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RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED Enacting semi-periphery: conditions of post-accession migration from Poland to the UK

[version 2; peer review: 1 approved, 2 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

Since Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, the sizeable community of Polish migrants in one of the top destination countries – the UK – have been subject to growing discrimination and hate speech in the form of negative media coverage, as well as unequal labour practices. This article explores the impact of the 2004 enlargement of the EU on the migratory experiences of Poles by examining the way the cross-EU free-movement regime contributes to their vulnerability and exploitation. It aims to uncover the way European integration explains the unequal treatment of Polish migrants in the 'old' Member States. The paper addresses the following questions: what factors have driven the increased number of Polish migrants in the UK in the context of the 2004 EU enlargement? Do economic discrepancies between the EU Member States, which fuel intra-EU migration, likewise shape migrant vulnerabilities? Adopting the theoretical lens of the World-Systems Analysis and the notion of biopower, this paper argues that the peripheral position of Poles in the EU single market during the early post-enlargement period has been reinforced by the migration experiences. This is an outcome of structural pressures that make the perspective of migration appear as aspirational and promising.

Plain Language Summary

This article looks at how Poland's entry into the EU in 2004 affected the migration motivation of Poles and their consequent experiences in the UK. It discusses the challenges they have faced, including discrimination, negative media coverage, and unfair working conditions. The study explores whether economic differences between EU countries made Polish migrants more vulnerable to exploitative practices and examines how the EU's free movement impacts their experiences. Building on 41 interviews with Polish migrants in the UK, and through the lens of social theory, it argues that while migration is often seen as a chance for better opportunities, it has also kept Polish

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

workers in lower-status positions within the EU job market.

Keywords
migration, EU integration, Poland, free movement, labour exploitation.

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

In response to the valuable feedback received from the peer review, the revised manuscript has undergone several key enhancements to improve clarity, strengthen theoretical integration, and deepen empirical analysis. The revised introduction features numerical evidence to substantiate the scale of post-accession Polish migration to the UK. It also provides clearer empirical support for claims regarding Polish nationals' vulnerability to unequal labour practices, and acknowledges the presence of Polish migrants prior to 2004 while precisely defining the "post-accession" period. The theoretical framework has been elaborated, whereas the methodology section offers a clearer rationale for selecting specific employment sectors. The paper's structure has been reorganised for distinct separation between theoretical exposition and empirical results.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

The transformations in Poland linked to the largest EU enlargement of 2004 (in terms of territory, number of countries, and population) have contributed to a significant increase in the cross-European mobility.[2] This has affected the life choices and experiences of people in the new Member States and resulted in the migration of a sizeable number of Poles to the UK in particular: as opposed to 58 000 Poles registered in the UK in 2001, ten years later this number reached 705 890, our of 1.134 million A8 citizens (Okólski & Salt, 2014) Recognising that Polish migrants were present in the UK prior to the 2004 accession, the increased migratory movement during the post-accession period under consideration – 2004 and 2016,[3] has been explained mainly by economic factors, including less restricted access to the UK labour market, economic discrepancies between 'old' and 'new' Member States, unfavourable economic contexts in Poland, and the development of low-cost airlines and communication tools, facilitating mobilities (Beaumont *et al.*, 2017; Engbersen *et al.*, 2017).

At the same time, the increasing phenomenon of unequal labour practices in the UK affects EU citizens, among others, whereby Polish nationals represent one of the most common group subject to various forms of modern slavery (Guilbert, 2019; Shankley, 2021). In 2016 alone, the UK National Referral Mechanism registered 163 referrals related to various forms of exploitation among Polish nationals (UK National Crime Agency, 2018). The demonstrated unequal position of Poles by both civil society actors and governmental agencies led to the question of the structural position of Poles within the broader context of the post-2004 enlarged EU, and the UK as a top desitnation country in particular (Chartered Institute of Building, 2018). This paper examines Polish migration specifically to the UK as a case study that illustrates the broader impacts of the EU's free movement regime and economic discrepancies between Member States.

Applying the framework of World-Systems Analysis (WSA), this paper argues that Polish migrants' peripheral position within the EU single market persisted even after their arrival in the "core" of the EU following enlargement. This pattern has been reinforced by their migration experiences, shaped by structural pressures that are often seen as aspirational and full of opportunity. Moreover, the argument that peripheries' "incorporation into the capitalist economy is associated with putting a (migration) drain on them" (de Haas, 2008) sheds light on the preconditions for post-2004 labour migration flows, notably in the case of Poland as a former country of the Communist bloc. Representing a peripheral post-communist state, Poland's integration into the free movement framework shifted its position towards the semi-periphery within the expanding capitalist system. Hence, through this theoretical lens, the mobility of Poles can be understood as a practice which makes them "Polish migrants" as products of core-semi-periphery relations. Therefore, the study specifically examines the impact of the 2004 enlargement of the EU on the migratory experiences of Poles by examining the way the cross-EU free-movement regime contributes to their life choices and migratory decision-making.

The empirical evidence, based on the collected contributions of 40 interview participants, allows for tracing the link between the changed policy framework introduced by the 2004 EU enlargement and the migration decision-making incentivised by the 'self-optimisation' in the new context. This translated into the decision to leave the country of origin and to explore better opportunities within the EU labour market, with the UK as a top destination. These testimonies also illustrate how these structural relations operate upon lives. The mobilities can be understood as an adaptation of life choices and strategies in response to the evolving dynamics of the international labour market. In this case, it reflects the expansion of the EU labour market, which has driven movement from economically peripheral regions to the core.

Finally, it is acknowledged that the analysis of the structural factors and economic forces may appear inadequate in

[1] The paper draws on the author's research conducted in the framework of the European Joint Doctorate MOVES, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 812764. The PhD dissertation entitled "Polish labour migration: a study of transnational mobility in the UK in the context of economic transformation".

