

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 peripheral 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, Polskifir*) 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 Europeaness 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 Europeaness 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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