, with most securing jobs aligned, at least partially, with their qualifications and skills. When it comes to the family situation, most participants of our study were married and had migrated with their children, while their husbands stayed in war-torn Ukraine. The age of the participants ranged from 31 to 54 years, with an average age of 42, partially positioning them as 'midlifers' – a social group often overlooked in studies on socio-spatial practices (Preston, McLafferty, Maciejewska and Yeoh 2024).

The specific socio-demographic profile of our participants makes an intersectional approach essential for a nuanced understanding of their experiences (Bastia, Datta, Hujo, Piper and Walsham 2022; Cleton and Scuzzarello, 2024). This analytical perspective recognises that individual experiences are not shaped by single factors but by the interplay of various social categories such as gender, age, class and migration status. Middle-aged migrant women face specific challenges stemming from both gendered and age-related factors (Lulle 2024). Labour-market inequalities are particularly pronounced, as the women frequently encounter difficulties securing stable, well-paid employment, often due to ageism and gendered expectations regarding family responsibilities. For our participants, this means that the challenge of re-entering the professional world in a new country is compounded by the dual burden of sole childcare and household management. Furthermore, middle-aged migrant women belong to the so-called 'sandwich generation', balancing economic and caregiving responsibilities for both younger and older family members. Social integration is another critical issue, as middle-aged migrant women frequently experience loneliness and difficulties in building new support networks, a challenge exacerbated by the dual roles of being a full-time employee and a full-time caregiver. The intersection of age, gender, migration and other aforementioned factors related to social roles and labour-market challenges can negatively impact on their mental and physical well-being (Preston *et al*. 2024), shaping and intensifying their experiences of liminality, which this article aims to explore.

Our study adhered to strict ethical standards for research with people in situations of forced migration who are at risk of experiencing vulnerability (see e.g. Clark-Kazak 2021); it was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the implementing institution. All participants were fully informed about the research objectives, confidentiality measures and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. They received written information detailing the project's purpose and data protection measures. Identifiable information, such as their name or specific workplaces, was anonymised while preserving the integrity of the data. Interviews lasted an average of 1.5 hours and were conducted in Ukrainian by a Ukrainian researcher, which fostered openness and allowed for the collection of rich and nuanced data (Kyliushyk *et al*. 2025). With the participants' consent, interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated to ensure accessibility for the entire research team. Thematic analysis (Nowell, Norris, White and Moules 2017) was used to analyse the qualitative data by identifying and coding data segments that reflected the key sources of the liminal state.

What shapes the state of liminality among Ukrainian women?

The analysis of liminality among Ukrainian women in the context of forced migration is structured into three sections, each devoted to a different source of this state. The first examines how disrupted life paths caused an existential crisis. The second focuses on the identity crisis which emerged from a fractured identity. The final section explores the belonging crisis stemming from belonging tensions.

'The war completely destroyed everything – our entire wonderful life – which we had to rebuild from scratch'. Disrupted life paths as a source of existential crisis

The escalation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 destabilised Ukrainians' lives, disrupting their paths and creating widespread instability. The initial disbelief that war could actually occur was soon replaced by shock, paralysis and a sense of being lost in a surreal yet threatening reality. The intensification of military actions and the unpredictability of events forced rapid decision-making under extreme psychological pressure. The urgent need to flee – often without reliable information, clear plans or support networks – initiated a state of suspension that only deepened over time. Within this liminal space, many Ukrainian women experienced limited agency, as their ability to shape their futures became constrained by structural barriers, legal uncertainties and socio-economic dependencies in host countries (Marotta 2025). While forced migration required them to make immediate choices, these decisions were often shaped more by external pressures than by personal autonomy, reinforcing a sense of displacement and precariousness.

> *After the occupation of the eastern part* [of Ukraine by Russia] *in 2014, it was obvious that something like this could still happen. But until the very end, I kept thinking – no, this is impossible. On the morning of the 24th* [of February 2022], *my sister called me, (...) 'Yaryna, wake up'. (...) And when my window started shaking, I realised – damn, it's happening here, at home. On the 25th, I started getting ready* (Yaryna, 41).

> *We got on the train without knowing where we were going. We boarded and started asking where the train was headed. But no one answered. Only after it started moving did we get a response – it was going to Lviv* [a city near the Polish border]. *And once we arrived in Lviv, our friends helped us to reach the* [Polish] *border* (Yana, 34).

Ukrainian women who fled to different, mainly European, countries – including Poland – found themselves in a situation of 'protracted displacement' (cf. Maxwell *et al.* 2024), characterised by prolonged physical dislocation and social disruption, leading to heightened uncertainty and unpredictability (Brun 2015). This previously unimaginable forced migration generated a sense of losing control over one's own fate – an experience already deeply strained by the preceding COVID-19 pandemic, referred to as 'unsettling event' (cf. Kilkey and Ryan 2020). The geopolitical uncertainty surrounding Ukraine and the broader region, the ambiguity regarding potential destinations for refuge and the lack of prior experience with international migration further exacerbated feelings of disorientation and being caught 'in-between nothing' (Thomassen 2015). As Anfisa (36) recalled: 'At the beginning of the war, we were completely disoriented; we understood absolutely nothing – where to go, where to escape, what to do, where we would end up. It was just incredibly terrifying'.

The experience of war and forced migration brutally suspended Ukrainian women's existence in a spatio-temporal limbo – trapped between the 'before' (a lost past) and the 'after' (an uncertain future) of 24 February 2022 (cf. 'forced liminality', Horvath 2015). This separation from their previous lives resulted in a metaphorical 'death' (van Gennep 1909), in which forcibly displaced individuals are compelled to abandon aspects of their past by severing ties with familiar practices and routines that had previously defined their standard of living and lifestyle. As Alla (44) reflected: '[In Ukraine] everything was wonderful. And then coming here… the war completely destroyed everything – our entire wonderful life – which we had to rebuild from scratch'.