[2] According to Beaumont *et al.*, in 2008, the number of temporary emigrants from Poland was 2.3 million, constituting 6.6% of the Polish population. For more information, see p. 29 of Beaumont, K., Kullas, M., Dauner, M., Styczyńska, I., & Lirette, P. (2017). Female brain drain in Poland and Germany: new perspectives for research. CASE – Center for Social and Economic Research, 486. https://www.cep.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/cep.eu/Studien/Case/Female_Brain_Drain_in_Poland_and_Germany.pdf

[3] The research is limited to the period between 2004, marking Poland's accession to the EU, and 2016 – the year of the referendum of 23 June 2016 related to the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union (Brexit).

understanding the individual level of the migration decision-making process, and the way the changed circumstances brought by Poland's accession to the EU, were internalised at the individual level. Therefore, the complex migratory experiences can be analysed through the interplay between the structural forces of the free movement regime, and individual agency, motivations, and socio-cultural conditions.

Analytical framework

The characteristics of post-2004 Polish migration have been analysed from different perspectives, particularly in terms of the push-and-pull migration model, considering the socio-economic situation in Poland and relevant discrepancies within the EU. The lack of a "coherent theory on international migration" resulted in the development of various theoretical approaches across disciplines (Massey *et al.*, 1993). Stephen Castles argued that the multidimensional nature of contemporary migratory processes should be analysed within a broader interdisciplinary framework, while no discipline can, in a holistic manner, singularly account for a complex set of drivers, modes, and implications of migration (Castles, 2003: 22).

Analysing the recent significant mobility of Poles, as well as their previous migration, Immanuel Wallerstein's World-Systems Analysis appears an adequate and insightful framework (Wallerstein, 1984). Wallerstein introduces three categories: the capitalist 'core', 'semi-peripheral', 'peripheral', and, finally, "isolated nations in the 'external' area, which were not (yet) included in the capitalist system" (de Haas, 2008: 7).

The argument that peripheries' "incorporation into the capitalist economy is associated with putting a (migration) drain on them" sheds light on the preconditions for post-2004 labour migration flows (de Haas, 2008), notably in the case of Poland as a former country of the Communist bloc. Representing a peripheral communist state, Poland's integration into the free movement framework shifted its position towards the semi-periphery within the expanding capitalist system. Thus, the above-mentioned framework appears particularly useful in analysing recent movements of Polish migrants to the UK, which are characterised by the context of the enlarged EU and the accession of several post-Communist states, that represented the countries with the sizeable emigration directed towards the "old" Member States.

In line with that premise, the relationship between the core and peripheral zones is defined as "the exchange of products containing unequal amounts of social labour" (Wallerstein, 1984: 15), whereby the tension stemming from this unequal exchange between different zones constitutes a cornerstone of the capitalist system (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1982; Wallerstein, 1984). Nevertheless, the interdependency between these mentioned areas is crucial not only in understanding the course of the capitalist world-economy development — when understood in a broader sense of respective processes, the relationship between zones can also be operational in light of the differences between a 'high-wage zone' in the core and a 'low-wage zone' in the periphery (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1982).

I employ Wallerstein's model of core-periphery relations to capture the logic behind the following phenomena: economic disparities within the EU as well as open labour market and "widespread but to some extent hidden shortage of labour labour" in the UK, particularly in the sectors of construction, social care, agriculture, cleaning and hospitality (Okólski & Salt, 2014); high unemployment rates in Poland, reaching more than 20 per cent in early 2004 (Eurofound, 2004), fuelling intra-EU labour mobility, and consequent instances of labour exploitation experienced by Poles in the UK. Within the modern world-system, according to Wallerstein, classes are formed as a result of "the geographical distribution of labour control and coercion that reproduces the relations of unequal exchange" (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1982: 91–113). According to this logic, migrants are considered as part of the international division of labour between capital- and labour-intensive zones (Wallerstein, 1974), while Polish migrants are situated in the redistribution of surplus value from the labour-rich semi-periphery, characterised by relatively low incomes, to the capital-rich and higher income core (the UK).

Against this background, the explanatory relevance of semi-periphery (and WSA more broadly) is reflected in its capacity to account for the process of cross-border labour mobility. Applying the WSA lens to intra-EU migration as a novel contribution, particularly focusing on how migration reinforces the semi-peripheral position of a country like Poland, sheds light on the prerequisites to the increased mobilities of Poles, explaining them as an outcome of the transformation of Poland's economy and its integration into the common European market. WSA is useful in understanding the patterns of economic migration processes, fostered by "system forces, processes, and structures" (Kardulias & Hall, 2006: 24), inducing migration of individuals primarily to the labour markets with "better earnings opportunities" (Miłaszewicz *et al.*, 2015: 65). At the same time, it also speaks to occupations typically taken by mobile Poles, who are mostly involved in the low-paid sectors of the economies of the host countries. Thus, this theoretical lens positions Poland as a peripheral post-communist state shifting to semi-periphery upon EU integration, whereas the UK is can be identified as the "core" or "centre" of the EU economic system. Migration flows from semi-periphery (Poland) to the core (UK) are therefore explained by the redistribution of surplus value from labour-rich, low-income areas to capital-rich, high-income areas. Whereas WSA allows for understanding the structural forces behind the migration of Poles, which follows the core-periphery logic within the enlarged EU, it largely neglects the endogenous factors behind mobility: it still remains unclear how the opportunities brought with Poland's accession to the EU and the free movement area are evaluated and perceived at the individual level. To address this analytical gap, this paper suggests a novel angle on the study of intra-EU mobility, borrowing the Foucauldian notion of productive power (Foucault, 1980) as a tool to examine the effects of European integration on the lives in the semi-peripheral states, and in Poland in particular.

Shifting from the notion of power as punitive or repressive, this concept invites the consideration of its productive effects,

those that produce knowledge, and shape aspirations and desires (Foucault, 1980: 59). Drawing on the assumption that productive power is entangled in all kinds of social relations, playing both a "conditioning and a conditioned role" (Foucault, 1980: 142), it is relevant to explore how it can influence one's life strategies and the perception of the available opportunities. At the broader level, it is also important to investigate how one of the strategies of productive power, namely political governmentality, is administering control over populations to address the larger special agenda (Pinkerton, 2018; Tomei, 2016). This approach is fundamentally different from more primitive types and manifestations of power directly applied to punish or "to *take* life" (Foucault, 1978: 138), whereas productive power projects "a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimise, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault, 1978: 137).

The influence of biopolitics on individuals as subjects of power is evident in migration decision-making. Building on the argument that biopolitical strategies prompt individuals "to self-optimise and self-care through cost-benefit calculations in all stages of life" (Repo, 2018: 237), it becomes clear that this "entrepreneurial image of self" (Tomei, 2016: 1144) plays a crucial role in shaping migration choices. Consequently, while power relations in capitalist societies are understood to shape "human behaviours through orienting the agency and self-control that actors exercise over their bodies, their desires and even their fantasies" (Tomei, 2016: 1150–51), the agency and mobility of Poles – as a practice that defines them as "Polish migrants" within core-semi-periphery biopolitical dynamic – remains an area for further exploration.

Acknowledging this idea of the governmental power that guides, manages, and makes certain life strategies desirable, it is possible to recognise a parallel with the process of the 2004 EU enlargement which allowed several post-communist states with high unemployment rates to enter the free movement area and to gain access to the labour markets of certain Member States. Those states, including the UK, were characterised by labour shortages, particularly in the low-paid sectors of the economy. The adopted policy, which lifted the temporal restriction on the labour market access typically applied for the new Member States, can then be considered as a governmental tool to fill the labour shortage. Opening the border and the labour markets for the citizens of the newly joined countries represented the policy which evidently broadened the spectrum of the available options and encouraged the populations in the periphery of the EU to migrate to its core in search of better economic and educational opportunities. Thus, within the adopted theoretical framework, the notions of biopower and biopolitics are employed to complement World-Systems Analysis: while WSA addresses the structural, macro-level forces (e.g., economic discrepancies, semi-peripheral positioning), Foucault's concepts help to understand the micro-level, subjective interpretations and how individuals are "governed" into perceiving migration as aspirational or desirable, even when it leads to discriminatory practices. This bridges the gap between macro-structural pressures and individual decision-making and experiences, particularly concerning how structural pressures make the perspective of migration appear as aspirational and promising.

Methods

This research draws on a qualitative research design, which is often applied to understand "how actors construct and interpret the world surrounding them, and how these interpretations affect their actions, identities and everyday experiences" (Barglowski, 2018: 154). The qualitative approach involves collecting data from various sources: a literature review includes journal articles and other online sources covering the period between 2004 and 2016, related to the issues of labour migration from Poland to the UK, as well as forced labour and exploitation experienced by Poles. Furthermore, following one of the fundamental principles of the inductive qualitative method, "oriented toward an exploration of the diversity of human life" (Barglowski, 2018: 156), I have conducted semi-structured interviews with Polish labour immigrants in the UK – "the most attractive destination country for Polish migrants after May 2004" (Kaczmarczyk & Okólski, 2008: 602). The interviews took place between February and June 2021. Given the aim of the research and formulated research questions, interviews are the principal sources of data in learning about the participants' motivations and experiences related to migration, as well as their attitudes to possible unequal practices experienced while in the low-paid sectors of the UK economy.

Sampling strategy and criteria

A non-probability snowball technique was chosen as an approach to sampling participants (Lapan *et al.*, 2011). 'Non-probability' or purposive sampling means that the participants are sampled strategically, "so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed" (Bryman, 2012: 418). Unlike other sampling techniques, purposive sampling is based on the defined characteristics of the research participants prior to fieldwork, thus making the selection of participants dependent on the judgement of a researcher" (Barglowski, 2018: 166). Therefore, the primary focus on participants with work experience in low-paid sectors (care, cleaning/housekeeping, construction, delivery, food production, gastronomy, hospitality) was a deliberate methodological choice. The 'snowball' technique is applied to reach out to a greater number of participants through already sampled ones, who might "propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research" (Bryman, 2012: 424). The formulated research questions instructed the sampling of participants, hence the primary focus on those having work experience in the low-paid sectors of the UK economy, to trace a possible correlation between migration experience and vulnerability to exploitative practices (Anderson & Rogaly, 2005; Lalani & Metcalf, 2012; Skrivánková, 2014).

Qualitative research methodology does not provide any established guidelines regarding the size of the sample, whereas it is in the area of quantitative enquiry that the sample needs to be statistically significant to allow for respective generalisations regarding the researched population (Barglowski, 2018: 157). Participants' sampling was guided by the criterion of data saturation. In this context, the understanding of

saturated results gathered through a sufficiently large sample implies that "further data collection would not provide relevant results to the themes, concepts, codes or theory" (Barglowski, 2018: 158). Thereby, sampling is terminated at the point when no novel contribution is gained.

The sample comprised 41 adults from 20 to 62 years of age, who identified themselves as Polish, among whom were 9 men and 32 women. The gender imbalance that can be identified within the sample of the present study is characteristic of recent Polish migration to the UK. While Okólski and Salt show that more than a half (from 52 to 65 per cent) of post-accession Polish migration was comprised mainly of men, the late accession period was characterised by the opposite trend, with predominantly female migrants coming from Poland to the UK (Okólski & Salt, 2014). All the participants had a migration background and work experience in the following sectors: care, cleaning/housekeeping, construction, delivery, food production, gastronomy, hospitality, manufacturing, and sales. This occupational trend is also reflected in the broader statistics related to the main economic sectors Polish migrants are involved in. Relevant data shows that, by 2011, most of the Poles in the UK were working in hospitality, manufacturing, services, education, health, transport, communication, and agriculture (Okólski & Salt, 2014). The above sectors were selected as common ones for Polish migrants and are known for exploitative practices (Anderson & Rogaly, 2005; Clark, 2013; Okólski & Salt, 2014).

While interviews represent the cornerstone of primary data collection in ethnographic research (Fedyuk & Zentai, 2018: 172), semi-structured interviewing was chosen as a technique which makes it possible to compare the individual responses on several topics (Lapan *et al.*, 2011: 94). Following the interest in the participants' perspectives, the topics discussed covered issues such as the motivations behind migration, the employment experiences in the UK and the role of the Polish community, one's daily working experiences, and the impact of the migration experience on one's life and the life of the family.