The sense of 'resetting' one's life among middle-class migrants largely stems from the loss of their previously socio-economic position. The erosion of one's past social status, the necessity to abandon their former lifestyle and their detachment from home and social networks effectively prevented Ukrainian migrant women from experiencing a sense of attachment – both geographically and socially. Their displacement resulted in what Bammer (1994: 12) describes as a 'simultaneously split and doubled existence – stretched across the multiple ruptures between *here* and *there*'. The place they once called 'home' ceased to be one, while their new place of residence had not yet been fully familiarised, leading to a distinctive state of 'in-betweenness' (Brun 2015; Horvath *et al.* 2015; Weidenstedt *et al.* 2023), deeply embedded in the condition of liminality.

> *I was going home* [in Ukraine], *thinking I would feel at home, that I would be comfortable there – my mother, father, brother, home – but I somehow felt like a stranger. I don't know where that feeling came from. (…) The question* [about the future] *remains open for me. I think the more time I spend here* [in Poland], *the more likely it is that I will stay* [here] *but, for now, no final decision has been made* (Olesia, 45).

Our interviewees, while sharing their experiences, employed the metaphor of 'parallel worlds' – coexisting yet radically different socio-political realities: a war-torn Ukraine – where they remain present in spirit but absent in body – and Poland, where they appear to lead 'normal' lives. This sense of a 'split state' accompanied them in their daily routines.

> *I don't even know how to describe it; it just felt illogical. As if in a parallel world, because mentally, you remained in Ukraine, at home. Here* [in Poland], *you wake up, prepare breakfast, make sure the children eat on time, clean up after them, walk the dogs, cook lunch – so, physically, you are here but, mentally, you are still there* (Olesia, 45).

As a result, many forcibly displaced Ukrainian women experienced an inner conflict, often accompanied by remorse for leaving their homeland in a time of crisis. This led to persistent self-doubt and an unending moral dilemma over whether they should have stayed or left. As Olesia explained

> *You have this moral feeling that you fled, that you betrayed* [your country], *that you took your child away – it's something that invites self-criticism to the point of guilt. (…) You start tormenting yourself, questioning whether you made the right decision.*

Moreover, the ongoing war in Ukraine made it difficult for migrant women to maintain their usual activities in their new place of residence, particularly those related to leisure or their previous lifestyle, further deepening their existential crisis (cf. Mijić *et al.* 2024).

> *When you understand that there is a war going on, that people are dying... a sense of guilt arises. (...) I watched people skiing and, at some point – I remember, maybe after a month – I thought that maybe I should go, too. (…) But then I thought that I couldn't allow myself to ski while others were in danger because of the war* (Yana, 34).

The extended experience of being forcibly separated from a place long considered home, combined with ongoing uncertainty about the future, fosters a sense of 'permanent impermanence' (Brun 2015)

among migrants from Ukraine. In this state, time becomes structured around waiting, significantly limiting their ability to move forward.

> *Right now, all my plans revolve around one thing – that the war ends as soon as possible. I can't plan anything because I don't know what tomorrow will bring but I already just want it to be over (...). I wake up every day worrying and thinking, God, when will this end?* (Hanna, 37).

In such circumstances, as Brun (2015: 24) pointed out, 'people often dream of return and a future located in an idealised and harmonious past'. This is reflected in the experience of Vitalina (45), who admitted: 'I would like to return [to Ukraine] and restore everything to its previous state. In our dreams, we all see our homes, our beds'. Envisioning a future that remains out of reach – often anchored in the past and embodied by the places and lives they were forced to leave – can lead to stagnation and a sense of helplessness, resulting in 'suspended living' (Dennler 2023; Menin 2017). For individuals living in a prolonged 'waiting mode' (cf. 'permanent liminality' Szakolczai 2016), there is a significant risk of losing hope which, combined with anxieties about the future, can severely impact on their mental health and overall well-being (cf. Baran *et al.* 2024), as reflected in Tina's (43) account.

> *In the first six months* [after the escalation of the war], *we were still running on adrenaline. There was a lot of hope that the war would end quickly and we kept waiting, waiting, waiting. But after half a year, people started to break down – both mentally and physically. Chronic illnesses emerged and many began seeing psychiatrists – and they still do. (…) I can see that many people now carry immense inner tension and anxiety. On the one hand, life has somewhat stabilised – people are working – but, at the same time, no one knows what will happen after the war, how to move forward – and that creates a lot of internal strain.*

A situation of protracted uncertainty (Brun 2015) significantly shapes the temporal perspective of forced migrant women, leading to a predominant focus on the short term (cf. Baran *et al.* 2024). Many Ukrainian women who fled the war report an inability or reluctance to plan for the long term, as the unpredictability of their circumstances and the constantly shifting situation in Ukraine undermine the feasibility of making lasting commitments. As Ilona (48) described it:

> *After two years of COVID-19 and the escalation, thinking long-term... I don't know what will happen in a year. I don't even know where to start, whether we will return, when we will return or what the situation will be* [in Ukraine] *when we come back because it will also change.*

Waiting for a future rooted in the past can lead to passivity and withdrawal from activity. This conscious suspension of various activities also includes mobility capital formation (Winogrodzka *et al.* 2025), which enables further post-migration mobility practices (Chról and Kyliushyk 2025). However, it can also function as a mechanism that helps individuals stay afloat despite tough experiences of loss, fostering the emergence of 'agency-in-waiting' (Brun 2015; Ramachandran and Vathi 2022) – the capacity of displaced individuals to act within conditions of uncertainty. In this context, individuals engage in strategic anticipation that enables them to endure and navigate challenging circumstances. This dual nature of response and strategy employed by Ukrainian migrants was highlighted by Yaryna (41), who works at a consultation point and helpline offering support to migrants:

> *It seems that women are facing certain general challenges. They understand what is happening in Ukraine, and many of them are under stress. Some are able to channel their efforts into seeking opportunities, for example, by participating in various IT courses and training programmes in Poland, which could help them find employment. However, I have the impression that most of them still want to return to Ukraine and are not fully aware of the potential benefits. (...) Some of them are still in shock and are not ready to actively search or consider other opportunities.*

On the one hand, the existential crisis experienced by Ukrainian forced migrant women was profoundly destabilising, manifesting as a rupture in their sense of connection, leading to a state of liminality (Thomassen 2015). On the other hand, this disruption of life path also prompted a critical reassessment of their engagement with the present, encouraging them to embrace a mode of existence centred on 'living in the here and now'. In the face of an uncertain future, this shift in perspective became both a coping mechanism and a way to reclaim agency within the constraints of displacement (cf. Brun 2015). Focusing on the present, in a sense, is an attempt to mitigate the negative effects of liminality.