Data handling and ethics

The anonymised interview recordings were transcribed and thematically coded using QSR NVivo software[4] to allow for thematic content analysis. The created codes reflected the discussed topics and recurrent themes, and fell within the scope of the following larger groups: migration motivations and factors, work experiences and conditions, attitudes to exploitative practices, and social experiences. The respective coding further allowed the identification of the ways the same theme was treated among the participants, whereas the identified patterns were used to inform theoretical accounts. Transcription and coding were done during online fieldwork to identify the point of data saturation.

Regarding the ethical concerns, the research and data collection plan underwent a review process and was found in line with the ethics guidelines of Paul Valery University, Montpellier III and the University of Porto. The process of primary data collection was guided by the principles of informed consent, voluntariness, and confidentiality.

Polish migrants as targets of power

To understand the migration experiences of Poles after the 2004 EU expansion through the lens of biopolitics, the observation by Burrell and Schweyher suggest that the UK's policy of granting free access to migrants from newly acceded countries emerged alongside a tightening of the asylum system, a shift that can be seen as "entrenching the de facto racialised contours of immigration control" (de Noronha, 2019: 2413–30). As a result, British immigration policy has been interpreted as a biopolitical regime (Tyler, 2010: 61–74) in which white Polish migrants held a relatively privileged position compared to other migrant groups.

Following the need to consider the multiple factors and levels influencing migration theoretically, this paper aims to include and emphasise the aspect of the subjective interpretation of the reality and the opportunities associated with migration. With this in mind, Foucault's notions of productive power and subjectivity as its effect help understand the way the 2004 EU enlargement changed the available options and life strategies for the nationals of the so-called A8 countries, including Poland alongside Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia, together with Cyprus and Malta. Conceptualised as a governmental strategy, this expansion encouraged significant emigration from these countries and made it attractive and desirable, yet simultaneously and paradoxically, it resulted in subjecting many to inequality and exploitative practices in the destination countries. The testimony of a female hospitality worker in Glasgow, conveys the idea of a lack of prospects in Poland, listing several factors contributing to a decision to leave her home country.

> P12: It was mostly because of the political situation that I decided to leave my country. I would just have no future there as far as I'm concerned. It's outrageous, they are just pushing young people out of the country because there's not enough jobs for young people. From what I understand is going on in there, I cannot agree with the right-wing views and I don't agree with the politicians in power at the moment, they are very nationalistic, and they want to leave the EU as well.

The empirical evidence based on the contributions of interview participants allows for tracing the link between the changed policy framework introduced by the 2004 EU enlargement and the migration decision-making incentivised by the "self-optimisation" in the new context. This translated into the decision to leave the country of origin and to explore better opportunities within the EU labour market.

As reflected in the following testimony, in some cases, short-term migration in the post-2004 context was perceived and used as a tool to improve the financial situation, which was followed by a return to Poland: (P5) "In 2004 when Poland joined

[4] For free alternative, please see Atlas.ti or MAXQDA.

the European Union, my brother left Poland for London, he was working in a construction factory. He just wanted to pay for his mortgage in Poland. Once he did, he returned to Poland." However, in other cases, the opened borders and the emerged opportunity to explore better paid employment were made from the position of continuous hardships and eventuated in the decision to stay in the UK:

> P19: It was in 2004, or 2005 when I really tried to get a job [in Poland]. Every single job I would find, they were very low paid. I was still living with my parents at that time. But I had to find money to pay for food, and to pay bills. I didn't earn enough, so in 2004 the UK opened the border for Poles, my friend got there straight away and then I joined him. We worked all day long and in a month, I earned my yearly wage in Poland. And that was why I decided to move out of Poland. In fact, I was never planning to go abroad for a long time. But well, it has happened. Although the initial plan was to come to the UK for 3–4 months and then go back to Poland. But I'm still here.

In her analysis of the post-2004 emigration from Poland, Rabikowska looks both at the motivations for migrations and the way migration experience interplays with the identity of migrants. Looking at the post-accession context and its impact on the aspirations of Poles, she suggests the following point of view:

> It can be argued that migration is mainly instigated by a picture of normality that can be achieved in the future – however vague and incoherent that picture would be among individuals – and thus it is always somehow unfulfilled and always in progress. As abstract a category as normality is, however, in Eastern Europe it evokes very concrete responses today and provokes changes in both the reality which migrants leave behind and the one in which they currently live. (Rabikowska, 2010: 288).

The 2004 accession of Poland to the EU is often framed in the testimonies of the research participants as a landmark event that offered exit options from a dire economic situation, or represented a means to achieve the said normality, or simply opened new opportunities that appeared attractive and promising:

> P21: 2004 back in Poland I was struggling because I was studying and working at the same time. None of those things were working out and I wasn't earning much so I figured out that I can do the same somewhere else for better money. Then why not try it?

The testimonies presented above demonstrate how biopolitics shapes individual choices. This migration can be understood as an adaptation of life strategies in response to the evolving international labour market – specifically, the expansion of the EU single market, which has driven movement from the economic periphery to the centre. Viewing migration through this lens helps clarify the factors influencing the decision to leave one's home country, often at the risk of exposure to exploitation and challenging living conditions.

Walia's argument that legal and social status insecurity contributes to hierarchical stratification (Walia, 2013: 9), is reaffirmed by the way Poles negotiate their status and navigate the hierarchies. In this regard, the intersection of race, gender, and religion as a power structure has been employed to analyse the process of negotiating the position of Polish migrants in the UK in the post-accession context, arguing that whiteness, cultural proximity and male privilege defined their positionality within the labour market and social relations (Fiałkowska, 2019: 11). Thus, previous qualitative research portrays the way Polish migrants appeal to these categories "to show belonging to the same community of values and resist their migration-related lower status" (Fiałkowska, 2019: 12–13).

It is worth mentioning that the assumed privileged position of Poles within the racial hierarchy particularly at the workplace, was narrated by one of the participants: (P37) "I am white just like Scots, but I think Asians, they have a worse experience than I do. And for those from Africa, it is very hard for them to find a job because of the perceptions of the locals. I know it's ridiculous but slowly it's changing."