> *Listen… The war affects only the fact that you don't know what will happen to you tomorrow. You live as if in the present day. You are grateful for what you have today. Yes, you make plans, but you understand that those plans… everything can go wrong. But at the same time, it gave you strength. And there are things you can stop paying attention to* (Alla, 44).

'I had such an identity crisis, the identity of myself, of who I am in general'. Fractured identity as a driver of identity crises

Ukrainian women, being in suspension between a lost past and an uncertain future (Brun 2015), experience not only disorientation but also an identity crisis, which is another dimension of liminality (Horvath 2015; Marotta 2025; Tereshchenko 2024): 'I had such an identity crisis, the identity of myself, of who I am in general. And it was such a terrible gap in terms of understanding myself. Well, supposedly I'm here for the children, yes, for security, but I lose myself all the time' (Inna, 41). This identity crisis results from a fractured identity, shaped by the shifts in social roles that female migrants are required to perform under new conditions. For instance, motherhood in this situation acquires a new meaning, as migration often involves sacrificing one's own ambitions and aspirations for the sake of one's children. As Inna continued, 'I'm a mother, I have to think about my children first. Because I gave up everything for their future. I'm 40 years old. Am I going to go back to everything that was before that?'. Ukrainian women not only have to organise their life in a new place but also bear the burden of trauma, loss and the need to provide stability for their families in what they relied on their husbands for before this: 'The women at the time went through many things. To save the lives not only of themselves but also of their children. To provide for their children, education, food, medical treatment, etc. This is also a very big sacrifice' (Maria, 50).

Traditionally seen in Ukrainian society as caretakers of the home, women have been forced to take on new roles – as both sole breadwinners and decision-makers, responsible for their own and their children's futures (Wolfensohn 2023), as Anfisa and Alla pointed out:

> [Stereotypically] *woman is the caretaker of the house but now Ukrainian women have shown that not only are they caretakers of the house but they can also drive a car across the country carrying children under the sound of air raids, under bombings* (Anfisa, 36).

When I first came to Poland, I understood that I needed to learn the language [and] *I need a job (...) to have an income here after all, because I have to pay for housing somehow. I have two children on my back. What will happen with my husband is also unknown* (Alla, 44).

Moreover, a situation of 'protracted displacement' (Brun 2015) not only separates women from their previous lives but also leads to new internal conflicts, especially in the context of decisions regarding the welfare of children. Some women yearn to return, while others have to reconcile their children's conflicting expectations, further exacerbating their sense of suspension:

The younger son whines all the time, every day, that he wants to go home. And he doesn't care... where you want to stay there and I will go. And I say – no, without me you will not go. That's because there's a war and you don't know where [the rocket] *might still come. The older son wants to stay here. And I can't tear myself apart'* (Alla, 44).

In addition, women's husbands very often found themselves in the military due to their own decisions or mobilisation obligations, which further reinforces the sense of insecurity among migrant women, as Alla continued: 'My husband is in the army, it's a very big stress'. Or they have health problems that are adversely affected by the experience of war. Women who relied on the support of their husbands before the escalation of the war become supporters themselves, as Yaryna's (41) family situation illustrates:

My husband has lost weight, well, a minimum of 13 kilograms, that is, if before he was L, XL, now he is S. He has mental breakdowns all the time, because he has many friends who have already died, whom he buried. But at the same time, he can't leave, even though he has a 'white ticket' [a military document certifying his inability to perform military service, colloquially] *he has such a disease, renal failure, he must be constantly under care. Sometimes he says he'd really like to help* [me] *more, but he can't. Because the point is that, before, even though I had a low income, my husband had the ability to support me.*

The identity crises not only result from the redefinition of women's roles as mothers and partners, but also as daughters. The migration of middle-aged women is associated with the specific burden of having to care for both the younger and the older generations (Lulle 2024). In the case of Ukrainian women, this multifaceted responsibility becomes particularly difficult because it is sometimes carried out, in part, long-distance, as Toma (54) told us:

I already have parents who are quite elderly, especially my father and well, it's hard to say that I'm here and they are there, I don't know. Maybe it will be that I will go here and there, I don't understand now at all and that makes it even more difficult for me, that is, now there is no certainty.

Many of the migrant women face an inner struggle – a sense of obligation to their aging parents left behind in Ukraine and a desire for stability and a better future for themselves and their children in the new country:

> *I have a child, yes, I have to support my child, I have a mother who is already advanced in age, yes, and I have to support her, that is my mother, in the first place, she in no way wants to leave, she never wants to live anywhere else but in Ukraine, she is 60 years old* (Anfisa, 36).

The statements of female participants in the study perfectly illustrate the nature of liminality – a suspension between two realities, an ambiguous 'being-in-between' (Horvath *et al.* 2015; Scott *et al.* 2022). On the one hand, there is a strong attachment to family and a desire to return to the familiar past while, on the other, there is a rational awareness that the future and opportunities for development are better in the new country: 'My husband is alone and it's difficult for me alone, that is, I say I want to return home and I want to live the way I used to but, in terms of prospects, development and life in a developed country, it's better here'. The uncertainty Toma expresses shows that liminality is not just a temporary state but a dynamic process in which migrant women are constantly making decisions and trying to find a balance between commitments and their own aspirations (Elo *et al.* 2024).

The forced migration of the Ukrainian upper-middle-class, including highly skilled women, to Poland has also been associated with the loss of professional status and with limited employment opportunities in the learned profession, leading to deskilling or occupational degradation (Jirka *et al.* 2023). Both the need to take care of their families and the limited opportunities to find work in their profession force women to take jobs below their competences: 'Women are working as dishwashers, although they previously worked as accountants, economists, financiers either working remotely or taking on manual labour. Somewhere their competencies are not being used' (Taisa, 49). The loss of skills results in a decline in social status and a sense of existential insecurity. This leads to a severe professional identity crisis (Mijić *et al.* 2024), which is another factor affecting the liminal state.

The situation of our interviewees shows that liminality not only affects low-skilled but also highly skilled migrants, who are also exposed to social and economic vulnerabilities in their new living environment (Jirka *et al.* 2023; Kirk *et al.* 2017). Ukrainian women often take on precarious work in the hope that it is a temporary solution as a transitional (liminal) condition that will prove to be a 'stepping stone' conducive, at a later stage, to a return to a pre-migration career path or to a new, stable socio-professional position. Forcibly migrated women, being burdened with new family responsibilities, make decisions to exert maximum effort in the hope of improving their professional situation (Elo *et al.* 2024):

> *I would like to have in Poland something similar to what I had in Ukraine, the same level* [of career development] *and earnings. I understand that it won't happen, because it would require me to communicate, you have to talk a lot, tell stories, ask questions, analyse; for this level I don't have enough, so I will have to make it up, I will be a bit overloaded, I will need more information, which is very important in my speciality. I know that I will not be as effective, as useful as I can be, for example, knowing the language* (Vitalina, 45).

On the other hand, a protracted situation of under-qualified work and a crisis of professional identity (Mijić *et al.* 2024) can result in a long-term suspension in limbo, which has serious economic, social and psychological consequences (Chwieduk 2022; Ukrayinchuk and Havrylchuk 2020) and can even be safety-related, forcing migrants to decide to return (Chról and Kyliushyk 2025):

> [In Ukraine] *people were in decent jobs. Here they are working in simple, physical jobs and people are returning because it is better for them to work in their own country. It's dangerous in our Ukraine but they won't work in a factory there or clean fish or do some dirty work. People choose dignity for*

themselves, it has always worked, people choose themselves. Even though the sacrifice will be the lack of security (Viktoria, 34).

This time of suspension and uncertainty for Ukrainian women working in low-wage sectors can be described as 'ambiguous liminality', a state between liminality and limbo (Scott *et al.* 2022). Such a situation is particularly acute for middle-aged women, who are more likely to face different challenges in the labour market, especially due to the need to combine caregiving responsibilities with work: '[Middle-aged] women tend to be more vulnerable than men, often due to the assumption that women should sacrifice their work or social network for others' (Lulle 2024: 130). Migrant women are also vulnerable to gender discrimination, as they 'receive lower salaries and may have less savings in midlife'; they are also susceptible to health problems related to the loss of a previous career path: 'If they gave up their careers involuntarily, they tend to be more at risk of poor mental and physical health'. This is because rebuilding one's position in the labour market in a different environment requires not only effort but also time which, according to our interviewees, they do not always have:

But do I see myself in Poland? On the one hand, I like everything here. (...) But I understand that, in order to be professionally useful, at least at the level I was in Ukraine, some more time will be needed. I have the feeling that I don't have it anymore. Because I'm not 20 years old anymore, so.... – So how to spend eight years of your life to retrain and start working as a lawyer in Poland? It takes time. I'm not sure exactly what I want (Ilaria, 41).

The lack of appreciation for the skills and experience of middle-aged migrant women can also lead to feelings of being unnecessary and undesirable in the labour market and can negatively affect their well-being (Lulle 2024). A good example is Maria (50), who holds a PhD in public administration and has an education in Ukrainian philology and psychology. In Poland, she felt that her education was not appreciated:

None of my degrees interest absolutely no one. Absolutely. Because they asked about higher education and they have it, I don't even know if I was appreciated for it. And if I could work [according to my qualifications], *then probably more of my competencies would be appreciated.*

Redefining new socio-professional roles results in a state of liminality in which old structures disintegrate and new ones have not yet formed (Horvath 2015; van Gennep 1909). The changes that have taken place in Ukrainian women are irreversible (Baran *et al.* 2024), so a return to the past is not possible (Brun 2015), despite still-existing cultural expectations related to gender (Fedyuk *et al.* 2023) and age (Lulle 2024):

Women have changed a lot, they had to start deciding for themselves, they didn't have the support of their partner. From what I observe, very many women have opened up and I think that this energy of theirs and their synergy, and this will help them, I'm sure, this genie in the bottle is no longer hidden (Taisa, 49).

In this situation, although the liminal state is associated with challenges and uncertainty, it also creates space for 'liminal agency' (Weidenstedt *et al.* 2023) whereby women are constantly making

decisions, forming their identities, changing and adapting to new conditions (Horvath 2015; Elo *et al.* 2024):

> *Women who went into the unknown got up on their feet, became stronger. They realised that, even if they are left alone with a child or something else, they can answer for themselves, answer for their children, make decisions that affect their fate and so on. Yes, to be independent, maybe not necessarily financially but emotionally and in other ways, too, is something women have certainly learned in the process. They have developed their personalities and learned to accept themselves as individuals, not just as an addition to the family* (Olesia, 45).

'Well, it is such a form of condemnation and pressure, it is actually from the side of the Ukrainians and from the side of the Poles too, (...) from all sides'. Belonging crises caused by belonging tensions

The liminality experienced by Ukrainian women also stems from the change in their social environment, as a result of which they find themselves 'in-between' – neither fully embedded in the new society nor connected to the old social structures, which have been destabilised by war and forced migration (Thomassen 2015). This leads to a redefinition of their identity and place in society (Horvath 2015; Pandey and Limba 2023). The cultural proximity between Poland and Ukraine, compared to other European countries, serves as a significant factor in reducing the sense of alienation among Ukrainian migrants, thereby facilitating the process of social inclusion: 'People who moved to Western countries feel more detached from Ukraine, not only because of geography but also due to a different mentality. (…) Here [in Poland], both the mentality and culture are very similar' (Inesa, 35). However, the women's initial perception of an easy adaptation to the new social environment, in some cases, proved to be illusory.