Seeing exploitation as embedded in labour exchange, however, neglects the agency of workers and makes it harder to analyse the reasons for "tolerating some degree of mistreatment" (Davies, 2018: 306) and accepting exploitative conditions. Within the literature on labour exploitation, migration is included on the list of factors contributing to the vulnerability to various forms of exploitation (Clark, 2013; Schwarz *et al.*, 2018), while the most common economic sectors for exploitative practices are construction, agriculture and food, hospitality, cleaning, and care-giving (Anderson & Rogaly, 2005; Clark, 2013). Moreover, Craig *et al.* argued that migration reinforces the vulnerability to the extreme forms of exploitation and slavery, irrespectively of migrants' legal status (Craig *et al.*, 2007), whereas elements of modern slavery include "severe economic exploitation; the absence of a framework of human rights; and control of one person over another by the prospect or reality of violence" (Craig *et al.*, 2007).

Most of the literature in the field of labour exploitation focuses on its severe forms, drawing on the international legal standards reviewed above, and respective national legislations, which revolve around the issues of prosecution and criminal justice. Yet, this approach has been criticised for disregarding the "routine and banal" (Davies, 2018: 294) everyday exploitative practices. The argument of persisting 'trivial' practices has been reaffirmed by several participants in their description of working conditions at such workplaces as construction, food production, gastronomy and hospitality, in some cases representing violations of basic health and safety standards. According to a 30-year-old female participant, who used to

work in hospitality, cleaning, and care, her experiences in all these fields were characterised by some form of everyday exploitative practices. As she notes:

> P16: It was hard at the restaurant as well, because it did all depend on how many people were coming to the restaurant. It wasn't that you had some set time when you could go for a break. You could only eat or drink whenever there was a time. Sometimes you would work for hours without a break. That was quite normal there. I always tried to make sure that I had something to eat and drink because I would probably collapse. But there was no place to sit, there were just some chairs outside for us next to the bins at the back of the building; it was quite smelly as well with flies. You would not want to eat there. So, we didn't have anywhere to sit. That was quite hard because you had to get used to eating and drinking while standing or kneeling, leaning against something. And that lasted for a year. Plus, there was a broken dishwasher and the floor was always flooded. So, you always had to make sure you had good shoes because otherwise, your shoes would get soaked. […] I thought it would be more organised, but it was very chaotic, and it was your problem to survive there.

While the above statement refers to a number of substandard working conditions, the absence of regular breaks represents the aspect that goes beyond the description of the 'trivial' practices listed in the description, pointing to an example of more severe violation, which nevertheless has been mentioned rather often during the data collection process. Similarly, another female participant working in food production referred to the experiences characterised by the long working hours performed in substandard working conditions and with physically demanding duties:

> P17: I never worked physically before, I was very young. It was very cold and a long shift to work, sometimes 10, 12 hours. And it was very hard for me to work with meat, sometimes I had to carry 10 kilos. And then another 10-kilo meatloaf and another, basically it was a hard job.

In another statement from the same sector, a 39-year-old male Polish migrant in Liverpool mentioned the conditions of freezing temperatures as a daily environment, for which the employer neglected to supply the required protection:

> P19: There were many issues there (at the factory), with the protective clothing for instance. People had to enter the freezer room sometimes, but you needed a proper jacket because it's minus 27 degrees there, […] so the company should provide everyone working there with proper trousers etc. But it wasn't the case. So, the safety issue was very big there, people had to wait for weeks for their clothes. I have never seen that before.

The examples of violations mentioned in the study show that they are indeed practised and have been endured by many of those working in various low-paid sectors in the UK. Whereas these specific cases might not fall within the scope of the stricter legal definitions of exploitation or forced labour, these testimonies put on display the widespread character of the conditions described above, which present the practices which can be located between the extremes of the spectrum of forced labour and decent job, chosen and accepted voluntarily.

To sum up, according to Veneziani and Yoshihara, exploitation as an unequal exchange of labour is characterised by "systematic differences between the amount of labour that individuals 'give' to the economy, in some relevant sense, and the amount of labour that they 'receive'" (Veneziani & Yoshihara, 2017), whereas the focus on ownership in social inequality theory shows that "the capitalist class owns the means of production and is thus able to exploit wage-earning workers" (Hamann & Bertels, 2018: 396).

A 40-year-old female participant who used to work in production in England, sharing the process of her migration decision-making in the early post-accession period, added that now she would have made the same decision. She elaborates as follows: (P31) "If I were to make the decision now if I were in Poland right now, I would leave anyway. But now, for political reasons, because of what is going on in Poland right now." Thus, the hierarchy of motivations could have shifted, with the political one taking the leading place in light of the current course of the government and the overall political situation in the country. However, with Poland's accession to the EU, it follows that the spectrum of available opportunities or escape options has broadened, creating a new context that presents migration as a promising path to explore.

The initial discussion of World-Systems Analysis highlights the structural forces behind Polish migration, such as economic disparities and unemployment, positioning Poles within a core-semi-periphery dynamic where they represent a labour flow from a relatively low-income semi-periphery to a capital-rich core like the UK. However, to fully grasp the complexities of Poles' migration motivations and experiences, this structural account must be complemented by an understanding of how these macro-level forces are internalised at the individual level. This analytical gap can be addressed by incorporating Michel Foucault's notions of productive power and biopolitics. Productive power, unlike repressive power, actively shapes aspirations and desires, guiding individuals towards certain life strategies. In the context of the 2004 EU enlargement, the UK's policy of non-restrictive labour market access for new Member States served as a governmental tool to fill labour shortages. This policy, viewed through a biopolitical lens, rendered migration appear aspirational and promising, encouraging Poles to perceive it as an opportunity for "self-optimisation" and an "entrepreneurial image of self".

This framework allows for a deeper intersection with the empirical data, revealing how the expansion of the EU labour market influenced individual decision-making processes beyond mere economic "push-and-pull" factors. For instance, testimonies

such as that of P21, who stated, "I was struggling because I was studying and working at the same time. None of those things were working out and I wasn't earning much so I figured out that I can do the same somewhere else for better money. Then why not try it?", demonstrate the internalisation of this perceived opportunity. While the economic rationale is evident, biopolitics explains how the systemic creation of such "better opportunities" made migration a desirable and seemingly inevitable path for many. This nuanced perspective shows that migration, even when undertaken willingly, is often shaped by compelled choices stemming from the power relations that define available realities. Furthermore, while Massey *et al.* highlighted structural economic drivers of migration (Massey *et al.*, 1993), the work of Okólski and Salt provides specific contextual nuance regarding the socio-economic situation in Poland that prompted significant emigration (Okólski & Salt, 2014), shedding the light on how Poles' perceived peripheral position within the EU market was reinforced by migration experiences, framed as aspirational despite leading to vulnerabilities and exploitative practices.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the effects of European integration and free mobility regime on the life choices of the persons from the "new" Member States. Drawing on the example of the Polish labour migration to the UK during the post-accession period, this paper explored the factors impacting the increased number of Polish migrants, zooming in on the impact of economic discrepancies between the Member States and the role this asymmetry plays in complex migration motivations.

Adopting the lens of World-Systems Analysis sheds light on the structural forces, such as the unemployment rate and low wages, behind Polish migrant mobilities which follow a movement from a labour-intensive semi-periphery to a capital-intensive core. WSA also explained the positioning of Poles in the sectors of the UK labour market. Thus, I have shown that a hierarchical system comprising the core, periphery, and semi-periphery reproduces population inequalities.

Yet, the analysis of the structural factors and economic forces appeared inadequate in understanding the individual level of the migration decision-making process, or the way the changed circumstances brought by Poland's accession to the EU were internalised at the individual level. In line with the structural account of WSA, economic forces "define the flow of migration" (de Haas, 2008: 7), while "individuals do *not* have a free choice, because they are fundamentally constrained by structural forces" (Castles *et al.*, 2014: 32). Therefore, structural accounts question the role of agency, suggesting that "people are forced to move because traditional economic structures have been undermined as a result of their incorporation into the global political economic system" (de Haas, 2008: 7–8).

This theoretical assumption was qualified by the contributions of the research participants, which showed the interplay between the structural forces of the free movement regime, and the individual motivations that can be linked, among others, to the family situation or the attitudes to the socio-cultural context in Poland. The notion of productive power coined by Foucault unveiled the need to examine more closely the choices people might be compelled to make, based on the reality produced by the power relations to which they are subjected. The collected testimonies and reflections of the research participants in some cases reiterate the inevitability of the migration.

At the same time, the significant emotional effect of the Brexit campaign on the migrant population and its impact on everyday life should be acknowledged, particularly with regard to its effect of generating uncertainty around the migrants' plans for the future (Anderson *et al.*, 2019; Anderson & Wilson, 2018; Burrell & Schweyher, 2019). In addition to generally constraining migration strategies (McGhee *et al.*, 2017: 2109–30), Polish migrants in the UK have noted an increase in personally experienced racism in the period following the Brexit campaign and referendum (Rzepnikowska, 2018). Existing research on the emotional impact of Brexit has also revealed that it constituted "a rupture to the continuity of EU citizens' everyday lives" (Botterill & Hancock, 2019: 3) and fostered the construction of the figure of a '*European other*', intensifying the feeling of unbelonging among Poles (Giralt, 2020: 42), and presenting another important aspect for analysis of migration trajectories in this unprecedented context.

Ethics and consent

The research and its data collection and management plan underwent a review process and were found in line with the ethics guidelines of the two degree-awarding institutions – Paul Valery University, Montpellier III (18 January 2021, approval number 2021-01 CER UPVM) and the University of Porto (11 December 2020, approval number 02 /CEFLUP/21.12.2020). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, using written consent forms.

Regarding the ethical concerns, the research and data collection plan underwent a review process and was found in line with the ethics guidelines of Paul Valery University, Montpellier III and the University of Porto. The process of primary data collection was guided by the principles of informed consent, voluntariness, and confidentiality.

Data availability statement

The data collected and analysed in the framework of this study cannot be shared under any circumstances due to strict ethical and confidentiality considerations. The research involved in-depth qualitative interviews with Polish post-2004 migrants in the UK, focusing on their migration motivations and experiences in low-paid sectors. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, including discussions of exploitative conditions and potentially undocumented work, any disclosure of primary data – even in anonymised form – poses a significant risk of re-identification and potential harm to participants.

This study was conducted in strict compliance with GDPR regulations and ethical guidelines approved by the Ethics Committees of the University of Porto and Paul Valery University,

Montpellier III. Ethical approval mandated that all data remain confidential and securely stored on a password-protected university server, with unpublished personal data to be destroyed at the project's conclusion. Participants were assured that their responses would not be made public to prevent legal, social, or economic repercussions. Therefore, in accordance with these ethical commitments, the dataset cannot be made available for secondary analysis or public access.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ? ? ✓

Version 2

Reviewer Report 12 July 2025

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✓ **Kate Golebiowska**
Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia

While the Introduction, Methods and Analysis are now largely improved, the Conclusion section remains a mixed bag. It retains the new topic about Brexit (I recommended removing it) and does not cross-reference biopolitics - now presented as a complementary concept to interpret the topic. I think cross-referencing to it would enhance the flow and rigour of the paper. There are also instances where the clarity of expression/intent could be improved One such example is the opening sentence in the "Polish migrants as targets of power". Overall (and with edits that the two other reviewers have made), I am happy to support the Indexing of this current version as final.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: migration, mobility, migrant settlement, labour market outcomes of migrants

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 07 April 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.21053.r51872

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Kate Golebiowska
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Thank you for the opportunity to review the manuscript "Enacting Semi-Periphery: Conditions of Post-Accession Migration from Poland to the UK." The paper considers the impact of Poland's accession to the EU on Polish migration to the UK in the context of the EU's free movement regime. Using the World-Systems Analysis and the concepts of biopower and biopolitics, the Author proposes that structural pressures have relegated Polish migrants to a peripheral position within the EU single market. Below, I am recommending revisions to improve the structure of the paper and to better integrate and use theory and evidence to contribute to the debates on immigration, power, and the EU labour market. I commend the Author for their efforts to draw connections between the macro structures and the experiences of Polish migrants in the UK.