Female migrants encounter numerous barriers in building a sense of belonging, which, among other factors, stems from entrenched stereotypes associated with previous waves of Ukrainian labour migration, which were characterised by their circular nature and precarious employment in low-wage sectors (Kyliushyk and Chról 2025):

> *I think our economic migrants played a very particular role in this. It is a centuries-old phenomenon – a massive migration of low-skilled workers. They came here in search of better wages rather than trying to secure them in Ukraine. Honestly, I was shocked when I found out how little our economic migrants earn* (Sofia, 47).

Ukrainian women who arrived in Poland after 24 February 2022 are often perceived through the lens of low-skilled labour, which leads to their devaluation in the labour market. The perception of them by Polish society through the prism of an 'economic migrant' (Fedyuk *et al.* 2023) not only disregards their level of competence and restricts their access to decent working conditions – by offering them low-paid, low-skilled jobs in demanding conditions – but also fails to consider their family situation, particularly the necessity of balancing work with childcare responsibilities.

> *On Polish websites, in the 'Jobs for Ukrainians' section, there are plenty of such job offers. Physical labour. A 12-hour shift. It's impossible. Even including Saturdays. It's almost slavery. Six days a week* (Taisa, 49).

They keep posting job ads all the time – mainly for fruit- and vegetable-picking, shop assistant, construction, hotel cleaning and similar work. I spoke with women who worked as cleaners – such jobs are available today but tomorrow they might not be. It's unstable and uncertain. You may get a few rooms to clean and then there might be nothing (Vitalina, 45).

According to our interviewees, employers fail to recognise their potential, resulting in their marginalisation and the reinforcement of their position on the peripheries of the labour market (Jirka *et al.* 2023). The imposition of occupational roles based on previous migration patterns, along with employment insecurity and instability, contributes to a sense of identity crisis (Mijić *et al.* 2024) and a lack of rootedness, further deepening the migrants' state of liminality. Ukrainian forced migrants remain in a transitional phase, in which both their social role and their sense of belonging are constantly questioned and redefined (Horvath 2015).

But there were also economic migrants who reinforced the idea that Ukrainians are just a working-class people – that they can only clean, wash dishes, work in kitchens or take care of the elderly. And what if you come from a home where you had a cleaner? And you have a different kind of experience. But here, you are perceived as someone inferior. And you don't speak the language well enough to present yourself. And often, women with higher education take any job they can. Because they have to. And once again, we end up proving that we are nobodies (Alla, 44).

Another dimension of discrimination is the colonial perception of migrants (Pandey and Limba 2023) within Polish society: 'In general, there isn't a very good attitude towards Ukrainians here. They look at us as if we were from the Third World' (Lara, 40). This forces women to constantly prove their worth and justify their right to full membership in society. As a result, the process of shaping a new sense of belonging becomes more demanding, requiring migrant women to make greater efforts – not only to adapt to their new environment but also to continuously fight for recognition (Blachnicka-Ciacek *et al.* 2021; Marotta 2025; Turner 1969).

I told her [the owner of the apartment I moved into] *I work at a university. She asked me several times if I even knew what a university is. (...) Meaning the existing stereotype. I didn't even mention that I have a PhD – I didn't want to shock her* (Inna, 41).

As long as Poland sees Ukrainians as poor people who can be used to fill labour gaps because they have nowhere else to go, Ukrainians will have restricted opportunities. And it takes a lot of time for each Ukrainian to prove that they can achieve something – perhaps even more than the average Pole (Victoria, 34).

Colonial, paternalistic perceptions have also been noted by our interviewees in the systemic approach to aid and support for migrants by humanitarian organisations. Instead of recognising the individual needs of women, they often treat them as passive beneficiaries of support, focusing not on providing real help or acknowledging the agency of migrant women but, rather, on fulfilling specific societal expectations towards them:

> [There is this approach] *You come, and we'll teach you. We'll give you trinkets, teach you how to take your shoes off at the entrance. Aid for refugees is endless clubs. I don't know of any organisations where the agency of the refugees was placed at the centre of attention* (Sofia, 47).

The situation is further complicated by the societal perception of Ukrainian women through the stereotype of the 'refugee' as a 'passive victim', who should be grateful for any help received and 'accept whatever is offered'. As Yana (34) observed: '[Poles] have a rather negative attitude towards Ukrainians, saying that they feed us, clothe us, provide for our livelihood and we came here – receiving allowances – and they do everything for us'. This kind of narrative overlooks the fact that Ukrainian women possess their own resources and competencies (Winogrodzka *et al.* 2025). As a result, such stereotypes may hinder integration, particularly in the labour market, leading to the denial of migrant women's aspirations for decent working conditions:

> *You go through a job interview and they look at you as a victim but you position yourself as a normal person, you don't even try to get their sympathy. (...) Well, people don't perceive that, in Ukraine, people fleeing the war have some competencies and they should still be paid normally for that, not just given the minimum wage and left to manage somehow* (Viktoria, 34).

This perception of Ukrainian women as 'passive victims' on whom employment conditions are to be imposed and from whom gratitude for every form of 'help' is expected (Fedyuk *et al.* 2023) intensifies their state of liminality. It prevents them from fully participating in society, undermines their agency and limits their ability to achieve professional and social fulfilment.

The stereotypical perception of Ukrainian women by the Polish society can lead to their social isolation, limiting their interactions primarily to the Ukrainian community. As Alla (44) emphasised: 'I only [have social relationships] with our Ukrainians, not with Poles'. For our interviewees, Ukrainians in Poland are mostly those who are also forced migrants, as they experience negative attitudes even from Ukrainian pre-war migrants. Ukrainians in Poland are divided by the boundary of the escalation of war and the privileges not shared by earlier migrants, which contributes to a negative mutual perception between the two groups. The negative attitude of economic migrants stems from a sense of unequal opportunities, which generates a feeling of competition, especially in the context of the labour market: 'Yes, competition, there are so many of us [Ukrainians]. And, well, let's say, with mental jealousy. Why do you have it this way and I have it that way? Why am I selling cherries on the street and you're coming home from [an office] job?' (Maria, 50).

The challenges of finding 'one's place' in Poland often become a reason for returning to Ukraine (Chról and Kyliushyk 2025) to restore one's previous socio-professional position. However, is a return to the previous life truly possible? Between the old identity of a Ukrainian resident and the new identity of a resident in Poland lies a significant gap in the balance of gains and losses, along with ambivalent feelings towards both the country of origin and migration itself. On the one hand, Ukraine represents home, social ties and familiar routines; on the other, everything has changed, becoming unfamiliar to returnees and, more importantly, they themselves feel like 'outsiders' in the eyes of Ukrainian society: 'I believe we will face a certain crisis of return because many of us are already experiencing a lack of understanding – even from close friends who stayed in Ukraine – and uncertainty about our place in society' (Sofia, 47). Returning to Ukraine does not necessarily mean the restoration of previous connections; rather, it is often accompanied by anxiety about starting life anew, similar to the experience

of forced migration: 'After returning to Kyiv, yes, reopening the kindergarten... I can't even say it would be a reopening; rather it would be starting from scratch' (Penni, 36).

The social belonging of Ukrainian women is exposed to multidimensional challenges that extend beyond their relationships with Polish society or the Ukrainian community in Poland. These challenges also encompass their ties with Ukrainian society in Ukraine. The experience of forced migration creates tensions between those who left and those who remained: 'Secondly, in my opinion, there will be a problem in relations between those who left and those who stayed. (...) On the Internet, people write that those who now live in Warsaw are traitors' (Taisa, 49). Such narratives can lead to feelings of exclusion and the loss of a previously held social identity. Migrant women face accusations of abandoning their homeland in a time of crisis, which may undermine their right to community belonging and lead to permanent divisions. Furthermore, the fear of incomplete acceptance upon a potential return exacerbates their sense of uncertainty and suspension in a social void (Horvath 2015).

> *I mentioned complicated relationships. (…)* [Ukrainians in Ukraine] *have a negative attitude towards those who left, thinking that it's easier for us here, that there are no airstrikes and they are the heroes, engaging in volunteer work, helping the army, etc. We won't be the same when we return. (...) It's hard to assess the sincerity and acceptance. Will there be a division or will someone say: 'Oh, they are cool because they hid in shelters and worked. And you are not cool because you left the country in a hurry'. So, I think there will definitely be some division and conflicts between those who stayed and those who left* (Penni, 36).

This issue is further exacerbated by the attitude of close relatives remaining in Ukraine, who often put pressure on the migrants, expecting them to return. The experience of stigmatisation from family and friends strengthens the sense of guilt and social exclusion, undermining the decision to leave for Poland. These tensions make the process of building a sense of belonging even more complicated and emotionally charged.

> *At first, it was very difficult and my military friends condemned me because I left the country. (...) I also initially received support but then condemnation for not coming back. (...) The pressure, of course, exists. I think that sometimes even the media say that they are waiting for people. It's a form of manipulation, trying to influence those who have left. I am often criticised for this, of course, also by my family. My dad thinks I'm just sitting around. 'You've been sitting around long enough, what are you still sitting there for?' But I'm not sitting around for a single day* (Viktoria, 34).

Feeling of pressure and exclusion from different sides – as Viktoria (34) continued: 'Well, it is such a form of condemnation and pressure, it is actually from the side of the Ukrainians and from the side of the Poles too, (...) from all sides' – leads women to create their own social network 'in between', based on the shared experience of war trauma and forced migration; however, this may reinforce the state of 'suspension' and lead to the formation of a collective liminal identity (Peter 2024; Thomassen 2015) based on shared experiences of marginalisation and rejection.

Conclusion: the vicious circle of liminality

International mobility, especially when forced, is not merely about changing one's place of residence; it is a complex socio-psychological process. The displacement of Ukrainian women due to the Russian war

has had far-reaching consequences, disrupting their personal and professional lives. Forced to leave their country suddenly, they had to navigate unfamiliar socio-professional environments in various European countries, leading to a state of liminality, characterised by a sense of being 'in-between': between different spaces, temporalities, old and new roles, societies, cultures and political orders.

This article offers an in-depth investigation of the factors shaping the experience of liminality in the context of forced migration, analysing both the external conditions that induce it and the internal psychological mechanisms that mediate this transitional state. Our study identifies three key sources that structure this experience among Ukrainian forced migrants: (1) disrupted life paths resulting from war and displacement, which caused an existential crisis characterised by uncertainty, disorientation and limited agency; (2) a fractured identity, which resulted in an identity crisis manifested in self-perception dissonance, the reconfiguration of socio-professional roles and processes of self-redefinition; and (3) belonging tensions, that led to a belonging crisis stemming from discrimination and social exclusion, which necessitate a constant renegotiation of social perception.

Disrupted life paths, shaped by war and forced migration, have emerged as a central source of liminality among Ukrainian women, strongly destabilising their sense of control and constraining their agency, resulting in a state of prolonged disorientation. The experience of protracted displacement situates these women in a condition of 'permanent impermanence', where uncertainty about the future impedes long-term planning and reinforces their sense of being 'in-between'. Spatial dislocation, detachment from home, socio-economic downgrading and the inability to reconstruct pre-migration lifestyles further entrench their sense of liminality, leading to its first dimension – an existential crisis. However, within this state of uncertainty, some women engage in forms of 'agency-in-waiting', leveraging available opportunities for development in Poland despite the ambiguity of their further migration trajectories (cf. Winogrodzka *et al.* 2025).