Introduction. The manuscript opens with general statements such as "The transformations in Poland linked to the largest EU enlargement have contributed to a significant increase in the cross-European mobility of goods, capital, services and people" and "This has (...) resulted in the migration of a sizeable number of Poles to the UK in particular." Numerical evidence to substantiate these statements is needed. Replacing general terms like "significant increase" with figures comparing pre- and post-accession migration flows will ground these assertions.
The second paragraph offers a general statement that "(...) the increasing phenomenon of unequal labour practices in the UK affects EU citizens, among others, whereby Polish nationals represent the most common group subject to various forms of modern slavery." This claim requires empirical support. The Author may use official statistics or other authoritative data to support it.
The Introduction shifts between the EU labour market and the UK, though the paper's title suggests a focus on the UK. The Author may address this by rewriting the Introduction and showing that the EU labour market opportunities and conditions serve as a broad background for considering the case of Poles in the UK's labour market. Additionally, this section will benefit from:
-Clarifying what is the period covered by "post-accession" migration;
-Expressly recognising that Polish migrants were present in the UK prior to accession;

Analytical framework. While the WSA framework is reasonably well laid out in its classical form, characteristics of the core, semi-peripheral and peripheral states in the context of the EU labour market are missing. When incorporated and supported with concrete examples and references, the analytical framework will gain more academic rigour. For example, on p. 3. the Author mentions 'high unemployment rates in Poland' that fuelled their intra-EU mobility for employment, but the reader is left wondering what these rates were and when, and why the scale of vacancies in the UK was a motivating factor to move. What was the unemployment rate in the UK in the period under review and in the industries where Poles found employment? Another point relates to the notion of productive power. If it is intended as an analytical framework, it should be included in the abstract.
Sampling strategy and criteria. This section will benefit from further elaboration. Please explain the rationale for choosing the specific industries of employment of the participants. If hospitality and agriculture are cited as the most common sectors for Polish migrants, supporting this claim with labour market data will strengthen its validity. Additionally, clarifying when the interviews were conducted (year) will help readers understand the participants' length of stay in the UK.

Polish migrant as targets of power. This section blurs the boundaries between literature review, analytical framework and results and is difficult to follow. Concepts like 'biopower' and 'biopolitics' are introduced here but belong in the analytical framework. I recommend reorganising the paper so that all concepts are introduced and defined in the 'Analytical framework' section. This will improve the clarity and logical flow of the paper.
The Author introduces Marx's concept of 'class' (p. 7) here, further confusing the reader. I am not convinced that the Author is well-versed in the Marxian concept of 'class'; it is hardly explained in one passage on p. 7 and referenced on p.8. If the Author chooses to retain it, a fuller explanation and integration with the WSA framework (especially Wallerstein's categories) is needed. Otherwise, the concept can be omitted, and efforts should be directed toward developing a more focused, in-depth analysis (pp. 7-8).
The closing paragraph on. p.8 is a moment where concepts and data should intersect meaningfully, but the interpretation is superficial and underdeveloped. For example, biopower and biopolitics are briefly mentioned there but not sufficiently applied to the empirical material. Expanding this section to show how these frameworks help explain participants' experiences will enhance analytical depth. The citation of Massey et al. (1993) can be enriched by drawing on Okólski and Salt (2014), which is already cited elsewhere and would offer more contextual nuance.

Conclusion: This section is again confusing. It includes elements that should be moved to the data section, such as new examples (see P31) and the accompanying considerations. The last paragraph introduces a new topic: the Brexit-related emotional effects, which, in my view, fall outside the paper's scope and can removed. This will create space to develop a more profound analysis using the conceptual framework.

The Conclusion will benefit from a style review, too. The opening sentence is too long (it makes up the entire opening paragraph), and the word "focusing" is repeated in the first line. The second paragraph needs specific examples and a more detailed discussion earlier to make sense. Specifically, the claim about how the core-periphery system produces "population inequalities" requires demonstration earlier in the analysis.

I hope the Author receives this feedback in good faith and considers the suggested revisions to develop a sharper paper. Best wishes.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: migration, mobility, migrant settlement, labour market outcomes of migrants

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 18 Jun 2025

Viktoryia Vaitovich

Thank you very much for your insightful and constructive feedback. I am grateful for your positive remarks on the effort to connect macro structures and the experiences of Polish migrants. I also fully acknowledge your reservations regarding the structure, integration of theory and evidence, and the need for stronger empirical support in certain areas. I hope the revised paper addresses your suggestions sufficiently.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 02 April 2025

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.21053.r51664

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Tomasz Komornicki
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The article has a very broad focus of the research. It is not entirely clear what was the main purpose of the interviews conducted. This affects their correct evaluation. The theses posed go beyond the capabilities of the methodology used. At the outset we learn that this goal was to uncover the way European integration explains the unequal treatment of Polish migrants in the ‘old’ Member States. Later in the text, more far-reaching theses and references to concepts appear. Poles are qualified as the most common group subject to various forms of modern slavery. The article does not provide evidence for such a thesis. On the contrary, some statements from interviews, as well as quotes from the literature, further indicate that the situation of Polish migrants is better than those from the global south. None of the quoted statements indicate that Poles as a group were treated particularly badly. Rather, they point to generally poor working conditions in certain sectors in the UK. Therefore, some of the theses seem over-interpreted.

The article also fails to mention some important contexts related to emigration from Poland to the UK. These include non-economic factors that determine the decision to stay in the UK for longer than the initially planned few months. Often mentioned here is the quality of public services, higher than in Poland. Another important element is the fact that not all migrants registered in 2004 were actual migrants at the time. Some had already been in the UK before, and Poland's accession to the EU only enabled them to legalize their stay and work.
In the article, emigration from Poland to the UK is treated in isolation from general migration flows from Poland. Against this backdrop, the UK gained (thanks to the immediate opening of the labor market in 2004) relatively better-educated migrants from Poland (relative to, for example, Germany, where migration took place illegally and included groups that were poorly qualified and more likely to be mistreated by employers). The cited data regarding sectors employing Poles (after Okólski) does not justify the selection of individuals for the interviews conducted. These are general sectors with both bad and better-paying jobs.