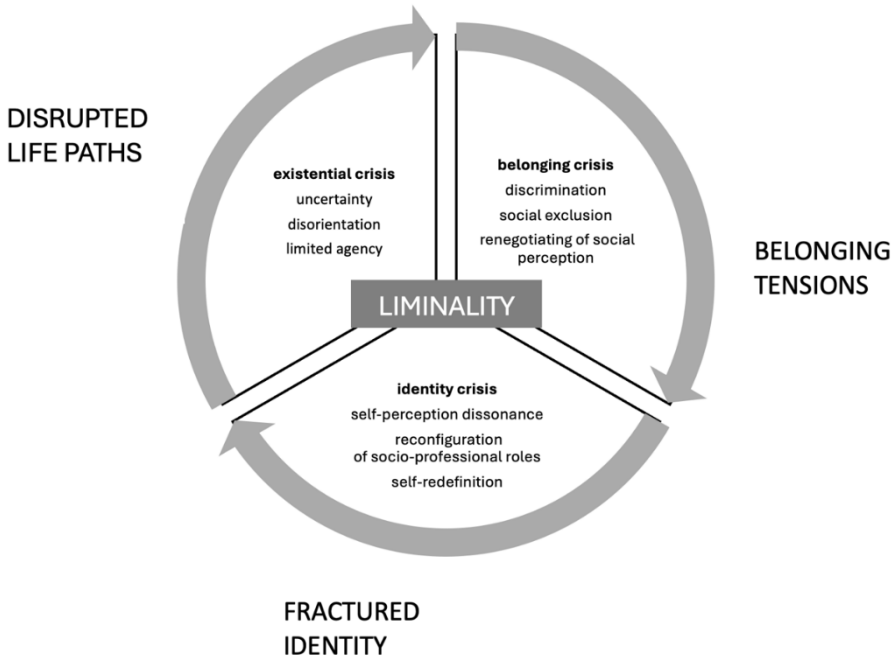
The second significant source of liminality is the fractured identity, a phenomenon characterised by the disruption and fragmentation of one's sense of self in the face of displacement. Identity is a dynamic process, continuously negotiated, constructed and reconfigured. However, in the context of forced migration, one's 'self' becomes unanchored from familiar frames of meaning, losing its previous points of reference. If an individual's identity was previously rooted in a specific social structure and family relationships, forced migration acts as a deconstructive force, dismantling these foundations. As a result, women experience an identity crisis – a dissonance between their past and present selves, which compels them to redefine their familial, professional and social roles – the next dimension of liminality. Despite the uncertainties of this suspended state, it can also become a space for self-redefinition. The identity crisis associated with liminality can also facilitate transformation (Horvath 2015), allowing women to (re)construct a new sense of self.

The final source shaping the liminal experience among Ukrainian migrant women is the belonging tensions, stemming from their position of suspension between different social environments. In Poland, they are often pushed to the margins of the labour market and society, facing discrimination rooted in entrenched stereotypes of Ukrainian migrants as low-skilled workers. At the same time, Ukrainian society – rather than serving as a stable point of reference – becomes a source of judgment for abandoning the country in war. The interplay of these dynamics places Ukrainian women in an ambiguous position, where they do not feel accepted either in Poland or in Ukraine. This crisis of belonging, the last dimension of liminality identified in our study, is not merely a by-product of migration but reveals deeper structures of marginalisation and exclusion. It highlights colonial mechanisms of hierarchisation within the society of the country of residence, which expects migrants to prove their worth while restricting their opportunities for full participation. Simultaneously, it exposes

the tensions within their country of origin, where social reintegration upon return is far from straightforward. As a result, forced migrant women must navigate a complex negotiation of their social perception and recognition – not only within Polish society, which imposes conditions for their acceptance but also within Ukrainian society, which questions their right to belong.

Taken together, these three dimensions – existential, identity and belonging crises – constitute a multidimensional condition, which forms a self-reinforcing, vicious circle of liminality (Figure 1) that is difficult to escape. The agency of migrants, their capacity for self-redefinition and the process of renegotiating their social perception can contribute to breaking this circle of liminality, ultimately leading to the stabilisation of their life situation and enabling them to make sense of their experiences of forced migration (Kyliushyk, Winogrodzka and Chról 2026). At the same time, further destabilisation and a prolonged state of liminality may result in migrants falling into limbo – which keeps them suspended, unable to return to their previous lives or to transition to a new position.

Figure 1. The vicious circle of liminality



Source: own elaboration.

The multidimensional character of liminality demonstrates that it is not a uniform or monolithic condition – it is deeply shaped by the migrants' socio-demographic positioning, including factors such as gender, age, class and socio-professional background. Recognising these intersecting factors allows for an understanding that middle-class, middle-aged Ukrainian women in Poland navigate displacement differently from other migrant groups and in other countries (see e.g. Kirk *et al.* 2017; Maxwell *et al.* 2024; Menin 2017; Scott *et al.* 2022; Weidenstedt *et al.* 2024).

Traditionally, liminality was defined as a transitional phase with a clear endpoint, culminating in the attainment of a new identity and social position (van Gennep 1909). Contemporary understandings, however, especially in the context of forced migration, challenge this linear model, emphasising its

complex, fluid and evolving nature (Marotta 2025). Liminality shifts over time as migrants renegotiate agency, identity and belonging, developing new coping strategies and redefining their ties to both origin and new societies. It is thus a dynamic, ongoing process that continually (re)shapes migrants' lives. Moreover, our research indicates that the state of liminality does not always lead to the formation of a hybrid or dual identity, as suggested by Tereshchenko (2024). In the context of forced migration, where individuals constantly struggle with rejection (Pandey and Limba 2023), such a choice is often not available. Migrants do not have the opportunity to freely integrate elements of their old and new identities, as their social position is negated by both sides – the origin country and societies of the country of residence. Such an experience does not lead to a harmonious blending of cultures but, rather, can reinforce the sense of exclusion and marginalisation, creating a state of 'neither here nor there', where identity becomes fragmented, incomplete and, in many cases, subject to a constant process of renegotiation.

To sum up, through a comprehensive in-depth analysis, we demonstrate that liminality is a multidimensional, intersectional and dynamic process, marked by continuous shifts and transformations. Building on these insights, future research could further investigate how different socio-demographic factors – such as age, class, education and family responsibilities – interact with forced migration to shape the experience of liminality. Exploring the experiences of other groups, including men, younger migrants and those with different professional backgrounds, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how forced migration generates liminality, revealing additional dimensions of this phenomenon. Comparative studies across various countries of residence could shed light on the role of national policies, labour-market structures and social attitudes in either mitigating or exacerbating this state. Moreover, qualitative longitudinal research would be particularly valuable in tracing the evolution of liminality over time, capturing the potential for transformation which it entails. In this article, we have focused on the individual experiences of liminality among Ukrainian women forcibly displaced to Poland. While we highlighted personalised stories, liminality emerged as a common thread connecting their narratives. Therefore, future studies should also examine the collective dimension of liminality within Ukrainian society – among those living abroad, those who decided to remain in a war-torn country and those who returned to Ukraine after spending a period of time abroad. Such an approach would not only generate new empirical insights but also advance the theoretical development of the concept of liminality.

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No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix 1. Characteristics of IDI participants

Nick and age	Region of UA	Socio-professional profile
Alla, 44	Central	She is an economist, works remotely as an accountant for an IT company. After moving to Poland, she took accounting courses to find local work. Married, her husband serves in the army, she is a mother of two teenage sons.
Maria, 50	Central	She holds a Ph.D. in public administration and has an education in Ukrainian philology and psychology. In Ukraine, she worked as a university manager and trainer in an international public administration project. Now in Poland, she collaborates with an NGO supporting migrants. Separated, with an adult daughter already living in Poland. Maria also has experience with internal migration.
Taisa, 49	Central	She is a cultural journalist with experience in cinema and PR for cultural institutions in Ukraine. In Poland, she collaborates with an NGO and a museum, organising cultural events. She is married with two teenage children.
Yaryna, 41	Central	She is an administrative management specialist who spent many years working at a diplomatic establishment in Ukraine. In Poland, she is employed by an NGO supporting migrants. Yaryna is a mother of a son and has a husband.
Yana, 34	Eastern	She is a military psychologist who, since the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine in 2014, has worked supporting soldiers. Before fleeing her homeland, she also worked as a child psychologist. Currently, Yana collaborates with one of the Warsaw NGOs, offering support for migrant women and their children, particularly those who arrived in Poland after February 24, 2022. Yana is a mother to a 4-year-old daughter; her husband is an active soldier in Ukraine.
Anfisa, 36	Central-eastern	Ph.D., worked in Ukraine's industrial sector in an analytical department of a large company. Before the war escalated, she reduced professional activities because of raising her child independently, and she ran English-speaking clubs as a hobby. In Poland, she worked at a cultural institution organising language camps. Later, she collaborated with a museum, NGOs, and entrepreneurs to support Ukrainian migrants in the Polish labour market.
Sofia, 47	Central	She is a psychologist by education. For nearly 20 years, she has worked as a freelancer, conducting various training sessions for Ukrainian NGOs. In Poland, she supports Ukraine's non-governmental sector by participating in major international projects. She is married, a mother of a 10-year-old daughter.
Toma, 54	Eastern	She holds a master's degree in Russian philology and economics and has many years of experience working as a manager in the sales and marketing department of a large enterprise. After resigning from this job for health reasons, she developed a passion for yoga. She is currently a coordinator for women's meetings in Warsaw. Married, she has a son who has lived in Warsaw for many years.
Victoria, 34	Central-eastern	She is a specialist who led a highly active professional life in Ukraine, working in a large trading company. In Poland she works in the financial department of a large outsourcing company in Warsaw. She is single and has no children.
Ilona, 48	Central	She is an entrepreneur with degrees in linguistics and management, ran a language learning centre in Ukraine, organising English speaking clubs for children and youth. She previously worked as a trainer, conducting business training and workshops promoting civic attitudes in schools. In Poland, Ilona still teaches English. She also aims to gather knowledge about starting her own business in Poland. Married, she has a son.
Olesia, 45	Northen	She is a teacher who also included the role of school principal in the past. A few years ago, motivated by a desire for further development, together with her friends, she founded a social organisation in Ukraine, which recently received its first grant to implement a project. Olesia continues her work as a teacher in Poland, engaging in a Ukrainian school. Mother of a daughter.

Inna, 41	North-western	She has a PhD in educational management and has over 20 years of experience as a university lecturer, leader of an NGO working on issues related to European integration, local and national youth policy development. In Poland she works in the Ukrainian education hub. Married, has a daughter and two sons.
Ilaria, 41	Southern	She is a lawyer who, before moving to Poland, provided legal services to a large company in Ukraine. She was also active in local government and strongly involved in her child's development. Ilaria currently works in one of Warsaw's NGOs as a consultant for administrative and legal matters at a consultation point where she supports migrants from Ukraine. She is raising her daughter independently.
Penni, 36	Central	She is a psychologist and an entrepreneur who founded an English-speaking, highly reputed kindergarten in Ukraine 10 years ago. In Poland Penni decided to open a kindergarten for Ukrainian kids in Warsaw. A comprehensive programme supporting Ukrainian entrepreneurship in Poland, in which Penni participated was a decisive factor. Divorced, she is raising her 7-year-old son on her own.
Inesa, 35	Central	She is a fashion designer, stylist, makeup artist, and expert in fashion journalism and ethical clothing production consulting, has been active in the fashion industry for several years and continues to develop her career. In Poland, she seamlessly carries on her international business. Additionally, Inessa lectures at a university, a role she did not have in Ukraine, and conducts various thematic training sessions. She is married and has no children.
Tara, 31	Eastern	She is a psychologist; she began doctoral studies and began working at school as a psychologist. She soon shifted her focus from academics to career advancement, eventually becoming an HR manager in a large manufacturing company. Now in Poland, she works as a salesperson for a transport company involved in developing the Ukrainian market. Currently single, she dreams of starting a family and having children.
Vitalina, 45	Central-eastern	She is a manager. In Ukraine she worked as a sales manager in a large international company. In Poland she continues to work remotely in the same company and has difficulties finding a job. Married and has two children.
Lara, 40	Central	She is a doctor and has worked in both public and private healthcare facilities in Ukraine. After six months in Poland, she found a job in a hospital, in line with her specialisation. She is going through long bureaucratic processes related to obtaining the qualifications to practice medicine. At the time of the interview, she had a conditional permit. She is married and has a daughter and a son.
Tina, 43	Central	She is a journalist by education, with 15 years of experience in journalism in Ukraine. For the past 7 years, she has also been interested in psychology. She led an NGO focused on empowering women and implementing educational programs for children and youth. In Poland, she continues the activities of her organisation. She is married and has a daughter and a son.

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