The exposition of the interview referring to the political situation in Poland is unclear. First of all, this is the situation before 2023 (right-wing rule), which should be highlighted somehow. Secondly, the singular example should be contrasted with the thousands of returns to Poland from the UK that followed Brexit.

Explaining the intensity of migration from Poland to the UK by the development of low-cost airlines seems wrong. Rather, airlines have responded to the demand from these migrations. Bus transportation between Poland and the UK also played a key role in their first phase.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Quantitative analysis of migration, modal structure of international transport, qualitative evaluation of migration based on surveys in Poland

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 18 Jun 2025

Viktoryia Vaitovich

Thank you for this valuable feedback. While the article's focus might appear broad, as stated, it draws on a broader doctoral research, which also extensively looks into the history of pre-2004 Polish migration to the UK. Therefore, the post-accession migration is not studied in a vacuum, but as a part of the complex genealogy. Regarding the comment on "particular bad treatment of Poles", it is important to clarify that the study aims to uncover *how* European integration contributes to their vulnerability, not necessarily to argue that Poles are *the worst-treated group* overall. Regarding participant selection, the methodology explicitly states the rationale for focusing on individuals with work experience in low-paid sectors: this was a strategic choice to trace a possible correlation between migration experience and vulnerability to exploitative practices. While these sectors may indeed include a range of jobs, research indicates that construction, agriculture, food, hospitality, cleaning, and care-giving are common sectors for exploitative practices. The sample, which included participants with master's and doctorate degrees working in these sectors, allowed for investigation of the phenomenon of skills downgrading and how even highly qualified migrants might accept such roles due to better earning opportunities abroad, despite the conditions. Besides, a dedicated part of the broader study zooms in on the characteristics of the conveyed exploitative practices, unveiling the prevailing "routine everyday" exploitation as opposed to solely severe forms. Therefore, the broader aim was to illuminate the specific vulnerabilities and exploitative practices they face despite their EU citizenship and "privileged" position relative to other migrant groups. In addition, non-economic factors for migration are also acknowledged, with the collected primary evidence pointing to a wide range of motivations, varying from self-development and personal growth, to socio-cultural and political context in Poland. The comment on the need to limit the scope of the evidence and related evidence is retained to enhance the quality of future related research outputs.

Thank you once again for your time and effort in conducting a thorough review and providing insightful feedback.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 25 March 2025

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Shaddin Almasri
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This article titled, 'Enacting semi-periphery: conditions of post-accession migration from Poland to the UK' explores Polish migration to the UK through the lens of world systems theory. It posits that the enlargement of the EU has not translated to inclusion of periphery states in the 'core', rather, migration patterns re-enforce Poland's status as a periphery state. The article is clear, well-written and well researched and looks to be an excellent contribution to academic literature on inequality and migration.

Starting from the analytical framework: This article would benefit from expansion on its guiding theoretical framework. While the premise is indeed convincing on its own, in this paper, it would require further elaboration. The EU core and periphery are not well defined and established and a number of generalizations are made throughout. For instance, the author mentions unequal exchange of goods in passing but does not specifically cite statistics. As this is a novel application of this lens, I recommend further data to convince readers of the strength and relevance of this lens in the intra-EU context, as opposed to its usual application at the global level.

Moving on to the case study and discussion: The relevance of bio-politics and biopower remains unclear. Inclusion of this as an area of further research in the case study/discussion section of this paper is somewhat confusing to the reader and may be best placed in a conclusion. It is unclear how this relates to the World Systems Analysis discussed in the previous section and requires further elaboration if this were to be kept.

Beyond the initial discussion, there is very little actually depicting how the immigration of Poles to the UK has re-enforced Poland as a periphery state. The data depicts poor working conditions and exploitation of migrant workers, however the link to the thesis is not clear. There appear to be many implied links and connections made, however it does not yet sufficiently prove the thesis. Furthermore, the conclusion introduces new data that would be best placed in the discussion, if it is indeed a part of the argument.

On to the conclusion: The conclusion explicitly states that WSA explains the positioning of Poles in the labor market through a look at inequalities. However the 'red thread' is not yet clear – there are several lines of thinking (WSA, bio-politics, migrant decision making, un-belonging) but they are not sufficiently connected. I understand that this likely because the interview content was rich and it indeed appears to be! However the thesis is made somewhat disjointed and I'd therefore recommend that the author focuses more clearly on one or two of these elements.

Some small notes:

- On the sampling strategy: I note that all migrants interviewed for the purpose of this study are workers mainly in the service sectors, with the exception of construction. Was this deliberate and if so, why? While not a majority, there are Polish migrants across many sectors in the UK with different levels of qualifications. Indeed, this impacts experience and I find that the paper would benefit from clarifying why there's a particular focus on those in particular sectors.
- Overall: The paper would benefit from a tighter edit.

Overall this is article is very promising! The data collected appears to be rich and informative and may produce several papers as a result. I look forward to its final iteration and congratulate the author for this contribution.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
No source data required

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Migration, refuge, inequality and aid politics in the MENA region. The article may benefit from a review by someone with expertise in application of Marxian frameworks to migration.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 18 Jun 2025

Viktoryia Vaitovich

Thank you for your feedback, which was invaluable for improving the manuscript across the sections. I appreciate the recognition of the paper's clarity and contribution to the literature on inequality and migration. I concur with the comments, which also in part are reflected in the suggestions of other Reviewers, particularly regarding the comprehensive introduction of theoretical concepts and their strengthened link with the empirical data. The comments related to the method's section also instructed the revisions reflected in the new version of the paper. Thank you once again for the feedback that guided the revisions with the aim of enhancing the analytical depth and overall impact of the paper.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.